

C. Economy

Employment and businesses are an integral characteristic of South Burlington, based on its location in central Chittenden County, its access to major transportation systems, and its historically strong investment in utility infrastructure. The economic future of South Burlington relies on intentionally planning for housing a growing population, appropriate environmental and energy conservation, and thoughtful redevelopment of our built areas. The vitality of South Burlington and the quality of life for our residents depends heavily on the continued prosperity of its numerous businesses and industries. The City must continue to attract and retain new employers of all sizes, sectors, and industries. The City also must invest in housing and infrastructure to attract and retain a workforce for those businesses. To meet our climate goals, we must work with neighboring municipalities to plan for appropriate development of economic opportunities within short driving or public transit distance from South Burlington housing, and vice versa.

At a neighborhood scale, multi-decade investments in City Center and infill housing along major transportation corridors of Shelburne Road, Williston Road, and Kennedy Drive are opening up new opportunities for small-scale services and businesses to complement the long-standing larger and national businesses in the community. Community interest supporting vibrant neighborhoods is also opening up ideas and opportunities for localized shops and services in areas that have previously been exclusively residential.

OBJECTIVES

- Invest in a vibrant, mixed use, multi-dimensional City Center
- Support appropriately-scaled local business growth, including retail and services, within walking distance of existing and planned residential areas
- Support mixed-use (residential & commercial) development in areas that can support both
- Evaluate existing business park areas for opportunities to integrate housing
- Identify and plan for areas of the city to be reserved exclusively for businesses that must be located away from housing, such as uses with heavy truck traffic and/or 24 hour operation
- Coordinate with bordering municipalities to plan for economic growth centers, commuting corridors, and environmental protection
- Support businesses of all sizes and in varied sectors and industries, with ownership by people of all groups, communities, and backgrounds
- Support business growth in green technology, arts and entertainment, hospitality, and pedestrian-scale retail and food service
- Invest in housing and transportation infrastructure to attract and retain a high-quality workforce for South Burlington businesses

INVENTORY, ANALYSIS, & CHALLENGES

South Burlington is an economic hub in Chittenden County and the state of Vermont. Located at the intersection of major transportation routes by road, rail, and air, South Burlington's economy has significant hospitality and retail sectors, with light manufacturing, small contractor and service businesses, and shipping/logistics. We are a growing city, both in population and economy, and

supporting intentional and sustainable economic growth must be a priority. In our efforts to be human-focused and climate-resilient, South Burlington should embrace multi-use land use, multi-modal transportation networks, quality of life for our workforce, and jobs in green industries to support the City into the future. This economic growth must be accessible and available to all members of our community and must not disproportionately negatively impact any group or area.

Land Use

Development of More Mixed Use Areas. Traditionally, zoning separated uses seen as incompatible with each other, like residential uses and many commercial uses. A more modern approach should reflect that many commercial enterprises are not as disruptive as their predecessors and have more varied needs than historically.

South Burlington is zoned for primarily or exclusively commercial and/or industrial uses in areas near the Burlington International Airport, the east end of Williston Road, Technology Park, and the Meadowlands Business Park area near Hinesburg Road. Many of these areas are currently built with commercial spaces, but the changing needs of businesses may make them prime areas for infill, more dense building, and/or smaller lot sizes. Siting new commercial/industrial space in already-commercial areas makes sense. However, businesses have expressed a desire for more flexibility in how they use those commercial areas for their business activities outside the historic idea of “commercial” use. It should enable enterprises like small business incubators that do not necessarily fit a traditional single-entity business model.

The City could allow integration housing into some currently commercial areas. South Burlington and Vermont as a whole have a known shortfall in housing stock. Currently, several large South Burlington businesses have more job openings than qualified applicants and are struggling to sustain and grow their operations. The tight housing market and lack of affordable options has created situations where applicants have turned down employment offers because they could not locate housing, which limits business growth. Even when housing is available, it is often not in South Burlington and requires a significant commute, which is incompatible with our climate action mitigation goals.

More housing units in some commercial areas would improve the housing shortage in Chittenden County and allow workers to live closer to their workplaces, supporting several climate-change-mitigation goals. It can also enable more multi-modal transportation and reduce the need for a personal vehicle for commuting. It can also improve vibrancy in neighborhoods allowing human-scale commercial, retail, and food service facilities in areas within walking distance of homes. For further discussion of housing, please see the Housing section (X.X).

Some areas of the City that may have capacity for mixed use housing in primarily commercial areas include Technology Park, the University Mall area, areas of Shelburne Road, and areas of Williston Road.

However, some commercial and industrial uses generate significant noise, smell, or other noxious side effects that make them incompatible with residential use, including 24-hour operation and 24-hour trucking. We need to study how to additional housing could be accommodated, but also where industrial uses could and should remain separated from housing. This would allow for some areas to become more mixed use while others remain industrial-only.

City Center. South Burlington continues to invest in its new downtown core, City Center, as one opportunity for integrated economic opportunity and housing in a walkable area. The City Center area is an opportunity for high quality employment in an urban setting. The City did not have a downtown core with professional employment opportunities in a walkable area with services, retailers, restaurants, and housing. We are optimistic that the City Center core will evolve over time into a thriving and energetic downtown where residents have access to high-quality employment either directly walkable or within easy reach via public transportation. The City intends to continue supporting economic growth, including housing growth, in the City Center area through investment and policy for the foreseeable future.

Transportation-Land Use Connection. Future employment and mixed-use development will necessitate a transportation system that meets the demands of the local and regional area. Future mixed-use employment centers in areas such as City Center, Kimball Avenue, Tilley Drive, Williston Road, and Shelburne Road should be planned with transportation improvements and to be walkable and bikeable.

Burlington International Airport. Critically, the Burlington International Airport is located in South Burlington and provides both business opportunities and community challenges. The Airport supports numerous businesses in South Burlington with direct airport access, but most businesses in our region benefit from access to a nearby international airport. Easy air connection to other areas of the United States and therefore to the world directly benefits our economy and supports the future economic health of South Burlington.

The City and the Airport need to work as partners for the continued economic and social health of our community going forward. Internally, the Airport plans for its own future through its master plan process. However, collaboration and cooperation efforts between the City, community, and airport should reflect the coexistence between the community and the airport, making the most of our opportunities to work together. This should include utilizing the airport-owned land around Airport Parkway for projects that benefit both the airport and the community, support for airport-reliant businesses around the airport property, and improved transportation to the airport that avoids impacts on neighborhoods. For more discussion, see the Northwest Neighborhoods section (X.X).

Permitting and Governance. Paired with more flexible and nuanced zoning in certain commercial and mixed use areas, the City should explore ways to streamline and simplify permitting requirements. The City should study the effect of the current Form-Based Code area to see how effective it has been in encouraging development and if other areas should be considered for Form-Based Code zoning. The City could also compare its permitting requirements and fee structure to surrounding municipalities to make sure that our development review is comparable or appropriately scaled up from our neighbors. There should also be consideration given to the City's role in providing support for small start-up businesses, especially those BIPOC-owned or owned by members of other historically-marginalized group.

Promotion and Marketing. South Burlington should further brand and actively market the City with the current community vision expressed in this plan. Additional marketing of the community as a place to grow a business could attract new economic investment and will support the hospitality and retail sector. The City should also advertise its growing cluster of Green Technology businesses and promote further growth in that sector.

Workforce Support & Quality of Life.

Economic viability and quality of life in South Burlington is intricately tied to many other aspects of this plan. South Burlington currently hosts a workforce of almost 20,000 jobs. While it is demographically younger than most Vermont communities, but South Burlington will still face the challenge of an aging of the workforce. In particular, South Burlington's economic future relies on attracting and retaining working-age people with a range of backgrounds, education levels, and areas of expertise. These workers will need, among other things, quality and affordable housing, childcare, and education and training.

Housing. As noted, quality jobs draw a workforce who need safe and affordable housing. South Burlington also strives to have our promising young people stay in Chittenden County and to be able to establish their lives here if they choose. Housing should include rentals, but also owner-occupied homes and affordable missing middle housing. These residents will need public services, including emergency services, and access to multiple modes of transportation.

Childcare. Childcare in Chittenden County and Vermont in general has become another pinch point for workforce participation. Shortage of childcare options for families will continue to prevent parents and caregivers from fully participating in the workforce to their desired level. We need to coordinate with large employers to provide or subsidize childcare, expand options for childcare, and enable new childcare centers to open and operate. This will require significant investment by both the public and private sectors.

Education and Training. Increased connection between education and employment will both facilitate young people coming to and staying in South Burlington and grow our local businesses with trained employees. South Burlington should explore how the City and community can support training programs, apprenticeship programs, technical programs in the trades, and other creative connections between the business community and the school systems and college system.