

Town of Sorrento – Memorandum on Revisions to the Future Land Use Chapter

The Comprehensive Plan Committee revised the Future Land Use chapter after receiving additional community input following the plan's initial submission to the Municipal Planning Assistance Program (MPAP). The primary amendment is that the Town is seeking a growth area exemption based on physical and infrastructure constraints and recent development patterns.

This memorandum summarizes the amendments made to the Future Land Use chapter that was originally submitted to MPAP and is accompanied by a redlined version showing those changes. This memorandum and the redlined chapter address only revisions to the Future Land Use chapter. They do not include other changes made to the Comprehensive Plan in response to missing requirements identified by MPAP during its review or to comments provided by other State agencies.

Summary of Key Changes

Growth Area and Transitional Area

- Removed the Growth Area and Transitional Area designations.
- Revised the chapter to seek a growth area exemption based on physical, infrastructure, and climate constraints.

Introduction

- Revised to remove references to accommodating growth and identifying growth locations.
- Clarified that the Future Land Use framework reflects limited development capacity and existing conditions.

Key Terms

- Removed key terms section as the majority are no longer applicable.

Overview: Key Desires and Conclusions About Land Use

- Clarified and expanded language to better reflect public engagement feedback.
- Revisions emphasize limited growth preferences, protection of town character, skepticism toward regulation, and strong opposition to large-scale or industrial development.

Future Land Use Designations

- Removed Growth and Transitional land use categories.

Rural Area

- Revised the Rural Area vision and description to reflect that it now encompasses areas previously designated as Growth and Transitional.
- Objectives and strategies remain, as they continue to reflect appropriate implementation tools for this area.
- Changed "Critical Rural Area" to "Rural Area" on the Future Land Use Map

Historic Village Area

- Added detailed discussion of flooding, sea level rise, and access constraints.
- Clarified how flooding along Ocean Avenue and vulnerability of critical infrastructure limit the desirability and feasibility of the Historic Village Area as a location for future growth.

Waterfront Area

- Renamed the section from "Waterfront Area" to "Critical Waterfront Area" to better reflect its functional importance and sensitivity.
- Designated areas currently zoned in Sorrento's Shoreland Zoning Map and Ordinance as "Commercial Fisheries Zone Boundaries" as "Critical Waterfront Area"
- Revised the strategy under the "Revise Commercial Fisheries Boundaries" to clarify that the intent is to remove areas that are currently included in this zone that are used for residential purposes.

Critical Natural Resources

- Designated areas currently zoned in Sorrento's Shoreland Zoning Map and Ordinance as "Resource Protection" and conserved lands as "Critical Resource Areas" in the Future Land Use Map

Proposed Land Use Policies (Section 5)

- Shifted policies into a table format. This revision was not redlined for readability; substantive text edits within the table were redlined.
- Add responsible parties and timeframes
- Revised language referencing Growth and Transitional Areas to reflect the updated designation framework.
- Shortened and clarified language related to implementing a site plan review ordinance.
- Added missing state-required policy and strategy elements.

Organization of Land Use Designations (Section 4)

- Reordered Section 4 to place the Rural Area (now Section 4.1) first, as it encompasses the largest portion of land in the community.
- This reordering was not redlined for readability; substantive text edits within sections were redlined.

Chapter O: Future Land Use

1. Purpose

This section discusses likely future land use patterns in Sorrento. An understanding of land use trends is particularly important in determining Sorrento's ability to manage potential growth and protect the varied interests of all residents. Specifically, this chapter:

1. Attempts to predict growth scenarios for the town;
2. Describes options for growth management; and
3. Provides a set of steps that can be taken to engage residents in the growth management process.

2. Introduction

Sorrento's distinctive geography as a peninsula community has significant implications for future land use in the town. Any future land use plan must be grounded in local values—protecting Sorrento's small-town character, preserving natural and scenic resources, and maintaining local autonomy.

The community's vision for the future includes protecting the qualities that residents cherish about Sorrento while addressing concerns about overdevelopment, the loss of town character, and the lack of locally affordable housing. In doing so, it can strike a balance between preserving what residents already have, defining what Sorrento wants to look like in the next 10 years, and what the town can do to protect that vision.

Sorrento qualifies for a growth area exemption based on documented physical and infrastructure constraints. Sorrento has experienced minimal development activity over the past decade, a trend expected to continue. The town does not contain an existing compact, serviceable area with the infrastructure or physical conditions necessary to support expansion consistent with state-defined growth area standards.

3. Overview

Sorrento's residents favor a balanced approach to land use, one that supports small-scale, community-driven development while safeguarding the natural environment and preventing large, disruptive projects. The overwhelming desire to maintain local control over land use is coupled with a resistance to overly restrictive regulations.

When asked about land uses in the 2023 Community Engagement Survey, the majority of respondents opposed mining, manufacturing, industrial-scale businesses, gravel pits, quarries, inns, hotels, bed and breakfasts, and commercial-scale short-term rentals anywhere in Sorrento. Opinions on other land use categories were more mixed regarding where they should be allowed, but residential and seasonal rental properties received the strongest support for being permitted throughout the town. There was also notable support for designating specific areas for marine uses. However, a significant portion of year-round residents expressed opposition to wind farms, workforce housing, and affordable housing in Sorrento.

Key desires and conclusions about land use in Sorrento include:

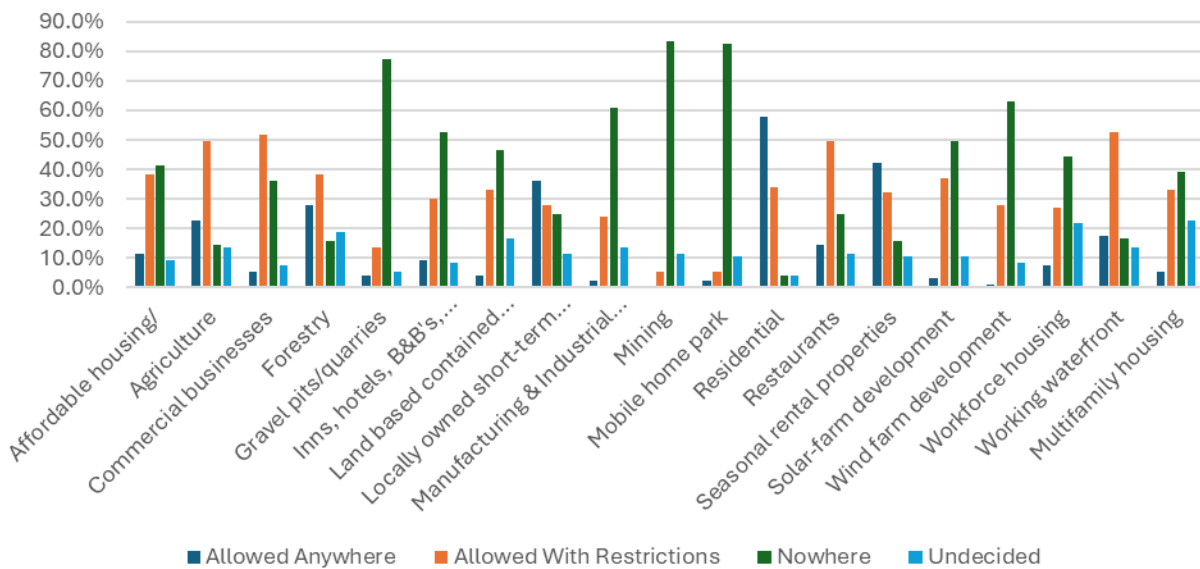
- a. **Preservation of Small-Town Character:** Residents strongly oppose large-scale developments, such as resorts or large scale, multi-unit residential buildings such as apartment buildings or housing complexes, viewing them as out of character for the area. This reflects residents' clear desire to limit change. The community's commitment to maintaining Sorrento's rural, small-town charm, is central to the town's identity.
- b. **Limited Growth and Development:** There is little interest in expanding the village area, adding street lighting, or increasing parking. Sorrento's residents expressed mixed opinions on commercial development. There was a strong sentiment against encouraging commercial development anywhere, along with a desire to see it limited to designated areas with size limitations.
- c. **Support for Small Businesses:** While large-scale commercial enterprises face opposition, there is support for small and home-based businesses. This highlights a preference for localized, community-oriented commerce that aligns with the town's scale and character. Ensuring that businesses can thrive without overwhelming the town's scale is a key priority.
- d. **Protection of the Natural Environment:** Residents of Sorrento place a high value on preserving the town's natural environment. Minimizing environmental impacts, including reducing light pollution, is a key priority for the community. There is a strong commitment to protecting the town's landscapes, ensuring that development does not harm the surrounding natural beauty and ecosystems.
- e. **Protection of Waterfront and Marine Industries:** The community is deeply focused on safeguarding waterfront businesses and maintaining the aesthetic qualities of the shoreline. Protecting

access to marine resources and uses is a critical concern, as the town recognizes the importance of marine industries to its economy and identity. Residents are committed to ensuring the waterfront remains a sustainable and active hub for both commercial and local recreational maritime activities.

- f. **Resistance to Industrial and Extractive Industries:** Broad opposition to industrial and extractive industries further reflects a commitment to preserving the town’s natural landscape and residential character. Residents are determined to prevent large-scale industrial activities that could disrupt the area’s tranquility and environment.

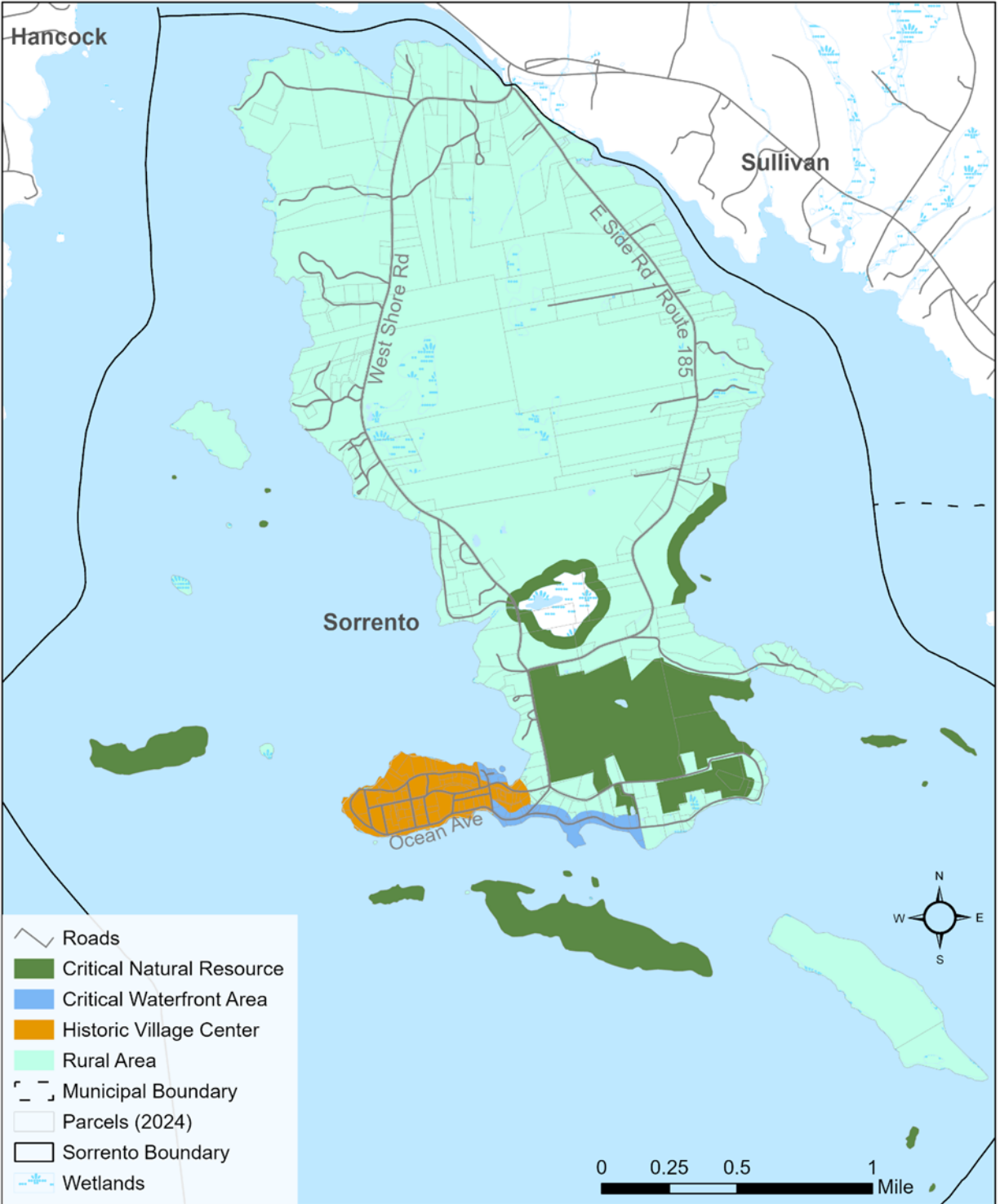
- g. **Skepticism Toward Regulations:** Despite concerns about growth and development, many residents are wary of land use regulations. This indicates a preference for greater autonomy over their own property, suggesting that the community is cautious about policies that might restrict landowners’ rights. Any additional land use regulations need to be carefully considered, specific to identified community concerns, and have extensive public engagement.

Q6: Please check where you feel it is most appropriate for the following land uses to occur in the future - Year-Round Only



4. Future Land Use Designations

The proposed land use designations *are not zoning districts*, but **functional areas** intended to guide the direction of future ordinances, development review processes, and conservation priorities. The land use areas that follow each include a **vision statement** and a set of **goals and strategies** tailored to the area's physical characteristics, development suitability, and community priorities. Collectively, they provide a roadmap for thoughtful land use decisions that will sustain Sorrento's identity and quality of life over the next decade and beyond. The future land use map shows rough estimates of the boundaries of these areas.



Sorrento Comprehensive Plan
Future Land Use

Sources: MEDOT, MEGIS, SCEC, USGS.
 Addison Gruber, 2/3/2026

Hancock County Planning Commission
 This is not a legal document. The information shown on this map is compiled from various sources and is subject to constant revision. Information shown on this map should not be used to determine the location of facilities in relationship property lines, roads, etc.



4.1. Rural Area

Vision

Preserve Sorrento’s traditional rural landscapes by supporting low-density residential development that reflects existing settlement patterns, respects natural constraints, and conserves open space. Development in the Rural area should remain limited in scale, occur primarily along existing roads, and maintain the quiet, open character that defines much of the town, while allowing for appropriate housing that supports a small, year-round community.

Description

The Rural area encompasses most of Sorrento, outside of the Critical Waterfront area, Critical Natural Resources area, and the Historic Village area. It includes the majority of the town’s existing housing and reflects long-standing development patterns characterized by scattered residences, working landscapes, and extensive natural areas.

Residential growth in the Rural area has historically been modest and concentrated along established roads, with limited commercial development. The landscape is defined by working woodlots, conserved lands, trails, wetlands, and forested areas that contributed to Sorrento’s scenic quality, ecological function, and sense of place. Natural conditions across much of the Rural area, including shallow, rocky, or poorly drained soils and infrastructure, constrain the suitability of land for dense or intensive development. These limitations reinforce the importance of maintaining low-density patterns and carefully siting new development to avoid environmental impacts.

These areas also play a vital role in supporting ecological systems, including wildlife habitat, water filtration, and carbon storage. They help maintain the town’s scenic quality, especially when viewed from public roads or the water, and contribute to the quiet, open feel that residents value. As development pressures increase in other parts of the region, protecting these rural areas becomes essential not only for maintaining Sorrento’s identity but also for ensuring long-term resilience to environmental change.

Future land use policies in rural areas would emphasize conservation, low-impact development, and maintaining traditional land uses. These approaches can help preserve Sorrento’s rural character while still allowing for limited, thoughtful growth that aligns with the town’s vision.

Objectives & Strategies

Objective	Strategy	Responsible Party	Timeline
Maintain Current Low-Density	Require at least 150–200 feet of road frontage for new residential lots to maintain an open space character and prevent overdevelopment.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years

Objective	Strategy	Responsible Party	Timeline
Development Patterns	Set minimum setbacks of 25–50 feet from front property lines to ensure that developments do not encroach too closely on roads, preserving the town’s rural, open feel.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years
	Establish larger lot size requirements for new residential development to support adequate septic capacity, maintain the town’s low-density character, and reduce pressure for more intensive development.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years
Encourage Clustered Residential Development	Promote clustered development where homes are built closer together, leaving larger portions of the property as undisturbed open space. This preserves the natural landscape and reduces environmental impact.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years
	Consider incorporating an open space requirement for all new subdivisions, ensuring that a portion of the land is dedicated to parks, green areas, or conservation.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years

4.2. Historic Village Area

Vision

The Historic Village center should retain its charm and significance to Sorrento, despite limited capacity for growth. Efforts should focus on preserving the area’s appeal while acknowledging that it is already built beyond current growth standards and vulnerable to sea level rise.

Description

Sorrento’s village core is a compact, walkable area. Defined by its late 19th- and early 20th-century architecture, the village includes historic homes, cottages, tennis and croquet courts, the library, the summer chapel, and proximity to the waterfront, including the town dock and boat launch. It features a mix of seasonal and year-round residences and is home to several cultural landmarks and gathering spaces that reflect the town’s heritage as a summer resort and its ongoing community life.

The village’s charm, small scale, and pedestrian-friendly layout are central to Sorrento’s identity, offering a sense of place that is valued by residents and visitors alike. Its layout reflects traditional New England planning patterns, with modest homes, narrow roads, and informal public spaces that promote walkability and neighborly interaction.

However, the village area faces significant limitations that challenge future growth and reinvestment. There is concern that many properties are undersized for adequate septic capacity, especially given that much of the

village is underlain by poorly drained, shallow, or otherwise unsuitable soils for conventional wastewater treatment.

Most critically, the village is also located in a low-lying coastal area, making it increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including sea level rise, storm surge, and flooding. Ocean Avenue, the primary access route serving much of the village and the waterfront, has been identified as a top priority in the Sorrento-Sullivan Vulnerability Assessment due to its exposure to coastal flooding and erosion. Flooding along Ocean Avenue already affects access to homes, businesses, and public infrastructure, including the Village Green, town dock, and pier. As sea levels rise, these impacts are expected to worsen, with low-lying segments of the road increasingly subject to inundation and potential loss of reliable access.

These physical constraints—combined with aging infrastructure and limited space for expansion—mean that the village is essentially built out by today’s development standards. As a result, any future development or redevelopment must be carefully planned to maintain the character of the village while addressing these environmental and infrastructure concerns. Policies that support adaptive reuse of historic structures, septic system upgrades, and climate-resilient design will be essential to preserving the village’s role as the center of civic life in Sorrento.

Objectives & Strategies

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
Maintain Traditional Village Character	Emphasize the preservation of existing historical buildings and architectural features that define the village’s character.	Sullivan Sorrento Historical Society, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Implement design guidelines that ensure new developments respect the scale, style, and materials of the village, preventing the area from losing its historical appeal.	Planning Board, HCPC	2 years
Ensure Adequate Soil Conditions and Stormwater Management	Protect public health, water quality, and environmental integrity by requiring that new development meet standards for both soil suitability and private septic systems.	Planning Board	2 years
	Encourage responsible site design by establishing minimum lot sizes, setbacks, and impervious surface limits based on local soil characteristics and septic capacity.	HCPC, Selectboard, Planning Board	2 years

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
	In the village core—where compact lots, shallow soils, and aging infrastructure converge—include stormwater management practices that reduce runoff, prevent erosion, and limit impacts to surface waters and neighboring properties. Strategies may include vegetated buffers, rain gardens, permeable paving, and green infrastructure solutions.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years
Support a mixed-use village core	Promote limited residential growth where appropriate, low-impact commercial activity, and reuse of existing buildings to maintain the area’s historic and civic identity.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
Promote Pedestrian Access and Safety	Improve pedestrian infrastructure, including wayfinding systems, and traffic calming measures, to enhance safety and connectivity within the village	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	4 years

4.3. Critical Waterfront Area

Vision

Preserve and support Sorrento’s working and recreational waterfronts as community assets.

Description

Sorrento’s waterfront is a defining feature of the town’s identity, culture, and economy. It includes critical access points for commercial lobstering, shellfish harvesting, and other marine industries, as well as recreational boating and fishing. The town dock and boat launch provide essential infrastructure for both working and recreational waterfront users, supporting Sorrento’s legacy as a coastal fishing village and summer destination.

The shoreline is also home to scenic vistas, rocky beaches, and a mix of seasonal and year-round homes. The Village Area provides a popular walking loop along the waterfront that is a cherished part of daily life for residents and seasonal visitors alike, offering opportunities for recreation, social connection, and appreciation of Sorrento’s natural and historic beauty. This loop reinforces the community’s relationship with the coast and contributes meaningfully to quality of life and the town’s unique sense of place. These views and waterfront experiences are central to how people experience Sorrento and play a major role in property values and local identity.

The working waterfront—though relatively small in scale compared to more industrialized harbors—is vital to local livelihoods, particularly for lobstermen who depend on access to the bay. Protecting access for marine

businesses and ensuring that the waterfront remains functional—not just picturesque—is a key concern for residents who wish to maintain Sorrento’s traditional connection to the sea.

At the same time, the waterfront faces pressures from climate change, sea level rise, private development, and seasonal demand. Ensuring a balance between recreational, residential, and commercial uses—while preserving access and the natural beauty of the shoreline—is essential to maintaining the waterfront’s long-term viability and character.

Objectives & Strategies

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
Protect Public Waterfront Access	Ensure that designated public access points (e.g., boat launches, docks, and fishing areas) are preserved and maintained for community use.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	Ongoing
Protect Scenic Ocean Views	Protect views that are visible from public roads and other key vantage points. This approach ensures these areas are respected for both the natural beauty and property rights of landowners.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Continue to look into climate resilient solutions to shoreline stabilization on public lands. Coordinate projects with private landowners.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	Ongoing
Revise Commercial Fisheries Zone Boundaries	Revise the boundaries of the Commercial Fisheries Zone as set in Sorrento’s Shoreland Zoning Ordinance to remove areas with residential uses and ensure they accurately reflect the working waterfront areas, focusing on locations that are actively used for marine industries such as fishing, boatyards, docks, and marinas. The boundaries should be realistic, accommodating both current uses and potential future needs.	Selectboard, Planning Board, HCPC	2 years

4.4. Critical Natural Resource Areas

Vision

Protect Sorrento’s ecologically and visually sensitive landscapes by maintaining low-impact, traditional uses and limiting development.

Description

This designation includes Swallow Hollow Bog, the town’s undeveloped shorelands, and its nearby offshore islands—together forming Sorrento’s most ecologically sensitive and environmentally valuable landscapes. These areas support a wide range of ecosystem functions and wildlife habitats. Swallow Hollow Bog, for example, is a freshwater wetland that plays a vital role in flood mitigation, groundwater recharge, and carbon storage, while also serving as habitat for rare plant and bird species.

The shorelands provide a critical buffer between land and sea, helping to filter runoff, protect water quality in Frenchman Bay, and reduce erosion. These coastal areas also offer important breeding and feeding grounds for marine and terrestrial wildlife, including shorebirds, fish, and shellfish.

Offshore islands, most of which are undeveloped or conserved, contribute to regional biodiversity and scenic beauty, offering nesting areas for seabirds and undisturbed habitat for native species. These islands also define Sorrento’s coastal viewsheds, which are an essential part of the town’s visual identity and appeal.

Due to their ecological significance and exposure to sea level rise, storm surge, and development pressures, these landscapes are highly vulnerable to disturbance. Even small changes in land use or hydrology can have outsized impacts. For this reason, careful stewardship and protective land use policies—such as conservation zoning, setbacks from wetlands and shorelines, and limits on clearing or construction—are critical to preserving the functions and beauty of these sensitive natural areas for future generations.

Goals and Strategies

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
Preserve critical natural resources	Discourage high-impact or large-scale development.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Support conservation, education, and ecological stewardship.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Collaborate with conservation organizations to secure land or easements, where necessary.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Continue to regulate development within and near wetlands, steep slopes, and fragile shoreline through Maine’s Shoreland Zoning. Consider increasing setbacks to preserve the coastline.	Selectboard, Planning Board	Ongoing
	Meet with neighboring communities to coordinate land use designations and regulatory and non-regulatory strategies.	Planning Board, CEO, HCPC, SALT	2 years

5. Proposed Land Use Policies

The following suggested policies are intended to guide the implementation of Sorrento’s land use vision over the next decade and beyond. Building on the rural, historic village, critical waterfront, and critical natural resource designations described earlier, these policies provide a practical framework for guiding development in a way that aligns with the town’s priorities and physical constraints.

They are designed to inform future updates to local ordinances, direct the review of proposed development projects, and support decision-making around infrastructure investment, conservation planning, and community character preservation. The intent is not to impose a one-size-fits-all model but to offer flexible strategies that balance private property rights with public goals.

These policies reflect public feedback and values expressed through surveys, meetings, and stakeholder discussions. As Sorrento faces pressure from development, climate change, and shifting demographics, this section offers tools to help the town grow deliberately, supporting its residents while safeguarding the qualities that make Sorrento distinct.

Goals and Strategies

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
Limit Commercial Growth, while Supporting Moderate Residential Development	Encourage the implementation of a basic site plan review process that is clear, straightforward, and designed to balance commercial, recreational, and institutional development with environmental and aesthetic considerations.	Planning Board	2 Years
	Preserve the historic character of the village center while allowing limited mixed-use development (see definition under key terms), for example, residential as well as small businesses.	Planning Board	2 Years
	Continue to allow home-based businesses, agriculture, and forestry.	Planning Board	Ongoing
	Consider preserving the rural and environmental character of Sorrento’s sensitive landscapes by encouraging low-density development that minimizes fragmentation and conserves natural features. Establish standards such as larger minimum lot sizes, increased setbacks, and road frontage requirements, while allowing flexibility for conservation subdivisions or clustered housing that achieve the same goals.	Planning Board	2 Years
	Encourage appropriate lot size areas based on soil suitability for septic, while allowing flexibility for innovative wastewater solutions.	Planning Board	2 Years
	Revise the subdivision ordinance based on the State’s Subdivision Ordinance that reflects Sorrento’s values and goals.	Planning Board	2 Years
	Track new development in the community by type and location.	Planning Board, CEO	Ongoing
	Provide the code enforcement officer with the tools, trainings, and support necessary to enforce land use regulations, and ensure that the Code Enforcement	Selectboard	Ongoing

Objective	Strategy	Suggested Responsibility	Timeline
	Officer is certified in accordance with 30-A M.R.S.A §4451.		
	Evaluate whether the Town has the legal authority and the appropriate process to discontinue or otherwise address undeveloped “paper roads” that appear on subdivision plans but were never constructed.	Selectboard	1 Year