

Chapter 2

Existing Land Use



Chapter 2

Existing Land Use

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Land is a finite resource, and the thoughtful use of land is a critical issue for all communities. The purpose of this chapter is to identify land use trends in Gorham, and suggest future land use policies for the community to pursue. Since 1988 Gorham has regulated land uses with a zoning ordinance. The zoning ordinance is based on the Gorham Master Plan, and NH RSA 674:2 II (B). This statute requires master plans to have a vision and a land use section at a minimum. How a community decides to use its land base clearly has a direct impact on natural resources, on community character, on transportation infrastructure, on housing affordability, the tax base, and the cost of providing services. Changes in demographics, evolving housing needs, and the economic and conservation needs discussed throughout this plan have had, and will continue to have, a direct impact on the landscape of the community.

Attitudes toward the land have changed nationally over the past decade. Experience has taught us that land is a complicated resource, and that one parcel of land may be better suited to a particular use than another. Natural factors such as slope, soil, groundwater, and surface water may vary across the landscape and growing communities must take these factors into consideration when planning their future, or face a decreasing quality of life.

Gorham, along with many other New Hampshire communities, is experiencing increased development, especially in terms of commercial development. With this growth come changes in land use. Fields and meadows become residential areas, or commercial sites. Forests are cleared and built upon, and new roads and other services become necessary. Land once considered undesirable for development becomes more attractive as prime sites are consumed. Steep slopes, wetlands, and other sensitive environmental areas become more susceptible to development as land becomes more and more expensive.

2.0 EXISTING AND HISTORIC LAND USE PATTERNS

Gorham's existing land use pattern is diverse in nature and consists of a wide array of uses. For the purpose of this master plan the existing land uses have been grouped into generalized categories in order to facilitate a better understanding of Gorham's existing pattern of development. They include:

- Residential
- Commercial/Industrial
- Utilities
- Current Use
- Public/Tax Exempt

Gorham is a product of its location and environment. The town's natural features such as topography and geology as well as its politics, transportation system, and economics has greatly influenced its development. The development of Berlin-Gorham into a regional center is a result of its geographic location, and early commercial and manufacturing growth in the area. The Androscoggin River provided the early power for manufacturing, and the Town's location provided easy access for neighboring communities.

Gorham is almost entirely in the Androscoggin drainage area except for a few acres which drain into Jericho Brook from the north-northwest side of Sugar Mountain in the Crescent Range. Presently, there are no developments on the eastern banks of the Androscoggin in Gorham except for a power plant, gas pipeline, and rail line to Berlin. Additionally, 30% of the town land area is included within the White Mountain National Forest. Approximately 750 acres within Gorham, representing 3% of the Town, are included in the Moose Brook State Park. Much of the undeveloped private lands within the Town of Gorham are owned by the Fraser Paper, Public Service Company of N.H., and E. Libby & Sons Company. The Town itself has 1,100 acres of watershed land as well as property acquired from tax collector's deeds.

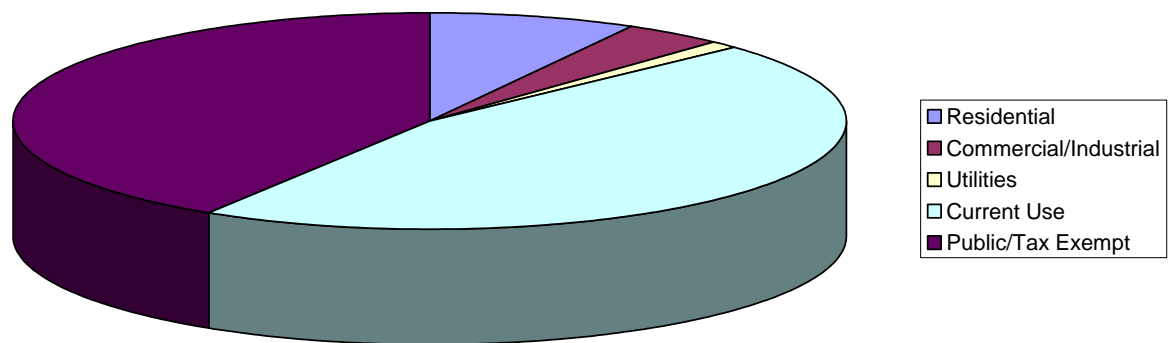
Gorham's downtown is located south of the Androscoggin River, with approximately three-quarters of the population settled at a relatively constant density in the area along the Androscoggin River between Moose Brook and the Peabody River. Residential homes are also located sparsely along U.S. Route 2 west to the Randolph border. A small development of seasonal and year-round residential homes on the Jintown Road has also developed in the last two decades. However, public facilities are limited in this area. Another large residential development called Stoney Brook has developed off of Route 16 in the southern part of the community.

Gorham's location in the White Mountains ensures its place in the tourist-based economy of the region. The recreational opportunities available within a short drive greatly enhance the success of tourist accommodations and services. Gorham holds a key position in the development of the North Country. Located on US Route 2, a major truck transportation route between Canada and the Atlantic seaboard, as well as a local transportation route for the region, Gorham receives a diverse stream of traffic year-round. The pressure to develop, from both external and internal forces, makes it imperative that the community plan for its future. Table 2.1 and Figure 2.2 indicate the present classification of land in Gorham for taxation purposes.

Table 2.1 Land Uses by Valuation

Land Use	Acres	Percent	Total Value	Percent
Residential	1635.19	8%	\$79,044,050	41%
Commercial/Industrial	717.64	4%	\$60,340,350	31%
Utilities	234.23	1%	\$34,046,600	17.8%
Current Use	9316.09	46%	\$428,300	.2%
Public/Tax Exempt	8149.32	41%	\$19,211,100	10%
Total Area	20052.47	100%	\$193,070,400	100%

Figure 2.2 Percent of Gorham Land Area by Property Type



Map A displays the land cover in Gorham. This map provides an image of the existing patterns of development and natural resource systems in the community.

2.1 The Working Landscape

Forestlands are by far the most dominant land use in Gorham. Approximately 93% of Gorham, or 19,200 acres of land, is covered by forestlands. The forests are combinations of softwood and hardwood species which make for diverse uses by the wood products industry. This includes four large tree farms which cover 20% of the town. Most of the forest land in Gorham is steeply sloped and is generally unsuited for other uses. There are also lands throughout the community that were once pasture land, but are now abandoned and in the process of returning to a natural state. Generally land that is presently unsuitable for development due to steepness or inaccessibility remain in woodlands until the pressure to develop, or the demand for the wood exceeds the natural barriers of the land. Presently only one farm exists as an agricultural use in Gorham. No land is currently being tilled for row crops, but some fields can be found scattered throughout the community.

There are currently 9,316 acres within the current use program which equals 46% of the community. There are also 8,149 acres designated as Public/Tax Exempt. Most of this acreage is in its natural state and includes a portion of the WMNF, and other protected lands. Gorham is fortunate to have such a high percentage of its working landscape intact.

2.2 Residential Lands

Residential land in Gorham is utilized in a number of ways: single-family homes, multi-family dwellings, mobile homes, and seasonal homes. Year-round residential units still dominate the residential usage, but second-home development and land subdivision for speculation is on the increase. The majority of residential units are single-family dwellings concentrated around the downtown area. There is surely a demand for apartments in Gorham, and during the last decade the community saw a reduction in the number of owner-occupied units and an increase in the number of rental units to meet this need. From 1980 to 2000 the community experienced a reduction in the year-round residential population, but an increase in the number of housing units. This is due to changes in the composition of households in Gorham that are resulting in smaller household sizes.

The Town has classified 1,635 acres, or 8% of the community, as residential. Some of this land also encompasses open space and natural resources. A great deal of residential development has been accommodated around the downtown due to the availability of Town services, but some has also been scattered to rural portions of the community. As more residential development crops up in the rural sections of the community, land becomes fragmented, natural resources are impacted, the character of the community is altered, and services must be extended to meet the needs of these residents.

Although there has been little development of multi-family units in the last decade in Gorham there is an increasing need for rental units. The need for affordable multi-family dwellings exists in Gorham and the surrounding communities. The subdivision of land for future development has continued even in times of little or no population growth, and Gorham's role as a viable area to live, work and eventually to retire to creates development pressure on land in Gorham today.

2.3 Commercial and Industrial Lands

Approximately 717 acres, or 4% of Gorham's land area, is identified as commercial and industrial. Although the percentage is small, these properties have a dramatic effect on surrounding land use, and contribute to the tax base. The majority of commercial land use is concentrated on Main Street (downtown) and the Berlin/Gorham Road (Route 16). The commercial uses in Gorham support the needs of local residents as well as other communities in the region.

From a land use perspective the Berlin/Gorham Road has seen the most change and has been the location of the most new commercial activity in Gorham over the last two decades. As a result Gorham has become a major destination for vehicle purchases. Based on the total number of employees at the dealerships in Gorham, this is the largest industry in the community, followed by jobs at the other large retailers (Wal-mart and Shaw's), and then Fraser Paper. Several other businesses and industries are located throughout the town, and expansion of these industries is always possible and encouraged.

2.4 Public and Tax Exempt Lands

This category includes schools, Town-owned property, churches, federal property, parks, recreational areas, libraries, hospitals, etc. There are approximately 8,149 acres, or 41%, of Town land devoted to public use. Like many communities around the WMNF Gorham has a high percentage of public lands. The combination of WMNF property and Town owned parcels creates the beginning of a great network of unfragmented blocks of land that contribute to the character of the community. These areas contain valuable natural resources, habitat, recreation resources, and working lands. These areas also support many of the public uses in the downtown and elsewhere in the community.