



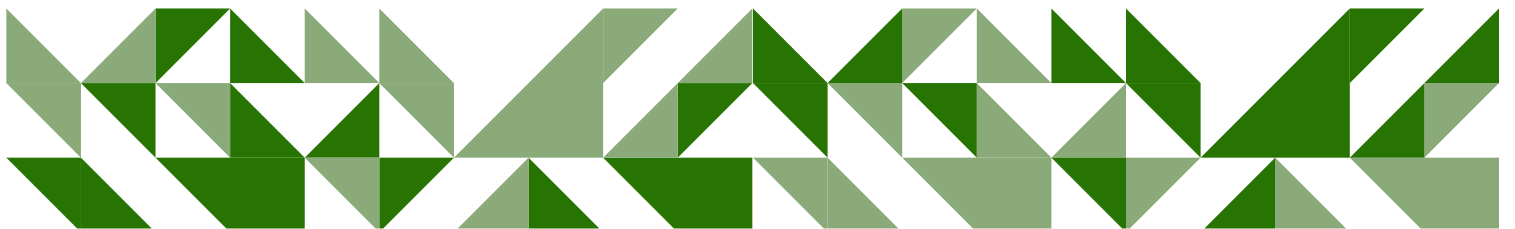
# Statewide Regional Planning Commission (RPC) Network Assessment Full Report



Vermont Association of Planning & Development Agencies

*Vermont Association of Planning and  
Development Agencies (VAPDA)*

*February 2025*



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## Purpose and Scope

### Project Purpose

During May 2024, the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) issued an RFP seeking assistance in conducting a study of the regional development system in the state of Vermont, as well as each individual Regional Planning Commission (RPC) working within the system. This assessment would include information about overall performance of the statewide RPC network, stakeholder satisfaction, and assistance in assessing how the network of RPCs as a whole is statutorily enabled and if the enabling legislation strategically positions RPCs to meet ongoing and emerging needs. This report is also intended to satisfy the need for an assessment of RPC performance as outlined in Vermont H.687 (Act 101), Section 50(a), adopted in June 2024.

The NADO Research Foundation responded to this RFP with a proposal of services that was selected by VAPDA in June 2024.

During 2011, VAPDA engaged with NADO on a similar evaluation of RPC organizations to this current effort. The findings from this previous report are referenced sporadically in the body of this report.

## RPC Establishment and Legislative Charge

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) were envisioned as a solution to the rising need to provide local Vermont communities with the ability to access additional assistance and resources to support the effective governance and provision of public services. Regional Planning Commissions, made up of member towns and communities, were established in Vermont state statute in 1967 with the adoption of Title 24: Municipal and County Government, Chapter 117: Municipal and Regional Planning and Development, Subchapter 3: Regional Planning Commissions<sup>1</sup> (Hereafter cited as 24 V.S.A. § 4341)

Pursuant to the enabling legislation, RPC organizations were tasked with nineteen specific roles and responsibilities related to regional development activities. As outlined in 24 V.S.A. § 4345a, a summarized list of duties is as follows:<sup>2</sup>

- Promote cooperation among municipalities;
- Facilitate economic development programs;
- Advise communities on matters regarding public financing;
- Provide technical assistance including the creation of plans, capacity studies, and bylaw assistance;
- Cooperate with neighboring governments in matters regarding conservation or development of regional or adjoining territories;
- Prepare a regional plan;
- Develop an ongoing planning process;
- Prepare an affordable housing plan and accompanying information and strategies for increasing affordable housing in member communities;

<sup>1</sup> <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/chapter/24/117>

<sup>2</sup> <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/24/117/04345a>

- Confirm municipal planning efforts;
- Review municipal plans at least every eight years;
- Develop strategies to manage growth and impacts;
- Review proposed state capital expenditures to assess compliance with regional planning documents;
- Assist District Environmental Commissions in making determinations regarding development and subdivision conformity;
- Assist the Public Utility Commission as requested;
- Hold public hearings as necessary;
- Assist in moments of conflict regarding adopted regional or municipal plans;
- Define substantial regional impact related to state regulatory matters or municipal plans;
- Undertake studies regarding energy conservation and renewable energy;
- Participate in clean water project development and implementation (as designated).

Optional duties are also outlined in *24 V.S.A. § 4345* as follows:

- Develop regional inventories of critical facilities including hospitals, emergency shelters and fire facilities, while also cooperating to plan for utility and service capacities for these facilities in case of emergency;
- Complete studies regarding land development, transportation, historic preservation, wetland protection, and similar topics;
- Maintain a working relationship with local municipalities and state entities as it pertains to the activities of the RPC;
- Utilize the ability to enter upon any lands (with permission) for the purposes of examination or surveying;
- Retain staff or enter into contracts for the purposes of carrying out RPC duties;
- Complete comprehensive planning activities;
- Undertake programs that improve, protect, and preserve physical and human resources;
- Provide training and assistance services to communities;
- Gather statistical data for the service region;
- Provide small business assistance;
- Acquire and dispose of property as necessary for the fulfillment of RPC duties;
- Obtain funds including from loans in order to own or operate property necessary for RPC duties, or to establish a revolving loan fund;
- Execute contracts with public or private entities to complete RPC duties;
- Invest funds that are unrestricted by state or federal regulation as described by the Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act;
- Other functions necessary to fulfill the obligations and duties of the RPC.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the established RPC organizations across the state, the Vermont Legislature adopted H.687 (Act 181)<sup>3</sup> which included the following language:

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) shall hire an independent contractor to study the strategic opportunities for regional planning commissions to better serve municipalities and the State. This study shall seek to ensure that the regional planning commissions are statutorily enabled and strategically positioned to meet ongoing and emerging State and municipal needs and shall review the following: governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability, and staffing.

The purpose of this report is to provide the requested review of the RPC organizations as it pertains to governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability and staffing. Each area is provided with focused discussion below.

## Executive Summary

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) is the statewide association for Vermont's 11 regional planning commissions. Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are political subdivisions of the State of Vermont created by their member municipalities (24 VSA §4341), that provide technical assistance to their municipalities. In the absence of county governments, Vermont's RPCs act as intermediaries between the municipal and state levels of government. RPCs work in a variety of fields: land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental quality. RPC executive directors and senior staff are asked to serve on state councils, boards, committees, and working groups, and are often called upon to develop and implement statutorily mandated programs with their member municipalities.

RPCs strengthen the capability and capacity of municipalities and extend the reach of the state connecting their communities with federal and state programs. RPCs are uniquely positioned to provide broad services to every Vermont municipality.

A legislative charge to complete a statewide assessment of performance and accountability for Vermont's RPCs was made in H.687 (Act 181) Section 50a – Regional Planning Commission Study, adopted in June 2024, as stated:

(a) The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) shall hire an independent contractor to study the strategic opportunities for regional planning commissions to better serve municipalities and the State. This study shall seek to ensure that the regional planning commissions are statutorily enabled and strategically positioned to meet ongoing and emerging State and municipal needs and shall review the following: governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability, and staffing.

(b) A stakeholder group composed of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, Vermont Council on Rural Development, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Agency of Administration, the Office of Racial Equity, legislators, and others will be invited to participate in the study to provide their insights into governance structure, accountability, and performance standards.

(c) The study shall identify the gaps in statutory enabling language, structure, and local engagement and make recommendations on how to improve and ensure consistent and equitable statewide programming and local input and engagement, including methods to improve municipal participation; the amount of regional planning grant funding provided to each regional planning commission relative to statutory responsibilities, the number of municipalities, and other demands; and how to make it easier

<sup>3</sup> Vermont H.687 (Act 181) – June 2024; <https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2024/H.687>.

for municipalities to work together.

(d) On or before December 31, 2024, the study report shall be submitted to the House Committees on Environment and Energy, on Commerce and Economic Development, and on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the Senate Committees on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs, on Natural Resources and Energy, and on Government Operations. (NOTE: This deadline was subsequently extended to February 28, 2025.)

VAPDA has partnered with the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation to complete the study. The goal of this effort has been to learn more about how Vermont's RPCs conduct programming and activities for the benefit of member communities as required by Vermont state law. The results of this effort will help to ensure that the statewide network of RPCs serves as a results-oriented, cost-effective and valued-added resource for the State of Vermont and its local communities. The findings will also serve as the RPC study called for in Section 50 of H.687 (Act 181).

This research effort included surveying and interviewing elected officials that are served by RPC organizations; individuals serving on RPC governing boards; RPC executive directors; federal and state agency stakeholders; statewide nonprofit organizations; and members of the Vermont legislature.

Complete research details and discussion regarding these recommendations can be found in the accompanying full report. Overall, the findings reiterate the important role of the RPCs, to serve as intermediaries between municipalities and the state. The State of Vermont has been a strong partner, supporting the work of the RPCs through ongoing funding support. There is interest in enhancing VAPDA as a statewide RPC network but also as a formal organization that advocates for and supports the RPCs in their vision of enhanced performance and impact.

As a result of this research effort, the NADO Research Foundation has crafted recommendations around the areas noted in the legislation: governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability and staffing. These recommendations are made with the intent of enhancing these state relationships and building stronger RPCs.

## Commentary and Findings

### Local Stakeholder Feedback

As part of this research project, 158 governing board members and 200 elected officials responded to online surveys offered by the NADO Research Foundation. (Note: Twelve individuals responded to both surveys, since they were both local elected officials AND governing board members.) This provided a perspective on the level of engagement, satisfaction, and desire for service from local parties. Across both surveys, the overall tone of the feedback was positive. Stakeholders expressed their familiarity with the services and activities of the RPC and an understanding of the critical roles that RPCs play in member communities. It is clear that towns face challenging conditions to fulfill a growing number of responsibilities passed down from the state and that partnerships with the RPCs are a key vehicle through which to complete these tasks.

Respondents resoundingly understood the resource limitations that Vermont RPCs face; this understanding was coupled with a strong desire for additional supportive services of all kinds and at whatever levels the RPCs might be able to manage now and in the future. For example, there is a desire for RPCs to provide capacity support to towns, specifically in staffing roles regionally that are challenging to fill locally. Respondents noted that many of the smallest communities face challenges meeting even the basic responsibilities they are charged with, and if RPCs could enhance their capacity by offering shared services with or on behalf of these

communities, it would be beneficial. Examples of positions highlighted by municipal responders that could benefit from these types of shared service considerations are clerk, zoning administrator, tax assessor, and town manager.

Overall, the survey results indicated that communities do not seem to be expressing unhappiness or dissatisfaction with the services offered by the RPCs, the level of energy expended in the pursuit of their many responsibilities, or the amount of communication taking place between the RPCs and the municipalities.

## Statewide and Regional Stakeholder Feedback

Interviews were completed with a variety of state agencies that work with RPCs, as well as statewide nonprofits and state legislators. External stakeholders praised Vermont's RPCs for their critical role in connecting municipalities to state government, especially in a state without county governance. Key strengths include their technical assistance, strong partnerships with state and federal agencies, regional expertise, support for project implementation, and contributions to policy development in areas like housing, energy, and climate.

Opportunities for growth focus on increasing public awareness, fostering inclusivity, building municipal capacity, improving collaboration, and exploring governance reforms like transitioning to a Council of Governments (COG) model. Stakeholders also recommend better mentoring, more consistent evaluation, and statewide coordination through a dedicated VAPDA coordinator to enhance RPC effectiveness.

Overall, while RPCs are vital to governance and local capacity building, strategic investments and reforms are needed to address resource limitations and maximize their impact.

## Council of Government Considerations

The NADO Research Foundation team spoke with RPC directors individually and as a group about the 'council of governments (COG)' model for RPC organizations in Vermont. The COG model is used by organizations in other states that have similar roles to the RPCs. Two key topics were discussed in relation to this concept: expanded statutory capabilities for shared services and modifying governing board requirements for member communities to enhance local participation and accountability.

## Expanded Statutory Capabilities

A critical topic of concern for RPC leaders and VAPDA is the potential to enhance the abilities of RPCs to participate in regional governance to enable better service delivery, specifically county governments. As outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4341, RPCs are political subdivisions of the State of Vermont. It was noted during the RPC executive director interviews that the organizations are often treated as consultants or contractors. Recognizing and maximizing the capacity for RPCs to act in the political subdivision role could be an initial step toward enhancing their ability to address challenges at the regional level on behalf of member communities as requested and observed during the survey portion of this effort. Fully addressing the concerns raised by local communities regarding additional shared services, or in some cases direct provision of services on behalf of member communities, requires an expansion of authorized capabilities for RPCs by transitioning to COGs. The NADO Research Foundation has provided six examples in Appendix K (of the full report) of how other states allow for formal engagement between RPC organizations and other parties, including member communities within a service region. Of those state examples, the most detailed language which appears to capture the sentiment of Vermont's RPC leadership and member communities are Connecticut and Maine. Following the statewide reorganization of regional councils of government that took place in Connecticut between 2013 and 2014, the updated language found in Connecticut General Statutes, Chapter 127, Section 8-31 provides the best reference for enhanced service provision. Maine Revised Statutes, specifically those found in Title 30-A, Chapter 119, Article 2, Subsection 2313 (2) Authority, state that regional councils on behalf of one or more members and with appropriate authorization, can execute any power, privilege or authority that a municipal



government is capable of. Using this as a model, these concepts would provide Vermont RPCs the ability to provide services on an as-needed basis to residents of towns with limited municipal resources or capacities. This ability would be critical to ensure that policy directives from the state are carried out at a local level. The Franklin Regional COG<sup>4</sup> in western Massachusetts could be considered a specific individual organizational model for the Vermont RPCs to evaluate regarding approaches to implementation.

## Governing Board Composition

Governing board composition was highlighted by both RPC executive directors and survey respondents. Feedback received during the governing board survey effort indicated that there may not be enough direct municipal participation on RPC governing boards. This feedback was balanced with similar comments that identifying individuals who can commit the time and energy needed to effectively serve on a governing board remains challenging. The lack of specificity in current Vermont enabling legislation regarding the appointment of commissioners by municipal governments may be contributing to these challenges, and could continue to be a challenge, especially if a shift to a COG model of governance is implemented. Similar to the previous topic, six states were evaluated in Appendix K to assess how their enabling statutes handle this topic, with all six specifying at varying levels of detail that elected officials, or municipal designees, should be among the official governing board membership.<sup>5</sup> A reconsideration of the membership of governing boards as required by state statute to more closely represent the true interest of municipal governments is recommended if a transition to a Council of Governments style of governance is a goal.

The statutory authority given to RPC is primarily focused on planning efforts, assistance to municipalities, and executing state legislative and agency initiatives. Currently, commissioners serve at the pleasure of their legislative bodies. There is no governing or governance authority beyond the commission at the RPC level.

Regional Planning Commissions have no elected legislative body and/or elected executive, no ability to raise general revenue, and no ability to enact and enforce laws, policy, regulations, or issue permits. Appendix K provides comparative examples from other states that includes an examination of their abilities to generate funding.

## Overall Performance Evaluation

Based on the research and analysis completed throughout this effort, the NADO Research Foundation provides the following general observations regarding RPC performance in the key areas outlined in H.687 (Act 181), Section 50 (a) – Regional Planning Commission Study. These observations are supported by discussions in previous sections, the full report, and additional information found in the Appendices.

### Governance

Regional Planning Commissions are performing in a satisfactory manner within the current statutory guidelines provided at 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345(a).

If it is the desire of the State of Vermont to enhance the capability of RPCs to more effectively address issues related to shared services and regional governance raised by member communities throughout this effort, changes are recommended, specifically to implement a COG model, transforming RPCs to COGs.

### Funding

The funding levels and mechanisms recommended for examination as part of this effort, particularly those provided by the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) for core statutory planning responsibilities, are found to be sufficient for current levels of programming.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin Regional Council of Governments; <https://frcog.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> In Massachusetts, planning board members are specified in statute – who may be either elected or appointed locally.

Any expansion of roles or responsibilities identified and recommended by the State of Vermont in the future will require additional resources for meaningful and successful implementation by RPC organizations.

Current ACCD funding allocation strategies which include factors for population and densities of towns are also found to be a fair method of distribution at the current time.

## Programs and Service Delivery

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be providing the type and level of programming consistent with the requirements outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345(a). Interactions with local officials and board members during the survey portions of this effort highlighted the quality and value of the services provided by the individual RPC organizations to member communities.

Service delivery across the RPC network was found to be satisfactory. Regional Planning Commissions are striving to provide the highest levels of service to member communities with the funding, staffing, and resources currently at their disposal. As indicated in survey results and stakeholder interviews, member communities are well aware of the resource limitations and programmatic requirements that RPCs must work within.

## Equity

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be working to improve their efforts in being more equitable and inclusive, based on guiding principles like the Vermont Environmental Justice Law and existing frameworks like the Vermont Agency of Transportation – Transportation Equity Framework.<sup>6</sup> Focus groups uncovered areas where RPCs would like to improve, techniques they would like to discontinue, and new techniques they would like to try. Overall, it is clear that RPCs can learn new approaches in equity practices from each other.

## Accountability

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be working with a high level of accountability to their member communities and contracts from federal and state agency partners. Survey and interview efforts produced numerous comments regarding the responsiveness of RPC organizations in addressing issues raised by stakeholders and their overall satisfaction with the services rendered.

While the levels of communication are high amongst all parties engaged with RPCs, there was an expression that this level of communication should remain high or even increase if possible. Communications recommendations based on this feedback are provided.

## Staffing

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to have sufficient levels of overall staffing for current programming requirements.

Any expansion of roles or responsibilities identified and recommended by the State of Vermont in the future will require additional resources available for staff support to guarantee meaningful and successful implementation by RPC organizations. This observation is based on the numerous comments received during the survey and interview portions of this effort, requesting support on several topics that were beyond the RPCs' ability to support at current staffing levels.

<sup>6</sup> State of Vermont – Agency of Transportation, Transportation Equity Framework Final Report, September 2023; <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/equity>.

## Recommendations

VAPDA was created to serve as the statewide association of Vermont's eleven RPCs to ensure effective planning programs that enhance the quality of life for all Vermont residents. Based on information developed throughout the assessment process, these recommendations focus on assuring that VAPDA and the RPCs are well positioned to continue to provide impactful services to Vermont communities and stakeholders who invest valuable resources toward these ends.

Recommendations provided here are offered in the topic areas outlined in H.687 (Act 181) as described. These recommendations are focused on parties who are empowered to act on these matters: the State of Vermont, VAPDA, and RPCs in general.

### Governance

There has been interest on the part of the RPCs in implementing a Council of Governments (COG) model of governance, specifically the COG model used in neighboring New England states. Their interest, and those of some of the state agencies and legislators, is in using the COG model to increase the potential for and ease in providing shared services to municipalities and, as a result, having more representative governing boards, with elected representatives.

1. **Shift to a Council of Governments (COG) model.** To pursue municipal shared services and expanded regional governance in the way that has been effective for other New England COGs, and allowing for greater efficiencies, the COG model is necessary. This model requires revisiting the structure of board membership. If VAPDA and the 11 RPCs are interested in moving from the RPC model to the COG model, it will be necessary to consider additional statutory changes outlined below.
  - a. Amend 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345a – Duties and Optional Powers transitioning RPCs to Councils of Government. Enable the RPCs to transition to councils of government, specifically allowing for the ability to increase shared services opportunities on behalf of and between member communities and RPCs without requiring the creation of other organizational mechanisms. This would also allow RPCs to offer certain fee-for-service opportunities for municipalities to contract for services like administrative support, code enforcement, zoning assistance, development review, etc. We recommend using Franklin Regional Council of Governments as a model for moving forward.
  - b. This would also necessitate a statutory change in RPC membership guidelines found at 24 V.S.A. 4342, requiring elected municipal officials to serve on COG Governing Boards.
  - c. This shift may also necessitate a review of the number and size of Vermont COGs and funding equity to ensure that all communities are being served equitably inside the new model.
  - d. With a shift to a COG model, it may make sense for VAPDA to rebrand itself with a new name and logo, that better showcases Vermont COGs.
2. ***If not shifting to a COG model,*** consider language that maximizes the flexibility of formal membership to RPC governing boards, such as language allowing for alternates or designees to be appointed. Based on this, if changes in enabling language are unlikely, it may be critical for the RPC organizations to agree on common membership language for individual bylaws that would provide the level of representation necessary to best address all membership concerns outlined in this report.
3. **Maximize the status of Vermont RPCs/COGs as political subdivisions.** RPC directors felt that this status as outlined in Vermont Statutes was underutilized and led to RPC organizations frequently being treated as consultants or contractors creating funding and contractual barriers. If the transition to

the COG model is not immediately feasible or until the COG model is assessed and implemented, an increased emphasis on this legal status for RPCs could allow them additional latitude to engage with municipalities and state agencies for the provision of services and other items of need as outlined during the survey and interview effort.

## Funding

RPC directors and governing board members expressed general satisfaction with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) allocation formula and the competitive factors that have been included in the allocation calculations. The ACCD funding formula as presented appears to be sufficient in capturing the specific challenges faced by regions big and small, using the outlined measures of allocation. Immediate improvements or changes to this were not offered during this research effort.

Funding levels appear to be sufficient for current levels of service. While RPC member appropriations did not rise to the level of an issue during the executive director and board chair interviews, continued investment in RPC operations is critical for future success. Should the desire (or demand) for services from either member towns or the state of Vermont escalate, additional funding will be required.

RPCs are grant-dependent, meaning their work programs are largely externally driven, which has the potential to significantly limit their flexibility and responsiveness to regionally and municipally driven needs. As a result, the temporary nature of their funding limits RPCs' ability to grow and retain staffing capacity. There may be value in considering ways to remedy this situation, assuring the consistent funding necessary to grow and retain quality staff.

1. ***Shifting to a COG model may necessitate additional funding due to a corresponding increase in responsibilities for staff.*** As shared services are implemented and COGs offer staffing solutions for their municipalities, additional resources will be required. Increasing funding to make RPCs/COGs more robust would build capacity for both project-level efforts and regional governance concerns, where present.

## Programs and Service Delivery

Overall, executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem pleased with the quality of programs and service delivery their RPCs are providing. External stakeholders are interested in building stronger partnerships with RPCs with increased communication. Positioning VAPDA to be more of a resource will be central to many of the program and service delivery items discussed here.

1. **Provide more frequent direct feedback about performance at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner/staff level.** During the interview process, a number of RPC directors indicated that feedback from partnering state agencies was not always direct or specific and occasionally provided indications that some RPC organizations were not performing as well as others. State agency representatives commented on performance concerns with the work of certain RPCs; it is unclear whether these concerns were shared with the individual RPC or VAPDA. To create more transparency around areas for improvement, it may be useful to develop regular processes or standards for feedback on both sides. This may include quarterly feedback meetings or a regular timeline for feedback. Where applicable, RPC organizations should be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies. This feedback should be in a direct and constructive manner that provides an opportunity for growth and improvement.
2. **Formalize the existing strategic planning processes of VAPDA.** While VAPDA has an existing strategic planning process, VAPDA leadership may benefit from undertaking a process that results in a Three Year Plan that outlines goals for building the internal organization, including plans for staffing and financial

stability of the organization; increasing the visibility of the RPCs as a statewide network; developing consistent and regular communications processes with applicable state agencies and stakeholders; developing systems to allow RPCs to develop coordinated approaches for statewide service alignment; and assuring steps are in place to continue the strong partnership between the RPCs and the state.

- 3. Establish a staff position focused on the management and administration of VAPDA.** Based on feasibility and funding, VAPDA should evaluate moving the organization from volunteer-managed to one managed by paid staff. The roles for this staff position to fulfill are many, including ensuring quality control on state projects, while also coordinating RPC efforts in communications, equity, state advocacy, state contracts, transparency, and education/training efforts.
  - a. Enhance the utilization of VAPDA as a statewide advocacy partner on behalf of RPCs.** Position VAPDA in a way that would facilitate the meaningful engagement of all RPC organizations as it relates to statewide advocacy efforts.
  - b. Continue to utilize VAPDA to streamline/coordinate program deliverables provided to state agencies.** Staffing VAPDA will allow the organization to function more as a central coordinating body, using a structured and intentional approach to evaluate and support statewide alignment by **creating and fostering opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and learning between members; and managing/streamlining reporting and impact measurement across RPCs.** VAPDA could also explore opportunities to take on more regional planning work and substate service delivery and coordinate with state agencies to enhance local service delivery and community development.
- 4. Utilize RPC working groups and VAPDA committee structure to provide shared trainings, catalyze statewide projects, and maximize efficiencies.** Informal committee structures within VAPDA have already been observed as effective methods to allow RPC representatives with common interests to collaborate on relevant topics. Enhancing and formalizing these committees or forming standing working groups could provide additional opportunities for peer learning and resource sharing.

## Equity

Despite concerns about equity at the federal level, Vermont RPCs are likely to continue the discussion around equity, as this topic was raised in survey responses from governing board members and local elected officials. VAPDA has already played a key role in developing the [Vermont Transportation Equity Framework of 2023](#) which may serve as a starting point for any discussions about equity strategies moving forward.

- 1. Continue to examine equity frameworks that may advance the goals of local communities and RPC priorities. Utilize VAPDA as a vehicle to develop statewide approaches for enhancing RPC diversity and equity practices.**
  - a. Consider creating a statewide equity plan for RPCs or establishing common Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) goals that each organization could work toward and report on.
  - b. Utilize RPC executive director meetings to share best practices, concerns, and opportunities for collaboration.
  - c. Engage in intentional learning and discussions around equity issues.
  - d. Create Public Participation Policy Guidance. Utilize VAPDA as a venue to formulate guidance that leads to the adoption and implementation of additional public participation policies that support RPC efforts to guide outreach and ensure inclusivity in every project and program.

- 2. Work to implement identified and existing Vermont best practices for Equity considerations, like the VTrans equity framework.**
- 3. Continue to address inclusivity within RPC organizations.**
  - a. Examine internal policies, hiring practices, grant processes, bylaws, strategic plans, etc. with a lens of inclusivity.
  - b. Foster diversity in leadership, committees, and boards. Identify barriers to participation and seek opportunities to expand engagement.
  - c. Maximize local engagement. Meet people where they are, cultivate relationships with different communities and audiences, direct marketing, etc.

## Accountability

While RPC executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem content with the accountability of the RPCs, there does seem to be a perceived disconnect between state agencies and RPCs in terms of communication.

- 1. Continue to build and enhance trust with municipalities.**
  - a. Lead transparent and inclusive conversations to support overwhelmed municipalities of all sizes, to help align their work more closely with local needs and priorities. Acknowledge overwhelmed municipalities' challenges and strategize how to overcome them.
  - b. Strengthen municipal relationships by understanding municipal needs and offering technical assistance to fulfill those needs as well as offering other kinds of assistance.
  - c. Ensure follow-through on any RPC offers or municipality requests, being sure to report back to municipalities.
  - d. Contact the smallest and most remote communities regularly to see if their needs have changed and if they may want assistance from the RPC. Situations and needs can change.
- 2. Continue to build and enhance trust with state agencies.** Encourage state partners to provide more frequent and direct feedback at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner levels about program delivery. Communications between the state and RPCs should be regular and allow for joint problem-solving.
  - a. Develop and implement a process or standards for mutual feedback between the state and the RPCs, such as quarterly feedback meetings and an established timeline for feedback.
  - b. Where applicable, executive directors and board chairs must be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies, not just to staff planners.
  - c. State agencies need to recognize RPCs as political subdivisions and work to remove funding and logistical barriers, making service delivery easier. RPCs are often treated as contractors only, not as statute-enabled partners.
  - d. RPCs need a better understanding of state expectations for balancing these two roles: project-driven entities working through state agency work plans and grants, or flexible field support staff provided with resources to meet the needs of the towns where they are. RPCs wish to build capacity among towns that is unrelated to provision of shared services.

### **3. Enhance the role of RPCs in capacity building of municipalities.**

- a. VAPDA may want to enhance its relationship with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) and any other organizations supporting municipalities to undertake periodic municipal capacity assessments that would help bring critical issues into focus such as staffing, public service, public information concerns, data needs, and any similar topic identified by local stakeholders. This will set the stage for a discussion of which organizations are already fulfilling certain capacity building needs and where there may be gaps that VAPDA can fill.
- b. Many municipalities lack the capacity to manage complex challenges, which RPCs could help address. RPCs should continue to play an active role in capacity building, especially in helping municipalities implement plans to access funding. This could involve stepping into a more proactive role in non-planning topics including town administration, project management and grant application preparation.
- c. Evaluate how additional funding and resources could be distributed among RPCs to accurately address expressed needs and capabilities.

### **4. Continue efforts to improve communication practices and build RPC capacities to share information widely (between RPCs and state agencies, between RPCs and towns, etc.)**

- a. Create a refined focus on marketing VAPDA (to the state, towns, etc.), developing shared training opportunities and better programmatic alignment for staff. RPCs thrive when they work together on projects. Embedding an RPC working group into statewide projects can highlight the efficiency of RPCs working together and sharing information/resources.
- b. Establish a written communication work plan for individual RPCs and VAPDA.
  - i. Create a communications budget line item or include communication items in future funding requests
- c. To improve communications between RPC and stakeholder state agencies, VAPDA should occupy an expanded role. This could include VAPDA-specific mailings on behalf of the RPC network, stakeholder visits to share updates, invitation of stakeholders to VAPDA-sponsored events, organization of site visits or road shows for the RPCs to showcase their work, and the creation of an annual statewide impact report.
- d. Better statewide messaging and marketing to increase awareness of RPC work, roles, services, and impacts. Utilize marketing and storytelling efforts, social media, websites and newsletters.
  - i. VAPDA should create core messaging that the RPCs can use to demonstrate what they do and their significant impact in communities. This might involve more outreach, education, and transparency about their operations and decision-making processes, including services available to member towns.
  - ii. Redesign VAPDA.org to serve as a marketing and communications tool for VAPDA and the individual RPCs.
- e. To build RPCs communications expertise, utilize VAPDA to organize RPC communications training opportunities.
  - i. Provide training on communication-centric topics for the RPCs.

- ii. Contract with communications professionals to offer accelerated assistance to those most in need.

## Staffing

Regional Planning Commission staff are the most critical asset in the cycle of assistance and service delivery to communities in Vermont. While the staffing levels at Vermont RPCs have grown significantly since the previous report in 2011, the observed levels remain minimally sufficient for current endeavors based on feedback received and may not be sufficient to keep up with the expanding roles and expectations placed on them by state entities. This has left RPCs in a position where they are not consistently able to adequately respond to requests for additional services now, and any that may be received in the future. Similarly, the request for additional services heard in survey responses from across the state is beyond what can currently be supported by RPC organizations.

1. **Prioritize continued investment in building overall RPC capacity across existing statutory service areas.** Based on feedback received during the survey and interview portions of this effort, RPCs are staffed at a minimally sufficient level to meet the current statutory programming requirements. Stakeholders acknowledged the condition of having limited staff working within the constraints of existing resources to manage deliverables and the ability to be responsive to local needs. The request for additional or enhanced services heard within the survey effort are beyond the existing staffing capacity of RPC organizations. As roles and expectations from member communities and the state continue to expand, the observed staffing levels will quickly become insufficient without additional flexible, long term and reliable funding.

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## Governance

Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions have a two-fold role in governance. One is a statutory role to perform the governance of their own organizations, led by the member communities that comprise the membership and governing boards. The second is to provide assistance to local governments across the state of Vermont as they work to carry out their statutory responsibilities for the benefit of residents.

## Background

Governance of RPC organizations in Vermont is outlined in state statute at 24 V.S.A. 4342 and 4343. As outlined, oversight to RPCs is provided by governing boards made up of representatives appointed by member municipalities. As stated in 24 V.S.A. 4342:

A regional planning commission shall contain at least one representative appointed from each member municipality. All representatives may be compensated and reimbursed by their respective municipalities for necessary and reasonable expenses.

Members of the governing board serve at the discretion of the member community and are appointed to a term that is dictated by the bylaws of the RPC which they are serving. Member communities can revoke their representatives at any time. Other non-municipal members can serve on the RPC governing board as outlined by the bylaws of the RPC.

Further, each RPC can elect an executive board (including officers) of between five and nine members who can participate in the more regular operation and management of the RPC.

Separate from the topic of direct RPC governance, survey respondents, interviewees, and RPC directors raised the topic of enhanced shared service provision and regional governance considerations for member communities. Current language found at 24 V.S.A. 4345 entitled "Intermunicipal service agreements" outlines the existing process through which RPC organizations may enter into such agreements. In response to this, RPC organizations have been advocating for a streamlined approach to this regional governance and enhanced shared services concept, discussed among the RPCs as the 'council of governments' (COG) model.

Responses to survey questions and commentary from targeted interviews did include statements regarding governing board composition and the COG model. Those statements are included in the discussion that follows.

## Highlights

Both governing board members and local elected officials for all RPCs were invited to share feedback through two online surveys developed by NADO Research Foundation. The questions asked respondents to identify the most critical services provided by the RPC, as well as any barriers to RPCs achieving at the highest levels, any areas of participation concern, and what service gaps exist that RPCs could consider addressing in the future. In total, 156 governing board members responded, along with 200 local elected officials. (Note: 12 individuals completed both surveys.) Complementing this survey effort, over 20 targeted interviews with regional, state, and federal stakeholders were also undertaken in this effort.

While the concern about whether governing boards made up of non-elected or municipal officials from member communities is legitimate, it is important to recognize that RPC organizations do not have the ability to choose their governing board representatives. It is noted here that 24 V.S.A. 4342 is silent on what positions/roles an appointed member must hold in order to serve on the RPC governing board. Ultimately, governing board representatives are appointed by the selectboard of member communities. As observed during the survey and engagement effort, many municipal officials (both elected and non-elected) are already overburdened with roles and tasks related to governance and public service within their home community, and requiring additional participation on RPC governing boards may be counterproductive to these concerns.

## Council of Governments Model

In an environment where state policy directives are often conferred directly to local municipal governments in the absence of county governments, Vermont RPC organizations are seeking ways to participate in (or enhance) regional governance efforts across the state. Specifically, the RPC organizations are seeking ways to capitalize on their unique status within the state to support this effort without the formal creation of new governmental entities (“bylaws”) as specified in 24 V.S.A. 4345. Conversations with VAPDA leadership throughout the assessment process elicited comments about the concept of working to implement what has been described as a ‘council of governments’ (COG) model of organization for RPCs in Vermont. To advance this effort, two specific areas have been identified for further discussion: the need for additional municipal elected official representation on RPC governing boards, and the need for enhanced shared service capabilities, provided to municipalities and facilitated by RPCs.

While there is no singular overarching federal definition for councils of government, the concept is well-documented in individual state statutes and can typically be characterized by some or all of the following qualities:

- Voluntary creation catalyzed by member governments or other organizations to be served;
- Voluntary ongoing membership;
- Agreement on core organizational functions that the council of governments will perform;
- Voluntary withdrawal from the organization with notice as needed;
- Voluntary financial contributions in the form of dues or other funding;
- Appointment of voting governing board members drawn from the membership of the organizations;
- Agreement on a common set of duties and responsibilities to be undertaken by the organization.

Councils of government were historically formed in response to regional needs and issues that required the combined efforts of multiple governments – and to attract and secure public resources that were made available to address these challenges – not unlike the conditions that led to the creation of RPC organizations in Vermont. These organizations focus on convening member organizations, building consensus regarding reasonable solutions to challenges, avoiding duplication of efforts, and maximizing efficiencies of scale when deploying services across a wide area. Individual states have given varying levels of responsibility and latitude to these regional organizations in pursuit of these goals. Some states focus more on planning and similar efforts, while others have granted wider authority to acquire and deploy resources; still others focus on supplementing existing services provided by member jurisdictions. The examples provided in Appendix K illustrate these differences in how RPC-like organizations in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, Ohio, Virginia, and Minnesota operate on behalf of stakeholders.

It is also important to note that councils of government do not solely exist for the purposes of regional community and economic development. There are many councils of government across the country that represent educational institutions, outdoor recreation groups, public safety organizations, senior services, and other topics where regional cooperation is critical for success.

While the enabling legislation in Vermont may not specifically address the RPC organizations as councils of government by name, the observation of the research team recognizes their operation as being very similar in nature. Vermont RPCs already operate in a manner much like traditional councils of governments, consistent with the characteristics listed above, but enabling legislation is necessary to make these abilities possible and clear.

### *Membership*

The State of Ohio in section 167.02– Membership, specifically states that member representatives “shall be the chief elected officer thereof.” (Regional councils of government, 1967) Similarly, Virginia states in Title 15.2, Chapter 4203 – Organization of planning district commission, “at least a majority of its members shall be elected officials of the governing bodies of the localities within the district.” (Regional Cooperation Act, 1968).

The State of Minnesota in Chapter 462 Section 388 – Commission Membership, offers detailed membership guidance in the establishing state statute. Offering ten categories of membership, the guidance refers to “one mayor or council member from a municipality of under 10,000 population from each county, selected by all mayors of such municipalities in the county” as well as “one mayor or council member from each municipality of over 10,000 in each county.” (Regional Development Act, 1969) Other membership recommendations for potential member organizations, including councils of government, are also provided.<sup>7</sup>

Connecticut General Statutes in Chapter 50 Section 4–124i states that each member community within the regional council of government is entitled to one voting member of the council, and that member ‘shall be the chief elected official of such member’ or another elected official appointed by the legislative body in accordance with local regulations. (Connecticut general statutes, 1971).

### *Shared Service*

In consideration of shared service concerns raised by VAPDA leaders, RPC governing board members, and local elected officials, Vermont statutes do address this at 24 V.S.A.434b – Intermunicipal agreements. The process requires the creation of separate bylaws that would govern the relationship between the participating parties. This is interpreted as the creation of a new organization, subject to these newly created by laws. As outlined, the process required may be a hindrance to municipalities capitalizing on this capability. Connecticut and Maine may serve as models for Vermont, with authorizing language that allows regional council organizations to act with, or on behalf of member communities, and to provide any service that is allowable under state law by a municipal government. As stated in section 8–31b of Connecticut General Statutes:

“Notwithstanding the provisions of any special or public act, any political subdivision of the state may enter into an agreement with a regional council of governments to perform jointly or to provide, alone or in cooperation with any other entity, any service, activity or undertaking that the political subdivision is authorized by law to perform.”

In subsequent sections, it is directly stated that “the administration and provision of such services shall not require the execution of any interlocal agreement.” (Connecticut general statutes, 2013)

Maine Revised Statutes provide similar guidance. Subsection 2313 (2) Authority, which states:

“The council, on behalf of one or more member municipalities and upon appropriate action of the legislative bodies of one or more member municipalities, may exercise any power, privilege or authority capable of exercise by a member municipality and necessary or desirable for dealing with problems of local or regional concern, except essential legislative powers, taxing authority or eminent domain power. This authority is in addition to any other authority granted to municipalities by the general laws and includes, but is not limited to, the formation of transit, solid waste and other service operations.”

Other models of executing agreements between RPCs and member communities (and any configuration thereof) for the purposes of providing services should be a subject of further discussion with VAPDA, legal counsel, and state legislative parties. Examples of statutory language provided here could be used as a template to initiate these conversations. Addressing governing board representation and shared services through the maximization of RPCs’ status as political subdivisions could address some of the identified RPC foundational challenges without requiring a more significant change in organizational model from RPC to COG.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/462.388>

## Analysis

A key concern raised by external stakeholders, particularly at the state level, was related to governing board composition. Feedback from survey respondents indicated a concern that there may be too few elected officials appointed by municipal members serving as representatives on RPC governing boards across the state, and by extension, limited participation by member communities. This perception suggests that the lack of elected representation could be negatively impacting communication between RPC organizations, member communities, and their citizenry. State agencies expressed concern about RPC Boards being truly representative of their communities. Vermont code at 24 V.S.A. § 4342 states that “a regional planning commission shall contain at least one representative appointed from each member municipality” with no further guidance provided. (Municipal and County Government, 1977)<sup>8</sup> Similarly the section at 24 V.S.A. § 4343 – Appointment, term and vacancy; rules, is silent on whether the appointed member should be an elected official or a private representative.

Provided in the table below are the number of selectboard members currently serving on RPC boards across the state. Selectboard members were identified here as they are the primary policy creators for towns in the region. It is important to note that during this analysis other elected officials did appear as commissioners on RPC boards, including listers, clerks, justices of the peace, and others. These non-selectboard representatives were not captured in the table below.

RPC	Selectboard Members on Governing Board
ACRPC	1
BCRC	7
CVRPC	1
CCRPC	5
LCPC	2
MARC	1
NRPC	6
NVDA	12
RRPC	4
TRORC	6
WRC	12

Table 1: Selectboard Members on Governing Board

In total, selectboard members occupied 57 of 582 total commissioner seats, or 9.8%.

Members of RPC Boards are appointed by their municipal selectboards. The RPC executive director has no role in choosing these representatives. Board makeup is based on municipalities that are already facing severe volunteer capacity issues.

Feedback received during the interview phases of this effort highlighted differing opinions on this topic. While some echoed this concern, others highlighted the need to identify any individuals who were willing to serve in these voluntary board roles. Several RPC executive directors noted that municipal staff and elected officials seem overwhelmed, and the addition of mandatory RPC governing board responsibilities could be daunting and counterproductive. Alternates or designees regardless of their official municipal status could help fill these gaps. Despite these considerations, seats may go unfilled, benefiting neither the community nor the RPC.

<sup>8</sup> <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/24/117/04342>

Based on these comments from surveys and interviews, the following analysis of RPC board seats and vacancies is offered, based on information collected from RPC websites during the research effort.

RPC	Total Board Seats	Total Vacancies	Vacant Members	Vacant Alternates
ACRPC	58	15	2	13
BCRC	37	11	11	0
CVRPC	36	12	0	12
CCRPC	60	12	1	11
LCPC	24	4	4	0
MARC	17	5	0	5
NRPC	48	11	4	7
NVDA	112	45	10	35
RRPC	61	13	2	11
TRORC	66	18	0	18
WRC	63	11	2	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>121</b>

Table 2: Governing Board Vacancies

As illustrated above, 27% of all RPC governing board seats, including alternates and special interest representatives, were listed as vacant as of February 2025. A review of bylaws available for all eleven RPC organizations available at the time of this report indicate that only CCRPC and NVDA have active provisions within the membership sections of their bylaws specifying that representatives should be drawn from the legislative body of the member. All other organizations state that members shall identify and appoint the requested number of representatives, with no requirement specified of their elected or employment status with the member organization.

## Recommendations

There has been interest on the part of the RPCs in a COG model, specifically the COG model used in a few of the New England states. Their interest, and those of some of the state agencies and legislators, is in using the COG model to increase the potential for and ease in providing shared services to municipalities and, as a result, having more representative governing boards, with elected representatives.

1. **Shift to a Council of Governments (COG) model.** To pursue municipal shared services and expanded regional governance in the way that has been effective for other New England COGs, and allowing for greater efficiencies, the COG model is necessary. This model requires revisiting the structure of board membership. If VAPDA and the 11 RPCs are interested in moving from the RPC model to the COG model, it will be necessary to consider additional statutory changes outlined below.
  - a. Amend 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345a – Duties and Optional Powers transitioning RPCs to Councils of Government. Enable the RPCs to transition to councils of government, specifically allowing for the ability to increase shared services opportunities on behalf of and between member communities and RPCs without requiring the creation of other organizational mechanisms. This would also allow RPCs to offer certain fee-for-service opportunities for municipalities to

contract for services like administrative support, code enforcement, zoning assistance, development review, etc. We recommend using Franklin Regional Council of Governments as a model for moving forward.

- b. This would also necessitate a statutory change in RPC membership guidelines found at 24 V.S.A. 4342, requiring elected municipal officials (or their appointed designees) to serve on COG Governing Boards.
- c. This shift may also necessitate a review of the number and size of Vermont COGs and funding equity to ensure that all communities are being served equitably inside the new model.
- d. With a shift to a COG model, it may make sense for VAPDA to rebrand itself with a new name and logo, that better showcases Vermont COGs.

2. ***If not shifting to a COG model, consider language that maximizes the flexibility of formal membership to RPC governing boards, such as language allowing for alternates or designees to be appointed.*** Based on this, if changes in enabling language are unlikely, it may be critical for the RPC organizations to agree on common membership language for individual bylaws that would provide the level of representation necessary to best address all membership concerns outlined in this report.
3. **Maximize the status of Vermont RPCs/COGs as political subdivisions.** RPC directors felt that this status as outlined in Vermont Statutes was underutilized and led to RPC organizations frequently being treated as consultants or contractors, creating funding and contractual barriers. If the transition to the COG model is not immediately feasible or until the COG model is assessed and implemented, an increased emphasis on this legal status for RPCs could allow them additional latitude to engage with member communities for the provision of services and other items of need as outlined during the survey and interview effort.

## Funding

Regional planning commissions play a critical role in assisting communities in accessing funding needed to complete statutory duties or providing public services. As such, the effective and responsible handling of public funding resources is critical to the success of RPC organizations. These funds most commonly arrive in the form of state or federal grants targeted at accomplishing specific deliverables developed by the granting agency. Regional planning commissions also facilitate the effective and accurate administration of awarded or allocated public funds as they are put to use in communities across Vermont. Member communities also contribute membership dues to their respective RPC organizations to assist in the defraying of costs associated with operating the organization.

## Background

As outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4346, RPCs in Vermont can receive and expend funds from any public or private source, inclusive of grants, loans, or other funds made available by member communities, state agencies or out of state entities that have made specific appropriations.

Funding utilized by the RPCs for the purposes of fulfilling their statutory duties originate from many sources and are generally focused on the core programs outlined in the authorizing state language including planning, transportation, natural resources, and emergency management. Examined in this section are two key funding sources: State of Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) funding and municipal dues or appropriations paid annually by members to their respective RPC organizations. These funds would be most closely associated with the planning functions outlined above.

## Highlights

The core funding provided to RPCs for their statutory planning duties is provided by the State of Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD). Funding is distributed using an existing formula outlined in Vermont Administrative code.<sup>9</sup> The formula includes four key components: 50% of the funds are distributed in equal shares to the 11 RPC organizations, the remaining 50% is split by population (45%), by the number of towns (45%), and the remaining 10% by property transfer receipts. This breakdown is illustrated below.

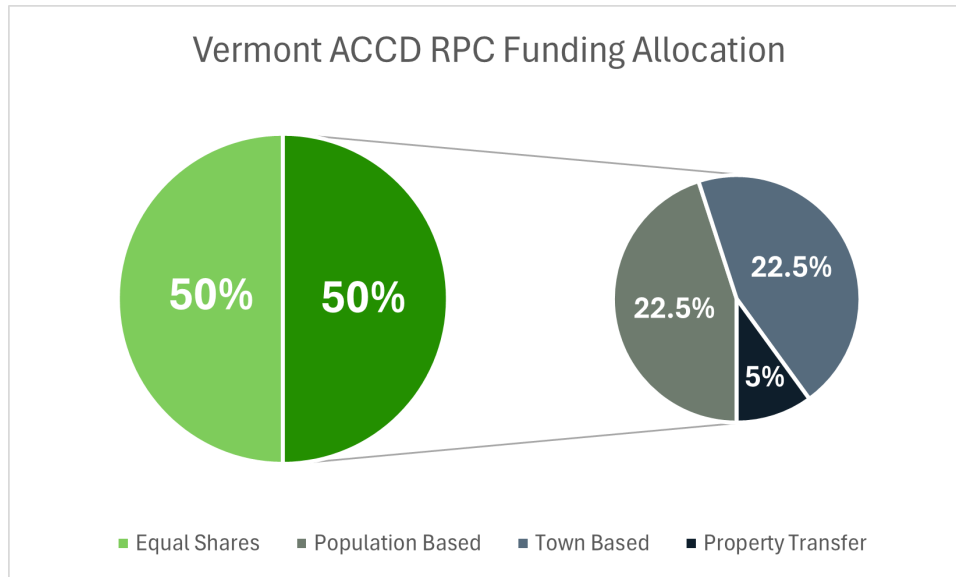


Figure 1: Vermont ACCD RPC Funding Allocation

For fiscal year 2025, the total amount of funding available to be distributed to RPC organizations was **\$7,300,350**. The allocations per RPC were reported as follows:

RPC	ACCD FY 25 Funding Allocation
ACRPC	\$580,243
BCRC	\$557,416
CVRPC	\$670,742
CCRPC	\$941,642
LCPC	\$534,475
MARC	\$493,116
NVDA	\$840,696
NRPC	\$642,943
RRPC	\$679,397
TRORC	\$697,558
WRC	\$662,130

Table 3: Vermont ACCD Allocation per RPC

<sup>9</sup> Section 11 020 006 – Rules for the Allocation and Distribution of Regional Planning Funds; <https://casetext.com/regulation/vermont-administrative-code/agency-11-agency-of-commerce-and-community-development/subagency-020-department-of-economic-housing-and-community-development/chapter-006-rules-for-the-allocation-and-disbribution-of-regional-planning-funds/section-11-020-006-rules-for-the-allocation-and-disbribution-of-regional-planning-funds>.

Annual funding contributed as member dues or appropriations are highlighted below. Specific guidelines and details for these appropriations can be found within individual RPC bylaw documents. For fiscal year 2025, Vermont communities are contributing **\$704,509** in municipal dues/allocations to RPC organizations. The breakdown of these funds per RPC is provided below.

RPC	Member Appropriations/Dues	Percent of RPC Budget
ACRPC	\$45,000	2%
BCRC	\$104,383	6%
CCRPC	\$58,090	1%
CVRPC	\$86,985	3%
LCPC	\$22,500	1%
MARC	\$34,804	2%
NVDA	\$28,232	1%
NRPC	\$68,389	2%
RRPC	\$27,000	1%
TRORC	\$95,892	3%
WRC	\$133,234	5%

Table 4: Vermont RPC Member Appropriations/Dues

## Analysis

State-level stakeholders raised questions about the provision of services across the state given the geographic, population, and town density differences across the RPC network. RPC service areas vary widely in their geographic size and density of population (both individuals and number of towns).

RPC	Towns	Population	Geographic Square Miles
ACRPC	21	37,434	718
BCRC	17	37,326	575
CVRPC	23	65,380	1,434
CCRPC	19	169,301	621
LCPC	10	25,977	466
MARC	10	23,543	344
NVDA	55	63,853	2,053
NRPC	23	57,980	882
RRPC	27	60,068	925
TRORC	30	57,607	1,280
WRC	27	48,293	936

Table 5: RPC Towns, Population, and Area

- The largest RPC region by population is CCRPC (169,301) which in 2024 was **159%** larger than the next most populous RPC (CVRPC, pop. 65,380) and **619%** larger than the smallest RPC (MARC, pop. 23,543).



- The largest RPC by number of towns is NVDA with 55. This is **83%** larger than the next largest RPC (TRORC, 30 towns) and **450%** larger than the smallest RPC region (LCPC/MARC, 10 towns).
- The largest RPC by geographic square mileage is NVDA with 2,053 which is **43%** larger than the next largest RPC (CVRPC, 1,434 sq. mi.) and **497%** larger than the smallest RPC (MARC, 344 sq. mi.)

These points of comparison are highlighted here, as they are the basis of competitive factors of the ACCD funding allocation formula, which provides significant core funding to the RPC organizations. (Note: there are other state allocation formulas in other state departments for resource allocation; ACCD is included in this discussion as it was central in the discussions with VAPDA, RPC directors, and stakeholders during this research effort.)

While the demographic and statistical disparities described above are notable, they are accounted for when distributing ACCD funding, with the exception of square mileage. RPC directors and governing board members expressed general satisfaction with the ACCD allocation formula and the competitive factors that have been included in the calculations. Immediate improvements or changes to this were not offered during this research effort. It is noted here that the total amount of ACCD funding available to support RPCs statutory planning work has increased by approximately 60% since 2023. This rise in funding is likely a supporting cause for the 91% increase in RPC programmatic staff across the state between 2011 (55) and 2024 (105).

Statewide values of ACCD allocations per town and per capita are offered below as a point of description regarding how allocated resources impact the service regions. As indicated, financial support provided by the State of Vermont has increased in total, reflected in an amount allocated per town and per capita between FY 2023 and FY 2025.

	ACCD Allocation Per Town	ACCD Allocation Per Capita*
FY 23	\$17,133	\$7.07
FY 24	\$23,242	\$9.59
FY 25	\$25,227	\$11.29
<b>Total Change</b>	<b>\$8,094</b>	<b>\$4.21</b>

\*2024 population figures were utilized in the per capita calculations for each year of analysis listed above.

Table 6: Vermont ACCD Allocation Breakdown

State-level stakeholders did express a concern during interviews that the NVDA region in particular was exceedingly large both geographically and in the number of towns served and that these challenges may be negatively impacting service delivery or satisfaction of member communities. While NVDA’s region is large, the research team could not identify any patterns of concern coming from elected officials, governing board members, or the NVDA executive director regarding the delivery of services or outcomes that could substantiate this. In the online survey effort, one elected official highlighted a concern about the level of service that appeared to be related to turnover in a specific staff position at NVDA. No similar commentary was recorded in the governing board member feedback. Respondents indicated a desire for increased levels of services related to current initiatives and for additional services. Specifically mentioned were the areas of general staffing, shared services related to administrative tasks, clerk staffing, data management, website management, and budget analysis. There was also an expressed awareness in the survey responses that NVDA staff were stretched thin both related to resources and staffing.

RPC directors, NVDA included, broadly discussed their outreach efforts and activities with the research team, and it was noted that many of the smallest communities were not regularly demanding service, despite the

efforts of RPC organizations and their staff making offers of assistance. A small number of interviewees across the total survey effort mentioned a concern about larger communities getting more attention and funding from their RPC, at the expense of smaller communities with few, if any, staff. To ensure they are serving all their communities, it will be important for RPCs to continue to periodically reach out to each community to gauge whether services are needed or desired. Building relationships and trust may be the key to ensuring all communities receive the services they need or do not realize they need. A common theme was identified that when needs and concerns were identified in local communities, RPCs were responsive and effective at addressing those items to the best of their ability. If state partners continue to feel that the physical size of the NVDA region is a concern for service provision after this research effort, further study is recommended.

An additional topic of interest among VAPDA members was member dues or municipal appropriations. Speaking generally, regional development organizations across the nation typically assess membership dues on a per-capita or per-community basis, and these funds are utilized to support ongoing agency operations. Enabling legislation for these types of appropriations in Vermont is found at 24 V.S.A. 4346.

In total, these funds comprise approximately 2% of the overall revenue budgeted by RPCs for FY25. The level of dependence on these funds varies by organization, and while the overall levels were low, BCRC and WRC showed the highest percentages of overall budget at 6% and 5% respectively.

The table below illustrates the highlighted municipal appropriations on a per-town and per-capita basis.

RPC	Amount Per Town	Amount Per Capita
ACRPC	\$2,142.86	\$1.20
BCRC	\$6,140.18	\$2.80
CCRPC	\$3,057.37	\$0.34
CVRPC	\$3,781.96	\$1.33
LCPC	\$2,250.00	\$0.87
MARC	\$3,480.40	\$1.48
NVDA	\$513.31	\$0.44
NRPC	\$3,108.59	\$1.18
RRPC	\$1,000.00	\$0.45
TRORC	\$3,196.40	\$1.66
WRC	\$4,934.59	\$2.76

Table 7: Vermont ACCD Allocation RPC Breakdown

Statewide these created average municipal contributions of **\$2,699** per town and **\$1.09** per capita.

This information is provided to illustrate a sense of how much each community is contributing to RPC operations on a per-town and per-capita basis. It is noted here that NVDA has the lowest per-town contribution but has significantly more towns than any other region (55). Similarly, CCRPC has the lowest per-capita contribution but has the largest population of any region (169,301). These considerations (number of towns and population) are covered in the ACCD allocation formula as discussed earlier. This discussion of municipal appropriation is provided to give context to future discussions about resource allocations or reallocation of existing resources. While RPC member appropriations did not rise to the surface during the executive director or board chair interviews, the expression of continued investment in RPC operations is critical for future success.

## Recommendations

RPC directors and governing board members expressed general satisfaction with the ACCD allocation formula and the competitive factors that have been included in the calculations. The ACCD funding formula as presented appears to be sufficient in capturing the specific challenges faced by regions big and small, using the outlined measures of allocation. Immediate improvements or changes to this were not offered during this research effort.

Funding levels appear to be sufficient for current levels of service. While RPC member appropriations did not rise to the level of an issue during the executive director and board chair interviews, continued investment in RPC operations is critical for future success. Should the desire (or demand) for services from either member towns or the state of Vermont escalate, additional funding will be required.

RPCs are grant-dependent, meaning their work programs are largely externally driven, which has the potential to significantly limit their flexibility and responsiveness to regionally and municipally driven needs. As a result, the temporary nature of their funding limits RPCs' ability to grow and retain staffing capacity. There may be value in considering ways to remedy this situation, assuring the consistent funding necessary to grow and retain quality staff.

1. ***If Vermont shifts to a COG model, the corresponding increase in responsibilities for staff may necessitate additional funding***, as shared services are implemented, and COGs offer staffing solutions for their municipalities. Increasing funding to make RPCs/COGs more robust would build capacity for both project-level efforts and regional governance concerns, where present.

## Programs and Service Delivery

### Background

In an effort to ascertain whether RPCs were providing consistent services in relation to their statutorily required duties outlined at 24 VSA 4345 and 4345a, NADO surveyed the executive directors of each RPC organization and evaluated information available on their organizational web pages.

Central to the delivery of services and programs on behalf of the RPC network statewide was the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA). VAPDA has been playing a significant role in supporting inter-regional and statewide efforts, operating on a volunteer basis.

### Highlights

#### Program Offering Survey Results

The eleven RPC directors responded to an online survey that sought to gather information on the programs and services offered by individual organizations, specifically, services provided in the past three years or anticipated in the next year. This survey broke the programming universe into seven core activity areas that included 60 potential service offerings. The core activity areas as presented were:

- Regional Planning and Assistance
- Inter-Municipal Planning and Assistance
- Data/Information Services
- Transportation Planning

- Natural Resources and Environmental Services
- Emergency Management Services
- Utility Infrastructure Services

These activity areas are similar to what was utilized in the 2011 version of this assessment. The reasoning was that this could provide an ability to compare service offerings between reports. The completed 2024 service matrix is presented in Appendix A. The programming offerings as indicated by the RPC survey responses are consistent with the statutory requirements outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345a. There was no notable deviation of activities between RPC organizations, outside of MPO considerations for CCRPC and RDC programming for NVDA and BCRC.

### VAPDA

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) has been organized as a non-profit organization in Vermont “devoted to sound planning principles that will enhance the quality of life for Vermont residents.” VAPDA is the statewide association for the 11 RPCs in Vermont and coordinates efforts, shares updates, and makes connections with state agencies.

Often regional planning organizations working toward common goals in states will organize into a larger coalition or association. These resulting state association organizations often act as convening and coordinating bodies for their member organizations and can provide other services including legislative and program advocacy and statewide service coordination. NADO Research Foundation surveyed seventeen state associations of regional development organizations in 2023, with the findings summarized below.

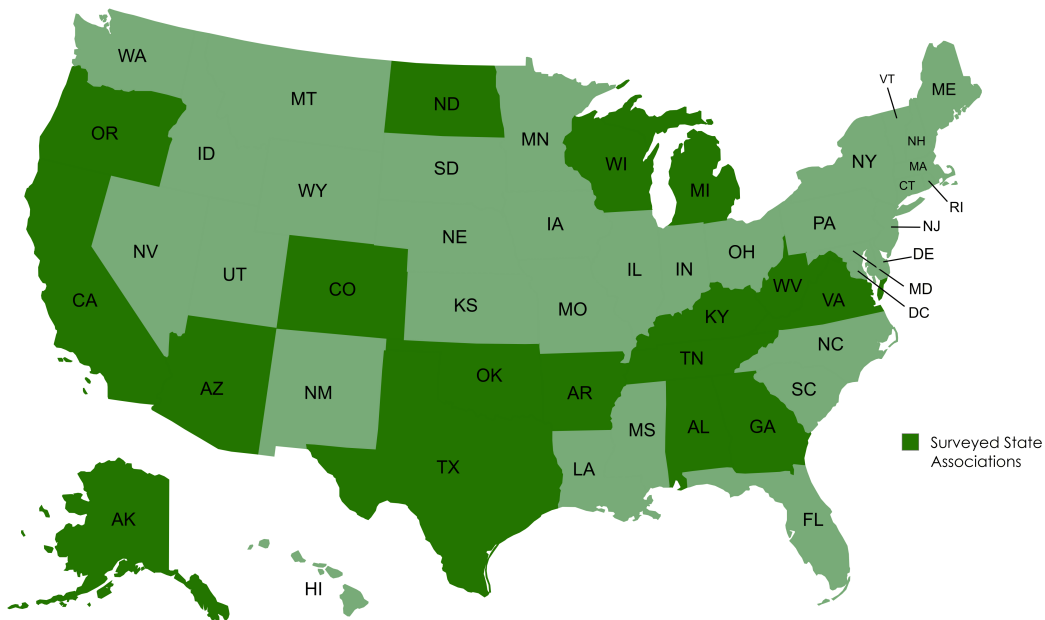


Figure 2: 2023 State Association Interviews

### Organization types:

- Organization types and structures varied across the respondents. Most common were 501c3 (charitable organizations) tax-exempt designations; others included 501c4 (civic leagues and social welfare organizations), 501c6 (business leagues), and other informal structures.

#### Funding sources:

- *Membership dues:* Of the seventeen organizations surveyed as part of this effort, fourteen charge membership dues. As noted, these annual dues range from \$500 to \$15,000 per organization.
- *State appropriations:* Some state associations receive direct funding appropriations from their state legislatures. This funding can be used for general administrative support or for specific program and service delivery. For example, the Tennessee Development District Association receives a state appropriation based on the amount of per capita dues collected, as well as an additional \$50,000 for general planning purposes. Similarly, the West Virginia Association of Regional Councils receives \$35,000 annually per council member from the state.
- *Federal grants:* These funds were often targeted to specific projects or programs. For example, the Southeast Conference in Alaska receives state funding related to contract work for services rendered, primarily focused on transportation and energy.
- *Private foundations:* For example, the Oregon Economic Development Districts Association has one full-time employee (FTE) supported by a private foundation capacity-building grant.

#### Staff structures:

- Staffing levels among surveyed state associations range from no staff to four FTEs (California). A majority of respondents reported they have no staff.

#### Meetings:

- A core function of these state associations is to convene the membership for the purpose of addressing challenges and issues. Associations surveyed as part of this effort met on varying schedules ranging from monthly to quarterly.

#### Legislative Services:

- Of the seventeen organizations surveyed here, ten participated in some type of legislative advocacy activities. Two respondents do so informally, while others are barred from these activities by state law.

In instances where regional planning organizations serve the entire geography of a state, state governments and partner agencies have the opportunity to utilize the network of organizations in a robust manner for statewide service delivery. In Vermont, this is already happening. Many agencies will contract with one RPC on behalf of all 11 RPCs to implement specific programs.

While the Vermont RPC network and its structure and execution is generally unique, there are examples in other states that bear some resemblance and are worth considering as reference points for future considerations as governance models evolve. An example of this would be the state of Kentucky. Kentucky has a network of 15 area development districts (ADDs), the functional equivalents to RPCs in Vermont. The state of Kentucky leverages the network of regional planning organizations to participate in statewide programming with a number of state agencies including the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet and the Kentucky Infrastructure Authority. Across the ADD network, these organizations are responsible for organizing and carrying out activities related to workforce development, economic development, water planning (water and wastewater management), transportation planning, senior services, GIS mapping, and broadband planning. Typically, each ADD organization will individually contract with the corresponding cabinet agency for the annual provision of services within their respective service regions.

To support this work, the network of Kentucky ADDs has created two organizations: the Kentucky Association of District Directors (KADD) and the Kentucky Council of Area Development Districts (KCADD). Members of the

NADO RF research team interviewed KCADD executive director Casey Ellis in November 2024. As the executive director of KCADD, Mr. Ellis manages both KADD and KCADD. KADD is comprised of all 15 ADD executive directors across the state. KCADD is made up of a 30-person board representing the ADD network. These individuals are county or municipal elected officials that serve on individual ADD boards. Two individuals from each ADD serve on the KCADD board. Each ADD makes voluntary annual contributions to the support and operation of KCADD. Funding contributed by ADD members is exclusively local funding generated from member dues, as KCADD and the executive director are registered lobbyists with the Kentucky Legislative Ethics Commission who advocate on behalf of the ADD members. In total KCADD has a staff of 2.5 FTE, with an executive director, Public Information Officer, and a part-time Administrative Assistant. Despite its central organizing role, KCADD does not hold any contracts or agreements with the state of Kentucky for programming undertaken by the ADD members.

## Analysis

Overall, the portfolio of programming offered across the RPC network was found to be consistent and remained consistent with what was reported in the previous version of this effort. Variations of responses in the survey could be attributed to wording or understanding of the questions as presented in the survey. For review purposes, if more than two RPCs did not offer a service as listed in the matrix, those items are bulleted below for further discussion. (MPO and RTPPO were excluded from this list as these are external program designations not under direct control of the RPCs.)

- Cultural Resources/Historic Preservation Planning
- Air Quality Programming/Assistance
- Coverage and Capacity Analysis/Studies

While the types of services were found to be consistent across the RPC network, the number of active contracts for each RPC was found to vary during interviews of RPC executive directors. To provide the services required by the state and desired by member communities, some RPC organizations stated that they had more than sixty (60) active contracts at any one time.

These services provided by Vermont RPCs are also largely consistent with the types of programming offered by similar organizations across the nation. The perspective of the research team is that the only major programs that Vermont RPCs do not offer that are frequently observed in similar organizations in other states are aging services and workforce development activities. These services are generally accompanied by state specific designations and funding allocations from the Older Americans Act or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) respectively. Other entities are providing these services in Vermont, and these program areas are not part of the authorizing language for RPCs.

## VAPDA

The research team spoke to RPC executive directors and board chairs about VAPDA as a key topic during the research effort. Overall VAPDA as an organization was viewed as an asset and a vehicle that RPCs can utilize to synchronize messaging and coordinate services between organizations. VAPDA is most generally populated by the RPC executive directors (EDs) as the key actors, and the sense of general cohesion among the group was cited as a strength. However, there was an acknowledgement that with some RPC executive director retirements to be expected in the next 5-10 years, it would be critical to have more continuity among the RPCs beyond the executive directors. (See the table below for the tenures of executive directors. The majority have been at their respective RPCs longer than their tenure as executive directors.) There was also a realization that there are few women executive directors; some existing directors have been attempting to encourage more senior women planners to be involved at a higher level.

Younger executive directors talked about the value of the mentoring that is happening between the more experienced executive directors and the newer executive directors, which is mostly informal, though it may benefit from a more formal curriculum. Senior executive directors are offering support to newer executive directors – “everyone is willing to help, support, answer questions. It feels like a pretty cohesive group, willing to offer support and information when necessary.”

RPC	Tenure of Executive Directors
ACRPC	25 years
BCRC	2 years
CVRPC	1.5 years
CCRPC	16 years
LCPC	9 years
MARC	2.5 years
NVDA	30 years
NRPC	10 years
RRPC	2 years
TRORC	27 years
WRC	15 years

Table 8: RPC Executive Director Tenure

Across the network of RPCs in Vermont, the average tenure of service for executive directors is 12.7 years. Overall executive director service time currently ranges from 18 months to 30 years. This illustrates how peer learning and information sharing facilitated by participation in VAPDA maximizes institutional knowledge for shared success.

There was some discussion about the inconsistency, in terms of informality and lack of structure, in how VAPDA committees are managed, which may affect how that committee and/or chair may be interacting with state government contacts. Some feel that the committee chairs are doing much of the committee work, when that work can be spread across the committee more effectively. There may be value in reconsidering the role, structure and responsibilities of committees. “It feels like the same RPCs are the ones raising their hands to do things.” VAPDA committees are currently formulated around existing statutory duty areas that RPCs are responsible for. There may be value in committees evolving to be more formalized as working groups with a more meaningful feedback relationship with the relevant state agency on those topics. This could be solidified as part of the overall feedback and communications loop that is discussed throughout this report. There may be ways of amplifying the work of these committees/working groups and making it stronger. A VAPDA staff position could help ensure consistency in terms of sharing responsibilities, facilitation and ensuring the groups are meeting the needs of both RPC and state agency stakeholders.

Many RPC board chairs did not know much about VAPDA and were, therefore, unable to weigh in on the organization. There was mention of the value of bringing board chairs together to learn more about their counterparts and associated roles in different RPCs.

The assistance provided through VAPDA was universally welcomed and highlighted as very valuable. It was noted that the executive directors that have the time and resources to be available to actively participate in VAPDA often hold the burden of working on behalf of the group, and this burden can be significant. This burden of responsibility is visible and sometimes discourages directors from becoming increasingly active with VAPDA.

There were roles highlighted that VAPDA is uniquely situated to serve, including state level advocacy and communication, best practices and peer learning, and serving as a conduit for statewide programming contracts as needed. If energy around these topics continues to grow, it was the view of many executive directors that staffing for VAPDA would become necessary. In addition, “the external needs are putting more of a challenge on the work we need to be doing in our regions and managing our organizations. There is an outsized reliance on us in particular issue areas.” A VAPDA staff member may help in this regard. There was no consensus at the time of these conversations around the exact role and duties that this position would fulfill. There were also other unanswered questions including how to sufficiently fund such a position. Despite a lack of clarity as to the answers to these questions, the concept of needing some level of staffing to elevate services was agreed upon.

## Recommendations

Overall, executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem pleased with the quality of programs and service delivery their RPCs are providing. External stakeholders are interested in building stronger partnerships with RPCs with increased communication. Positioning VAPDA to be more of a resource will be central to many of the program and service delivery items discussed here.

1. **Provide more frequent direct feedback about performance at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner/staff level.** During the interview process, several RPC directors indicated that feedback from partnering state agencies was not always direct or specific and occasionally provided indications that some RPC organizations were not performing as well as others. State agency representatives commented on performance concerns with the work of certain RPCs; it is unclear whether these concerns were shared with the individual RPC or VAPDA. To create more transparency around areas for improvement, it may be useful to develop regular processes or standards for feedback on both sides. This may include quarterly feedback meetings or a regular timeline for feedback. Where applicable, RPC organizations should be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies. This feedback should be in a direct and constructive manner that provides an opportunity for growth and improvement.
2. **Formalize the existing strategic planning processes of VAPDA.** While VAPDA has an existing strategic planning process, VAPDA leadership may benefit from undertaking a process that results in a Three Year Plan that outlines goals for building the internal organization, including plans for staffing and financial stability of the organization; increasing the visibility of the RPCs as a statewide network; developing consistent and regular communications processes with applicable state agencies and stakeholders; developing systems to allow RPCs to develop coordinated approaches for statewide service alignment; and assuring steps are in place to continue the strong partnership between the RPCs and the state.
3. **Assess the feasibility of establishing a staff position focused on the management and administration of VAPDA.** Based on feasibility and funding, RPC organizations can evaluate the feasibility of moving the organization from a volunteer-managed to one managed by paid staff. The roles for this staff position to fulfill are many, including ensuring quality control on state projects, while also coordinating RPC efforts in communications, equity, state advocacy, state contracts, transparency, and education/training efforts.
  - a. **Enhance the utilization of VAPDA as a statewide advocacy partner** on behalf of RPCs. Position VAPDA in a way that would facilitate the meaningful engagement of all RPC organizations as it relates to statewide advocacy efforts.
  - b. **Continue to utilize VAPDA to streamline/coordinate program deliverables provided to state agencies.** Staffing VAPDA will allow the organization to function more as a central coordinating body, using a structured and intentional approach to evaluate and support statewide alignment



by **creating and fostering opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and learning between members; and managing/streamlining reporting and impact measurement across RPCs.** VAPDA could also explore opportunities to take on more regional planning work and substate service delivery and coordinate with state agencies to enhance local service delivery and community development.

- 4. Utilize RPC working groups and VAPDA committee structure to provide shared trainings, catalyze statewide projects, and maximize efficiencies.** Informal committee structures within VAPDA have already been observed as effective methods to allow RPC representatives with common interests to collaborate on relevant topics. Enhancing and formalizing these committees or forming standing working groups could provide additional opportunities for peer learning and resource sharing.

## Equity

### Background

One of the areas identified for evaluation within this study was equity. VAPDA was part of an effort to develop the [Transportation Equity Framework 2023](#), along with the Vermont Agency of Transportation, which has implications for RPCs as well. The framework covers areas of stakeholder and public involvement, distributive equity, procedural equity, contextual equity and corrective equity. In addition, the purpose of the Vermont Environmental Justice Law<sup>10</sup> is to ensure all Vermonters regardless of race, cultural background, or income have equitable access to environmental benefits such as clean air and water, healthy food and public transportation.

### Highlights

Dawn Espe, of the Sowing Room/Picked and Preserved Consulting and formerly with the Region Five Development Commission in Minnesota, served as a peer consultant to the research team for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) topics. Her goal was to provide recommendations for improving internal and external communication processes and stakeholder relationships using DEI strategies.

This was done through a variety of methods. This included a review of RPC engagement/media scan, surveys, and interviews. In addition, three one-hour facilitated focus groups were undertaken with one member of each RPC. In each focus group, participants shared who they serve, who they would like to serve, who is underserved or missed, and what engagement strategies and tools they are using to reach their desired community impact outcomes. Finally, a scan of Minnesota RDCs' communication and marketing efforts was done to compare to those of Vermont RPCs. The participants and the questions used in the three DEI focus groups can be found in Appendix G.

As part of the previously covered RPC board member survey, board members were presented with one question to gauge the historical effectiveness of their RPC in reaching the following audiences/communities:

- Unemployed or underemployed;
- Veterans;
- Communities of environmental concern;
- Immigrant or limited English speaking;
- People with disabilities;
- Minority.

<sup>10</sup> Environmental Justice, 3 V.S.A. § 6002 - <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/03/072/06002>

Of the 1,227 selections made in the 154 survey responses regarding the historical effectiveness of RPCs in reaching these populations, **45%** of responses were ‘I don’t know.’ Further details are provided in the figure below.

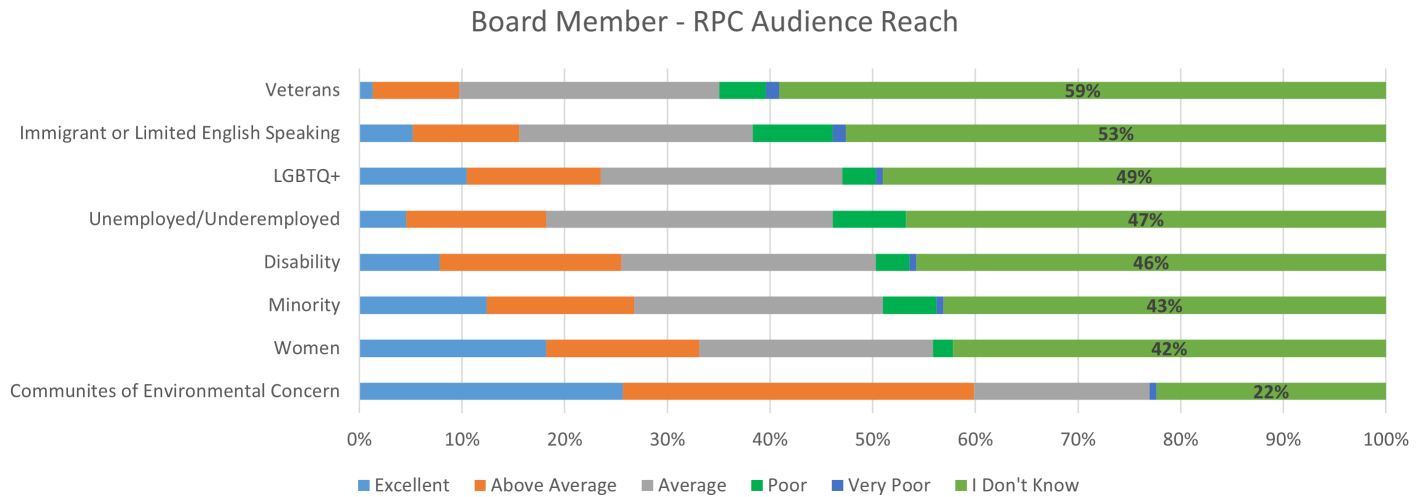


Figure 3: Board Member Response – RPC Audience Reach

Of the populations where RPC board members could rate the historical effectiveness, communities of environmental concern’ received the highest rating, with 60% stating that the effectiveness of service had been ‘excellent’ or ‘above average.’ The next closest population was ‘women’ with 33% reporting effectiveness of ‘excellent’ or ‘above average.’

RPCs primarily serve municipalities and local units of government (e.g., towns, cities, selectboards, planning commissions), which can also include acting as staff or advisors for towns with limited resources, particularly rural or under-resourced areas. Secondary audiences include nonprofits and community-based organizations who may also address gaps that municipalities cannot cover; local businesses, startups and manufacturers through the RDCs and brownfields work. RPCs also help state agencies reach rural or underserved areas through contracts or collaborations.

## Analysis

The facilitated focus groups uncovered the following gaps and challenges.

### Gaps

Gaps in the audiences the RPC staff feel they are reaching include:

- Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, particularly in areas experiencing population growth among people of color.
- Low-income individuals, unhoused populations, and those in recovery or involved in the justice system.
- Migrant and refugee populations, such as recent Afghan arrivals.
- Youth, older adults, and non-English speaking communities, including those living in trailer parks or rural areas.

Each participant expressed that the limited diversity of commissions, committees, boards, and other decision-making bodies made engagement with younger families, working-class individuals, marginalized populations, and communities of color more challenging. There was an overwhelming desire to engage with stakeholders and community members in less formal settings, outside of established projects and programs.

## Challenges

Current challenges identified by focus group participants included:

**Engaging Underrepresented Groups:** Public engagement strategies often fall short in reaching marginalized populations or fostering inclusivity in planning processes. Examples included meeting schedules that exclude working families or low-income individuals who cannot attend traditional volunteer meetings – and limited stipends or incentives for participating in planning efforts making engagement inequitable.

**Capacity and Resource Constraints:** Many RPCs operate at the limit of their capacity, with limited ability to expand outreach or provide direct benefits to underserved populations. Current funding models focus on project deliverables rather than broader community engagement.

**Municipal Awareness:** Some municipalities are unaware of RPC resources or lack internal capacity to fully use their services, leading to unequal levels of engagement.

**Demographic and Cultural Shifts:** Some regions are experiencing significant demographic changes, requiring municipalities to adapt their systems to include those who have been historically excluded, often without adequate education or tools for doing so.

### *What to Keep and What May Need to Change*

Focus group participants were asked what outreach methods they currently use, what they may want to drop or change, and what methods they would like to add. The graphic below illustrates the results of this interaction.



Figure 4: Effective/Ineffective RPC Communication Practices

Focus group participants talked about methods they are interested in adding:

- Front Porch Forum, for those not using it yet.
- “Going to them” approach.
  - › Have staff attend more community events happening in the region.
  - › Regular in-person conversations with stakeholder groups, not tied to specific projects, to build meaningful relationships.

- › Have staff attend more community events happening in the region.
- › Regular in-person conversations with stakeholder groups, not tied to specific projects, to build meaningful relationships.
- › Older/younger multigenerational discussions.
- › Regular drop-in hours or coffee meetups, regardless of whether there is something to share.
- › Focus groups and other public outreach.
- Quarterly or monthly managers or executive director meetings where municipal and nonprofit groups get together to share resources and information.
- Amplify RPC outreach through communities. Giving towns the support, technical advice, and resources around engagement strategies that are currently at low levels so towns can add to the outreach.

## Recommendations

A variety of recommendations arose as a result of this research, around engagement and representation in the broader community, practices internal to the RPCs and relationship building.

### Engagement and Representation

#### **Expand Outreach to Constituents**

- Increase informal engagement and build partnerships with various municipal (e.g., planning commissions, selectboards, advisory committees) and non-municipal community groups like nonprofits to bring more voices to the table.
- Foster wider, less filtered dialogue with municipalities.
- Better utilization of opportunities to engage with the public during mandatory public hearings, such as combining with another event, meeting, or informal gathering.

#### **Increase Awareness of RPC Work**

- Improve marketing and storytelling so people understand what RPCs do. Include storytelling/personal impacts in newsletters, on websites, and in social media. Invite nonprofits working on community development/social capital-building initiatives to speak at commission meetings. Focus on the “ripple effect” of the planning, zoning, business development activities that RPCs are assisting municipalities with. Focus on how these decisions impact the region from an equity lens.
- Social media such as Facebook and/or LinkedIn. Many in the focus groups suggested that social media was not useful to them in their awareness building. For those for whom it is working, it may be helpful to manage content and capacity among RPC staff, rotating weekly among staff as to who is responsible for routine posts, which can include events happening in the region, fun facts, “this day in history,” as well as job postings, RPC reports, public meetings. However, some may be ready to throw in the towel, if social media is not helping them to spread their message. For those RPCs, close accounts if not using them or make them look more like a static page.
- Track metrics related to websites and newsletters in terms of number of visits, clicks, how long folks are staying on the website and engaged in the newsletter.
- Share information about the roles of commissioners and opportunities to serve.

- Highlight work done at municipal levels and with community partners.

### **Connect with other RPCs**

- Institute quarterly RPC executive director meetings to share best practices, concerns, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Engage in intentional learning and discussion around equity issues. This can be done as RPC staff or executive directors or in an RPC committee made up of staff and commissioners. There could be a topic of the month, a book to read and discuss, or presenters could be invited. Team utilization of assessment tools, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory, are useful in that it shares where individuals and groups are at with regards to cultural agility and bridging difference. There is a common language that can then be used as people work to increase their cultural capacity.
- Consider creating a VAPDA statewide equity plan or integrating strategies from the Transportation Equity Framework.

## Internal Practices

### **Create Public Participation Plan Guidance**

- Utilize VAPDA as a venue to formulate guidance that leads to the adoption and implementation of additional public participation policies that support RPC efforts to guide outreach and ensure inclusivity in every project and program.

### **Address Organizational Inclusivity**

- Reflect on internal policies, hiring practices, grant processes, bylaws, strategic plans, other procedural documents, and workplace culture through an equity lens to ensure inclusivity and safety for all staff and community members.

**Foster Diversity in Leadership, Committees and Boards.** Diversity in rural Vermont is different from diversity in other places. Vermont is becoming more diverse, but it still has a lower racial and ethnic diversity than the United States as a whole. In 2022, 91.9% of Vermont's population was white (non-Hispanic). RPCs should figure out what diversity means in their respective regions and work toward ensuring representation based on that diversity.

- Where are barriers to equitable participation? Where are opportunities to expand engagement with underserved populations? (e.g. meetings are always during the workday.)
- Ensure, to the extent possible, leadership and staff reflect the demographics of the community. Intentionally recruit diverse individuals to leadership roles and committees.
- Consider revising bylaws to broaden commission representation to special interest groups such as higher education, emerging leaders, etc. If special interest/citizen groups are already in place, give them equal voting privileges and equal voice in all matters of the RPC.
- Strategically diversify committee memberships to include underrepresented populations, youth, and regional partners.
- Use stipends to support participation and reduce barriers to engagement. Offer stipends to individuals who would like to participate but cannot due to needing to take time off from work or find childcare, transportation or any other barrier to attendance they may face. Consider accessible meeting times for those who work. Food is also another way to encourage attendance and engagement at public meetings.

## Relationship Building

### Local and Individualized Engagement

- Meet people where they are—physically and culturally.
- Cultivate long-term, meaningful relationships with different communities, particularly marginalized groups.
- Remote work throughout municipalities on a rotating schedule—creating less transactional and more connected relationships with local leaders and community members
- When seeking new committee members, ask “the usual suspects,” the ones who serve on everything and have them offer some of their ideas on who may be interested.
- Even though municipalities are the “client,” consider direct marketing of programs and opportunities to the communities they are meant to impact; those communities then know what is available to them and can advocate for themselves to local government agencies that are eligible to receive dollars. Additionally, the programs can be developed alongside those impacted versus doing it to or for them.
- Strengthen partnerships with nonprofits and social service providers to reach marginalized communities directly. This includes addressing housing and mobility issues tied to aging populations and underserved demographics.
- Consider a youth advisory group that might meet quarterly before commission meetings to learn about the planning and policy work happening in their towns and to offer their ideas, opinions, etc. This not only engages youth in civic responsibility, but it also gives RPCs access to a more diverse group of individuals as youth are more diverse than any other generation before them. It also addresses the generation gap as RPC commissioners are typically older adults.

### Strengthen Municipal Relationships

- Encourage municipalities to understand the importance of selecting inclusive and representative commissioners.
- Offer technical assistance to municipalities around attracting a diverse workforce, inclusive community planning, etc. Tie in the value proposition: how inclusive equitable practices can benefit them from an economic perspective.
- Focus attention on municipalities with the most need rather than by the ebb and flow of requests. This ensures that your time and energy are being put where the greatest impacts can happen versus being tied up in projects that keep impacting the same populations.
- Provide municipalities with DEI training and strategies to create more inclusive planning processes. Examples include stipends for participation, offering belonging and inclusion training, and supporting difficult conversations in towns about inclusivity
- Leverage RPCs as intermediaries for state initiatives, ensuring rural and underserved communities are included in larger state policies and programs.

While RPCs are primarily focused on serving municipalities, there is growing recognition of the need to broaden their reach and address gaps in representation, equity, and inclusion. This requires balancing current mandates with long-term partnerships, innovative engagement strategies, and resources to connect with underserved populations meaningfully. This all depends on remembering the lived realities of the people in the region,

connecting through shared experiences and community-focused initiatives. These approaches emphasize intentional outreach, internal reflection, and structural adjustments to create a more inclusive and representative RPC. However, it will be important to focus on small, consistent efforts to broaden representation over time.

## Accountability

Regional Planning Commissions in Vermont, and across the country, are formed by the formal action of local communities. Once formed, RPCs are accountable to those member communities for the performance of their statutory duties. Further, RPCs are required to follow all rules and regulations that pertain to any funding resources or other supporting assets secured by the organization, whether for their use or use by member communities; often these other funding resources come from the state government.

## Background

Based on the charge of duty provided by the State of Vermont in the enabling statutes, RPCs are ultimately accountable to the member communities and their residents as it pertains to the collective outcome of effort. Regional Planning Commissions are also accountable to the funding agencies and entities that have entrusted them with the resources necessary to undertake the work of the region.

In order to ascertain the level of accountability exhibited by the RPCs, both governing board members and local elected officials were surveyed for their perspectives on a number of topics. Similarly, RPC organizations responded to an online survey regarding organizational financial practices.

Finally, RPCs were also asked to respond to a survey regarding communications practices. Communication between RPCs and their various stakeholders is a key metric in assessing accountability.

## Highlights

During this assessment effort, NADO created online surveys focused on collecting feedback from local elected officials representing communities across Vermont. The survey contained 13 questions about local officials' perspectives on RPC services, structure, communications, and other questions concerning the performance of RPC organizations. Three open-ended questions offered an opportunity for respondents to provide feedback on existing or potential services.

Survey questions were generated following conversations with VAPDA and RPC representatives based on historic questions, feedback, or commentary that had been received during the disposition of their duties. There was also an effort to capture information while minimizing respondent burden. Responses were collected October 4 – November 8, 2024. During this time, 199 individual responses were collected across all the RPCs. The breakdown of local official responses by RPC is illustrated below.

Elected Official Responses			
ACRPC	14	MARC	8
BCRC	11	NVDA	8
CVRPC	14	NRPC	8
CCRPC	21	RRPC	40
LCPC	19	TRORC	20
		WRC	37

Table 9: RPC Local Elected Official Survey Responses

The number and percentage of towns represented in the local elected official survey is provided below. Please note this indicates towns that had at least one response to the local elected official survey. Twelve (12) individuals responded to both the local elected official and governing board member survey since they met both criteria. In total 127 of 261 (49%) towns were represented in the results.

RPC	Towns	Response	Percent
ACRPC	21	11	52%
BCRC	17	9	53%
CVRPC	23	11	48%
CCRPC	19	14	74%
LCPC	10	7	70%
MARC	10	6	60%
NVDA	55	8	15%
NRPC	23	6	26%
RRPC	27	20	74%
TRORC	30	16	53%
WRC	27	19	70%

Table 10: RPC Towns Represented in Survey Responses

Respondents to both surveys categorized their relationship with the RPC, and respondents could choose more than one applicable category. The summary of relationships for all respondents to both surveys is below.

Relationship Type	Responses
RPC Board Member	13
Member Community Official	179
RPC Committee Member	20
Program Participant/Stakeholder	11
Interested Party	10
No Relationship	4

Table 11: RPC Survey Respondents Relationship to Organization

## Local Elected Official Survey Results

Five questions gave local elected official respondents the opportunity to rate their perceptions about RPC programming and structure.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Note: respondents were able to skip these questions or answer in portions for those that contained multiple options, so the total number of responses (n) varies in the information presented below.



Local elected official respondents were asked to gauge how familiar they were with the total portfolio of services offered by the RPC, with **68.8%** responding that they were **either extremely or moderately familiar** with the services offered by the RPC. Thirty percent indicated they were somewhat or slightly familiar. Only 1% responded that they were not familiar.

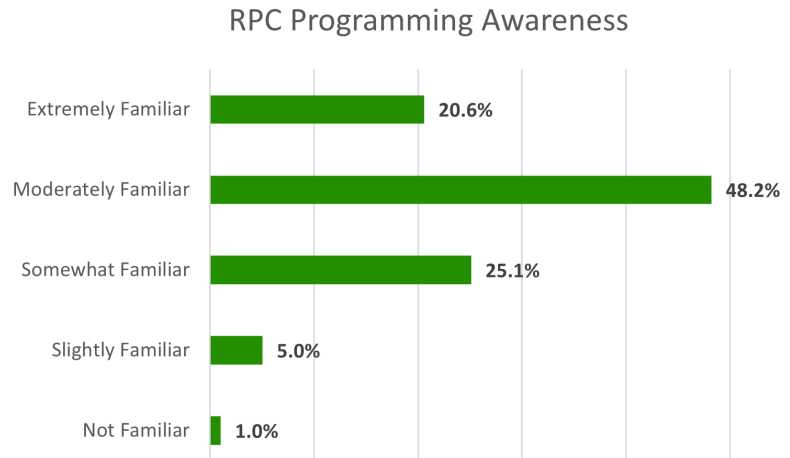


Figure 5: Local Elected Official – RPC Programming Awareness

Respondents were asked to gauge how familiar they were with the organizational structure of the RPC, with **55.1%** indicating that they **were extremely or moderately familiar** with the organizational structure of the RPC. Only 6.1% indicated that they were not familiar.

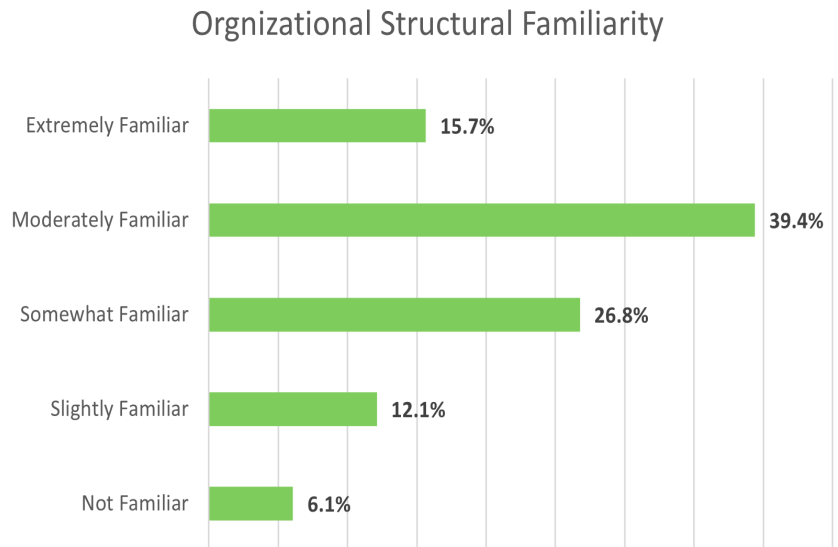


Figure 6: Local Elected Official – RPC Structural Familiarity

Next, respondents were asked to offer their opinion about the level of overall engagement by the RPC organization in development activities across the region, with **86.9%** indicating that RPCs **were extremely or moderately engaged** in regional development activities. Only **3.5%** indicated that RPCs were slightly or not engaged.

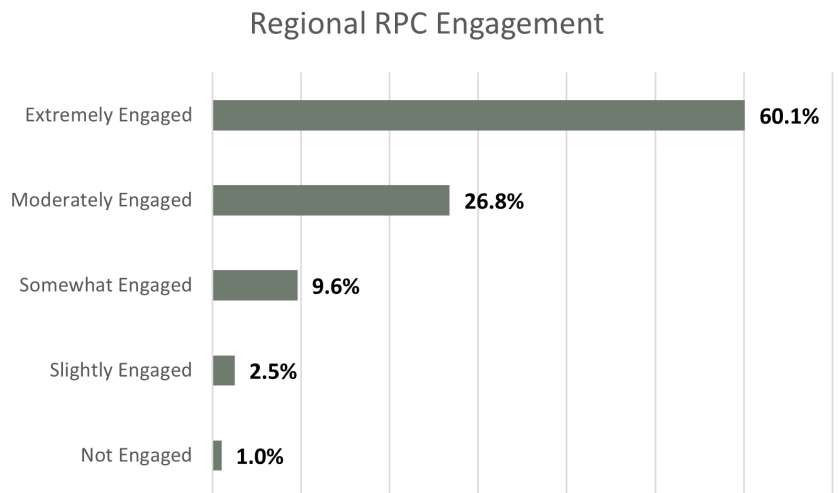


Figure 7: Local Elected Official – RPC Regional Engagement

Communication is a critical topic for RPCs and local communities. To this end, local elected officials were asked to evaluate the amount of communication received by them from the RPC. **Over 92%** indicated that the amount of communication was **excellent, very good, or good**. Only four percent rated the amount as fair, and three percent poor.

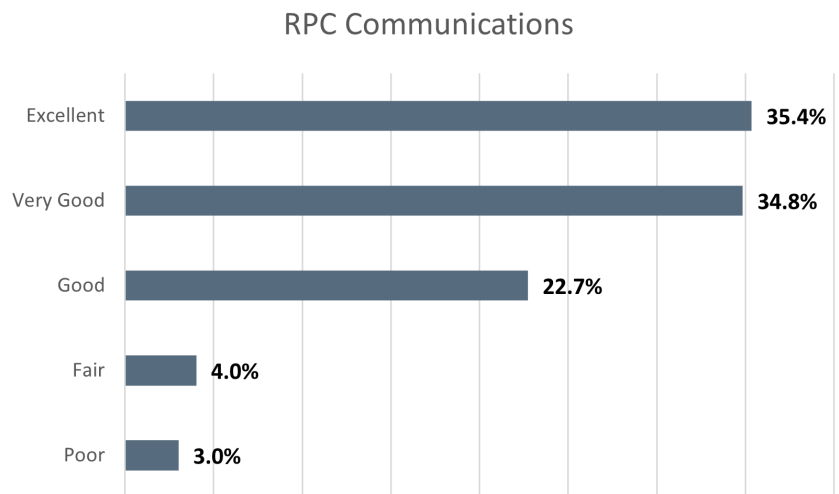


Figure 8: Local Elected Official – RPC Communications

### Board Member Survey Results

Vermont RPC governing board members were also invited to respond to the same questions provided to local elected officials. In total 156 responses were received to the survey; this represents approximately 27% of all board members from across the state. Response numbers and rates for each RPC are offered below.

RPC	Board Member Responses	Percent
ACRPC	14	24.1%
BCRC	11	29.7%
CCRPC	22	36.7%
CVRPC	8	22.2%
LCPC	17	70.8%
MARC	6	35.3%
NVDA	15	13.4%
NRPC	10	20.8%
RRPC	14	23%
TRORC	17	25.8%
WRC	22	34.9%

Table 12: RPC Board Member Survey Responses

Five questions gave the governing board respondents the opportunity to rate their perceptions about RPC programming and structure.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Note: respondents were able to skip these questions or answer in portions for those that contained multiple options, so the total number of responses (n) varies in the information presented below.

Respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with the total portfolio of services offered by the RPC; **85.1%** responded that they were **extremely or moderately familiar** with the portfolio of services. Only **3.1%** responded that they were slightly familiar or not familiar.

### RPC Programming Awareness

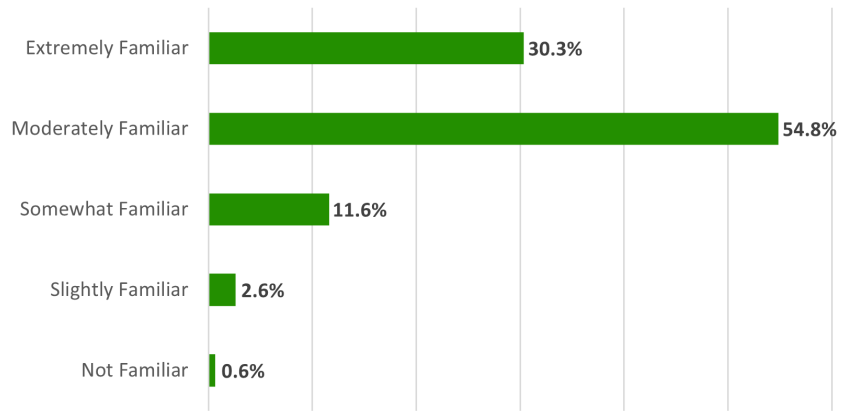


Figure 9: Board Member – RPC Programming Awareness

Respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with the overall RPC organizational structure; **80.2%** responded that they were **extremely or moderately familiar** with the RPC organizational structure. Only **5.4%** responded that they were slightly or not familiar.

### Organizational Structure Familiarity

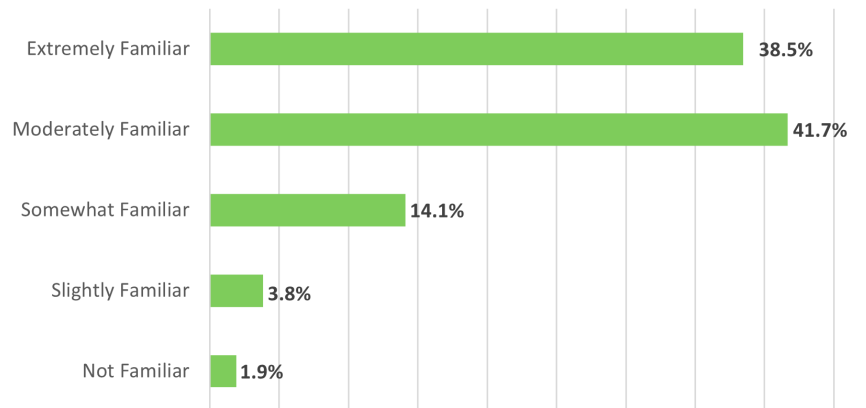


Figure 10: Board Member – RPC Structural Familiarity

Respondents were asked to rate their opinion of the level of overall engagement by the RPC in regional development activities in the region. These activities could include support for project development, infrastructure development, housing development, assistance in community engagement efforts, project review, and related activities. Among respondents, **90.3%** responded that they felt their RPC was **extremely or moderately engaged** in regional development activities. Only **.6%** felt that their RPC was not engaged.

### Regional RPC Engagement

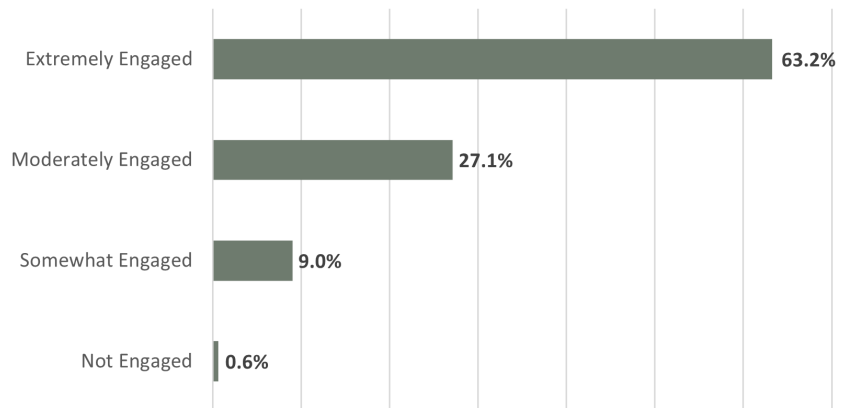


Figure 11: Board Member – RPC Regional Engagement

Respondents were asked to rate their opinion about the amount of communication received from the RPC. This communication could include newsletters, email, phone calls or other focused communication and direct contact. Among respondents, **92.3%** felt the amount of communication received was **excellent, very good, or good**; **7.7%** felt the amount was fair or poor.

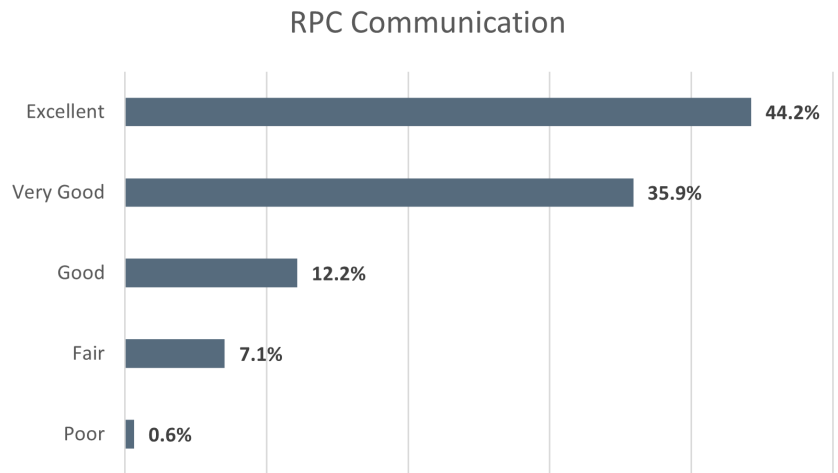


Figure 12: Board Member – RPC Communication

### Financial Practices Survey Results

One of the most critical roles that regional development organizations across the nation play on behalf of members and citizens is to be an effective manager of public funds. Vermont RPC organizations are entrusted with financial resources including grants, loans, local appropriations, and other donations from entities interested in the betterment of their region through cooperative effort. Managing and administering these funds is a significant and serious undertaking that requires effective management, strong policies and procedures, and attention to detail. Across the network of 11 RPC organizations in Vermont, the average revenue budget for the most recent year available at the time of this report (FY 25) was \$2,638,791. In total, the RPC partners were entrusted with approximately \$29,026,698 in overall revenues, based on review of available budget and audit resources in a most recent year snapshot of assets. With significant levels of resources moving through these organizations, financial management and accounting practices are crucial.

RPC	FY 25 Revenue Budget
ACRPC	\$2,453,050
BCRC	\$1,766,080
CCRPC*	\$3,400,692
CVRPC	\$3,056,577
LCPC	\$1,630,303
MARC	\$2,227,521
NVDA	\$2,593,824
NRPC	\$3,732,654
RRPC	\$2,035,877
TRORC	\$3,712,098
WRC	\$2,418,022

\*MPO Revenues Excluded

Table 13: RPC FY 2025 Revenue Budget

As part of this assessment, the NADO Research Foundation asked Vermont RPCs to answer 15 questions about financial management and accounting procedures in effect in their organizations. A summary of the individual responses is detailed below.

As detailed in the survey responses, two of eleven RPC organizations currently outsource their financial management and accounting services (Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission and Lamoille County Planning Commission). Of the remaining nine organizations that staff these services in-house, a total of 14.45 FTE staff positions are retained for these purposes statewide.

RPC	Financial Management FTE
ACRPC	1.2
BCRC	1
CCRPC	3
CVRPC	-
LCPC	-
MARC	2
NVDA	2
NRPC	1.25
RRPC	1.5
TRORC	1.5
WRC	1

Table 14: RPC Financial Management FTE

All eleven RPC organizations responded that financial reports and related information are regularly made available to board members and management staff. All eleven RPC organizations had at least one year of audit documentation and related materials available on their agency website. Ten of 11 had three years or more of audit documentation widely available. Providing these financial documents and audit records increases transparency and provides stakeholders with opportunities to understand how RPC organizations manage and deploy financial resources in their respective regions.

Ten of eleven RPC organizations are using the accrual method of accounting in their organization, with one respondent using a modified accrual method. These methods of accounting simply outline when revenues and expenses are recorded in an organization.<sup>13</sup>

Eight of the eleven RPC organizations have completed a single audit. Addison County RPC, Bennington County RPC, and Rutland RPC have not met funding thresholds to necessitate single audits but have undertaken other financial audits. It is important to note that a single audit is not required of non-federal entities that do not expend more than \$750,000 in federal funds prior to October 1, 2024, or \$1,000,000 after this date. A single audit (or any related financial audit materials) was referenced in the survey as a core collection of materials that constituents and stakeholders could review to learn about the financial standing and practices of the RPC organizations. Other audit methods and products may be available and acceptable, but the NADO Research Foundation did not survey these options for the sake of brevity. Some items reviewed in the audit process include other financial practices including handling cash and checks and documented purchasing policies. Regarding the handling of cash, checks, and currency that may be in the possession of the RPC at any time, all 11 have written policies in place that govern these practices. Another key financial consideration of day-to-day RPC operations is the ability of the executive director to independently make purchases or enter into contracts without the need for governing board action. This allows the RPC to act at a quicker pace as opposed to waiting for board meetings for routine purchase approvals. Ten of eleven RPC organizations permit some combination of unilateral purchasing and contracting, with the predetermined amount which the executive director could

<sup>13</sup> For general reference, accrual happens when expenses are incurred or when revenues are earned, regardless of when funds are exchanged. Cash accounting reflects the recording of revenues when they are received, and expenses when they are paid.

expend ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000. Four respondents indicated that there were no predetermined limits on expenditures. Typically, this ability and corresponding expenditure limits can change based on the governing board's level of trust in the individual serving as executive director and their past performance in these matters.

As a final question, respondents were asked if their organization engaged in future financial forecasting to anticipate the revenues and expenses required to maintain services for the region. Nine of 11 organizations responded that they engage in this type of financial forecasting.

## External Stakeholder Interview Results

External stakeholders were interviewed to learn more about their experiences with the RPCs in general and with specific RPCs. Questions also asked about how RPCs have been helpful to them in their work, how RPCs can be helpful moving forward, the value proposition for collaborating with RPCs, and how RPCs can improve their services to their member municipalities and the State of Vermont.

External stakeholders included key contacts at state and federal agencies and Vermont nonprofits as well as state legislators. A full list of questions and contacts interviewed can be found in Appendix E. It is important to remember that information gained from external stakeholders is reflective of their perceptions about RPCs and VAPDA and may not reflect other stakeholder experiences.

Overall, all external stakeholders discussed how valuable the work of the RPCs is, given the state's lack of county government and the resulting gap between municipalities and state government. The RPCs serve a critical role, connecting municipalities of all sizes and types with state government.

Each RPC has strengths and unique challenges, often influenced by leadership and resources. The perceived effectiveness of RPCs varies widely; while some are perceived to be proactive and deeply involved with communities, others are perceived to struggle with capacity and engagement.

Mentoring, succession planning, and fostering collaboration among RPCs could enhance overall performance and consistency across the state.

*Strengths related to accountability include:*

### 1. Strong Partnerships and Valuable Liaison Role between State and Local Levels

- › **Critical Resource for Small Communities:** RPCs are essential for small, lower-capacity towns, helping fill gaps in local expertise and resources, by offering vital support in planning, grant writing, and emergency management/disaster relief efforts. RPCs act as additional “boots on the ground” by providing technical assistance to towns, making them essential partners in local capacity building.
- › **Strong State Partnerships:** RPCs are valued partners for state agencies, helping extend state capacity in crucial areas and serving as vital intermediaries between towns and state agencies, helping navigate local perspectives and state policies, especially in areas with limited resources. RPCs have established relationships with local communities, which helps to disseminate information effectively and efficiently.
- › **Legislative Collaboration, Advocacy, and Thought Leadership:** RPCs have been instrumental in the legislative process, particularly in helping to develop and pass significant planning and housing bills. RPCs can advocate for local needs at the state level and help align local and regional efforts. They have also played roles in statewide policies, such as climate action plans and housing legislation.
- › **Special Relationship with Federal Agencies, like USDA Rural Development (RD):** There is a strong,

mutually beneficial, with RPCs valuing the support and direct funding access USDA RD provides, and USDA RD valuing their regional insight and assistance.

- › **Referral Partners and Project Insights:** RPCs are often the first point of contact for identifying and referring important regional projects. Their role in regional economic and community development planning allows them to pinpoint foundational projects (e.g., infrastructure needs) that can impact broader economic development efforts. Partners rely on RPCs for learning about projects and understanding specific regional needs, like infrastructure gaps that could affect development potential.
2. **Holistic and Regional Approach and Collaboration:** RPCs are seen as unbiased and holistic, focusing on the broader needs of their regions without pushing specific agendas and often contributing to statewide policy shaping. RPCs help coordinate regional efforts, such as joint agreements and municipal service agreements. This fosters regional cohesion and reduces redundancies, leading to more efficient service delivery and planning. They help establish standards and consistent planning processes, providing communities with a reliable baseline for development.
  3. **Trusted Expertise, Data, and Knowledge Partners:** RPCs bring significant expertise, relationships, and data to facilitate community projects, often acting as catalysts. RPCs have unique insights into local communities, understanding what works and what doesn't, translating community visions into actionable plans, and providing practical advice on what is feasible. RPCs serve as go-to resources for knowledge and gut checks. They are deeply embedded in their regions and have a keen understanding of local needs, challenges, and opportunities. This makes them valuable for ground-truthing information and for getting reliable advice on what approaches might work best in different contexts.
  4. **Implementation and Support:** RPCs are effective in implementing initiatives, especially when supportive funding is available, and serve as key thought partners and convenors for community planning.

### *Opportunities for Growth*

Many of the opportunities for RPCs mentioned below are in areas in which a VAPDA Coordinator could have a real impact. Building trust through a bottom-up approach is at the heart of all these opportunities. There is support for a more bottom-up approach to planning and decision-making, where RPCs are positioned as key facilitators of regional collaboration and community empowerment, actively seek input and participation from all communities (especially overwhelmed municipalities, and are transparent about their actions.

1. **Increased Public Awareness and Engagement:** There is interest in increased public awareness (among policymakers and the public) about what RPCs are, how they function, and their role in local and regional governance. This increased understanding will improve their effectiveness and build their ability to engage with member communities.
2. **Regional Collaboration, Communication, Leadership and Advocacy:** There is an opportunity for RPCs to take a leadership role in advocating for regional solutions to common challenges, like resilience, transportation, or housing. By serving as a conduit for local concerns, amplifying them at the state level, flagging patterns that are emerging, and ensuring efforts are aligned with local needs and values RPCs could help shape policies that better reflect the needs of their regions and solve existing problems.
3. **Emerging Role in Capacity Building of Municipalities:** RPCs could take a more active role in capacity building, especially in helping municipalities implement plans and access federal funding.

4. **Strengthen Relationships with State Agencies:** The need to overcome entrenched perceptions within state government is a significant challenge. Some state agencies feel that cultivating relationships is crucial but can be hit or miss depending upon the RPC. Given these perceptions, there is
5. **Work Toward More Robust Evaluation and Greater Accountability:** There is a call for better reporting and accountability, more robust evaluation tools and stronger systems to track the impact of funds allocated to RPCs, ensuring better accountability and transparency in their operations. There may be **value in considering creating templates or manuals for ensuring consistency.**
6. **Staffing VAPDA.** There is value in considering a staff coordinator for VAPDA to support the RPCs in maintaining consistency and transparency. Some of the roles that a staff person could play are below.
  - › Statewide Alignment. This coordinator could help RPCs to consistently report out budgets and operations to build trust, avoid external scrutiny, and demonstrate RPC value more clearly. This coordinator could also support more consistent communication, mapping, and planning across RPCs to ensure a baseline level of service and effectiveness. This could also include establishing regular communication channels with state agency partners and fostering collaboration among RPCs to share best practices.
  - › RPC Capacity Building. Investing in RPCs to build their capacity to provide more comprehensive support to municipalities, especially around grant writing, project management, and community engagement, could enhance their effectiveness and better position them to respond to local needs. There's a noted need for **better mentoring among RPCs**, especially for new executive directors or staff, to help navigate their roles and responsibilities. There may also be value in enhanced levels of support and resource allocation for under-resourced RPCs to ensure equitable service across communities.
  - › Strengthen Governance Structures and Explore New Models: There is interest in considering revising governance models to encourage broader participation, greater accountability, and transparency. One model that has been discussed is the Council of Government (COG) model.

## Communications Survey Results

As part of this study, NADO surveyed the eleven Vermont RPCs to answer eighteen questions to evaluate and analyze individual RPC public engagement efforts and communication strategies. A brief summary and highlights of the responses are detailed below. Full details of these results are included in Appendix L.

- Only one of eleven RPC organizations indicated that they employ a full-time communications focused staff position. The remainder manage communications tasks internally among multiple staff positions.
- Seven of eleven RPC organizations indicated having a dedicated communication budget.
- Four of eleven RPC organizations indicated having an annual documented communications plan or calendar.

Regional Planning Commissions indicated the use of multiple forms of communication, with the top reported mediums being agency websites, commercial ad placements such as newspapers, contact lists, email services, and social media. It was also reported that most RPC organizations have encountered success utilizing the Vermont-based service Front Porch Forum to share messaging and meeting notices. Digital newsletters and direct email communications to stakeholders were perceived as the most effective tools for general communication.

Tracking engagement was another topic of interest. Respondents indicated that tools like Google Analytics for



monitoring web traffic, as well as social media interactions and email open rates from distribution platforms are effective at measuring engagement with audiences.

Staff capacity was identified as the greatest challenge to RPCs' ability to engage in strategic communication efforts with stakeholders. As contractual obligations for RPCs continue to evolve, dedicating time to communications-related tasks remains challenging. The RPCs remain challenged to effectively communicate their organizations' priorities in a way that gets noticed by their intended audiences, especially in a marketplace full of other information.

## Analysis

As intermediaries between state agencies and municipalities, the RPCs are accountable to both. The feedback from municipalities that provided responses to surveys shows that they are generally satisfied with the work of the RPCs. If the RPCs are not in communication with all the municipalities in their regions on a regular basis, this could be an area of improvement, to ensure that they are responsive to municipal needs across their regions.

Survey efforts indicated that local elected officials and governing board members were familiar with the portfolio of services offered and the general structure of the RPC organizations. Respondents also indicated that they felt that RPCs were actively engaged in overall development activities across the region. Across both governing board members and local elected officials, over 90% of respondents felt the level of communication was 'good' or better. Even with these high ratings of communication, written comments from respondents expressed a desire for communication to be increased.

Interviewed state agencies were generally satisfied with RPC performance in programmatic areas. There were comments regarding desired improvements in communication and consistency of materials created and submitted by RPC organizations. These are reflected in the recommendations.

To help public engagement and communication efforts not feel so burdensome to already stretched thin staff, and to streamline and formalize efforts, it is recommended that each RPC create a written communications work plan, calendar, or similar at the beginning of each calendar year. Using online project management tools, pulling from annual organizational work plans, or borrowing a plan outline from a similar organization can help get the initial communication plan off the ground, which can then be updated annually once established. Staff should be assigned to carry out specific tasks helping distribute the load among the organization. As a first step, RPCs should document existing communications efforts and their frequency. Between e-newsletters, email updates to specific groups of stakeholders or committees, and other ongoing tasks, many communications products are likely already being produced through existing RPC resources and staff time.

An upside to communications work is that much of it can be accomplished through minimal dollars, if any at all. Through free online resources and tools, such as social media, a great deal can be communicated from an organization to its stakeholders for little to no cost at all. However, when more complex needs arise, it is helpful to have a pool, no matter how small, to help meet those needs. It is recommended that if an RPC does not already have room for communications expenses to be included in their budget, that they research how to work towards adding funding for public engagement efforts in future budgets. If it is not already included in project proposals or other types of funding requests, RPCs can use their communications work plan or calendar to document the staff time, materials, or subscriptions (such as e-newsletter software) that would be required to complete needed outreach for each project or program area.

Producing cohesive messaging about the important roles that the eleven RPCs play throughout the state is a crucial step in outwardly establishing their value. It is recommended that VAPDA help create core messaging that the RPCs can use to help express to the public and their stakeholders their significant impact in communities. Coupled with this targeted messaging could be communications-related training opportunities,

organized by VAPDA and led by RPC peers or subject matter experts as needed.

Regional Planning Commission organizations expressed a desire to have additional opportunities to build capacity within local communities. This may be best accomplished through a focused municipal assessment effort where RPC partners can ascertain the specific needs and shortcomings of local government organizations in order to identify reasonable approaches to address those issues. This would be an effort that would be considered outside of their current town planning and project review responsibilities as outlined in state statute, and will require further refinement.

## Recommendations

While RPC executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem content with the accountability of the RPCs, there does seem to be a perceived disconnect between state agencies and RPCs in terms of communication.

### 1. Continue to Build and Enhance Trust with Municipalities.

- › Lead transparent and inclusive conversations to support overwhelmed municipalities of all sizes, to help align their work more closely with local needs and priorities. Acknowledge overwhelmed municipalities' challenges and strategize with them how to overcome them.
- › Strengthen municipal relationships by understanding municipal needs and offering technical assistance to fulfill those needs as well as offering other kinds of assistance such as DEI training.
- › Ensure follow-through on any RPC offers or municipality requests, being sure to report back to municipalities.
- › Contact the smallest and most remote communities occasionally to see if their needs have changed and if they may want assistance from the RPC. Situations and needs can change.

### 2. Continue to Build and Enhance Trust with State Agencies.

Encourage state partners to provide more frequent and direct feedback at the VAPDA, RPC and planner levels about program delivery. Communications between the state and RPCs should be regular and allow for joint problem-solving.

- › Develop and implement a process or standards for mutual feedback between the state and the RPCs, such as quarterly feedback meetings and an established timeline for feedback.
- › Where applicable, executive directors and board chairs must be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies.
- › State agencies need to recognize RPCs as political subdivisions and work to remove funding and logistical barriers, making service delivery easier. RPCs are often treated as contractors only, not as statute-enabled partners.
- › RPCs need a better understanding of what the state wants them to be: project-driven entities working through state agency work plans and grants, or flexible field support staff provided with resources to meet the needs of the towns where they are. RPCs want to build capacity among towns that is unrelated to provision of shared services.

### 3. Enhance the role of RPCs in Capacity Building of Municipalities.

- › VAPDA may want to enhance its relationship with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) and any other organizations supporting municipalities to undertake periodic municipal capacity assessments that would help bring critical

issues into focus such as staffing, public service, public information concerns, data needs, and any similar topic identified by local stakeholders. This will set the stage for a discussion of which organizations are already fulfilling certain capacity building needs and where there may be gaps that VAPDA can fill.

- › Many municipalities lack the capacity to manage complex challenges, which RPCs could help address. RPCs could take a more active role in capacity building, especially in helping municipalities implement plans to access funding. This could involve stepping into a more proactive role in non-planning topics including town administration, project management and grant application preparation.
- › Reevaluate how funding and resources are distributed among RPCs that more accurately reflects expressed needs and capabilities.

#### **4. Continue Efforts to Improve Communication Practices and Build RPC Capacities to Share Information Widely (between RPCs and State Agencies, between RPCs and towns, etc.)**

- › Create a refined focus on marketing VAPDA (to the state, towns, etc.), developing shared training opportunities and better programmatic alignment for staff. RPCs thrive when they work together on grants. Embedding an RPC working group into all statewide projects can highlight the efficiency of when RPCs work together and share information/resources.
- › Establish a written communication work plan for individual RPCs and VAPDA.
  - Create a communications budget line item or include communication items in future funding requests
- › To improve communications between RPC and stakeholder state agencies, VAPDA should occupy an expanded role. This could include VAPDA-specific mailings on behalf of the RPC network, stakeholder visits to share updates, invitation of stakeholders to VAPDA-sponsored events, organization of site visits or road shows for the RPCs to showcase their work, and the creation of an annual statewide impact report.
- › Better statewide messaging and marketing to increase awareness of RPC work, roles, services, and impacts. Utilize marketing and storytelling efforts, social media, websites and newsletters.
  - VAPDA should create core messaging that the RPCs can use to demonstrate what they do and their significant impact in communities. This might involve more outreach, education, and transparency about their operations and decision-making processes, including services available to member towns.
  - Redesign [VAPDA.org](http://VAPDA.org) to serve as a marketing and communications tool for VAPDA and the individual RPCs.
- › To build RPCs communications expertise, utilize VAPDA to organize RPC communications training opportunities.
  - Provide training on communication-centric topics for the RPCs.
  - Contract with communications professionals to offer accelerated assistance to those most in need.

## Staffing

The motivation for establishing regional development organizations across the country, and in Vermont, was to provide additional support to communities in general and in their efforts to secure additional supporting resources for development activities of all types. The primary resource used to advance these efforts are program staff at RPC organizations. These individuals provide direct technical assistance to communities, as well as the day-to-day operational talent necessary to ensure that RPCs are compliant with all rules and regulations that pertain to their funding and programming endeavors.

## Background

There is no direct reference to RPC staffing found in Title 24 Chapter 117, subchapter 3: Regional Planning Commissions.<sup>14</sup> RPCs have historically hired and retained staff as needed and as resources allowed in order to complete their statutory obligations.

During the previous iteration of this report completed by the NADO Research Foundation for VAPDA in 2011, a general assessment of staffing across the RPC network was undertaken. In an effort to collect information that could be used to create staffing level comparisons between 2011 and 2024, the research team utilized staffing position categories/descriptions established in 2011 as the basis for comparison and inserted updated staffing information provided by VAPDA during the fall of 2024. This updated information was collected via peer review documentation completed by VAPDA in early 2024. Staffing matrix tables are available for review in Appendix B.

## Highlights

Feedback received during the survey effort of this project repeatedly called for RPCs to regionalize staffing and municipal services to member communities. Many survey respondents and interviewees expressed an understanding that RPCs were working to maximize their available staffing resources and acknowledged that any additional capacity that could be gained from additional staff would be welcomed. The exact number of staff necessary to meet this request is unknown in total and will be determined by each RPC organization based on the level of services being demanded by member communities. It is noted that Vermont RPCs have a higher number of specifically defined statutory responsibilities outlined in authorizing statutes than many other states across the nation. This correlates with the overall level of funding support provided to the RPC organizations by the State of Vermont.

## Analysis

There is no widely recognized metric for RPC staffing in Vermont or similar organizations across the country. As part of this exercise NADO examined similar organizations and networks in other states. While there are some states that are vaguely similar (e.g. Kentucky), Vermont was generally unique in regard to statewide composition and scope of statutory duties.

The staff positions and counts were allocated into three distinct categories; directors/executives, programmatic, and office management. Best efforts were made by the research team to crosswalk position descriptions as provided in 2024 RPC peer review documents with position descriptions utilized in the previous reporting.

Overall, the number of staff members employed across the RPC network has risen by 53; a 62% change since 2011. Staffing in the director/executive and office management categories have only risen by 1 and 2 positions respectively, while the programmatic staff has increased by 50 positions. This represents a 91% increase from 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Vermont Statutes, Title 24, Chapter 117; <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/chapter/24/117>.

Indicated in the table below, the share of director/executive positions and office management positions relative to the total has decreased since 2011, while the share of programmatic positions has risen by over 11%.

RPC Staffing Totals				
	2011	2024	2011 Share %	2024 Share %
Director/Executive	16	17	18.6%	12.2%
Office Management	15	17	17.4%	12.2%
Programmatic	55	105	64%	75.5%

Table 15: RPC Staffing Totals

Only two RPCs now employ fewer than ten workers, while the largest (Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission) has increased from 10 to 21. The Northwest Regional Planning Commission has seen the largest proportionate increase, with staff more than doubling from 8 to 18.

There has also been a shift in employment types within the RPC programmatic staff, though our categories are too imprecise to determine whether this reflects changing roles or only changing titles. For example, the number of GIS Technicians has fallen by half while the number of positions held by some permutation of the word “planner” has risen from 8 to 30. The change in GIS positions is likely attributed to the rise in GIS skills being more common and distributed across a number of position descriptions, and less tied to specific GIS only positions. This does not necessarily indicated a decline in GIS capabilities within positions or organizations. Titles including the word “Energy” have risen from 1 to 11 in 2024.

Despite this growth in overall staffing levels, almost universally, respondents to the online surveys indicated their desire for RPCs to have additional financial resources that could be deployed for increased staffing. It was formulated that if RPCs had additional resources, they could employ additional staff and ultimately increase the level of assistance provided to local communities. When considering the full-time staffing levels reported in 2024 across the state, the composite average of number of staff members available per town was 0.6. In other words, for each town being served by an RPC in Vermont, there are 0.6 staff people available to provide assistance services. The full table of FTE to town ratio by RPC is offered below. (Note: FTE values were drawn from 2020 VAPDA Peer Review Information)

RPC	FTE	Towns	FTE per Town
ACRPC	8	21	0.4
BCRC	10	17	0.6
CCRPC	20	19	1.1
CVRPC	9.5	23	0.4
LCPC	10	10	1.0
MARC	14	10	1.4
NVDA	16	55	0.3
NRPC	18	22	0.8
RRPC	11	27	0.4
TRORC	13	30	0.4
WRC	9	27	0.3

Table 16: RPC FTE Per Town

## Recommendations

Regional Planning Commission staff are the most critical asset in the cycle of assistance and service delivery to communities in Vermont. While the staffing levels at Vermont RPCs have grown significantly since the previous report in 2011, the observed levels remain minimally sufficient for current endeavors based on feedback received and may not be sufficient to keep up with the expanding roles and expectations placed on them by state entities. This has left RPCs in a position where they are unable to adequately respond to requests for additional services now, and any that may be received in the future. Similarly, the request for additional services heard in survey responses from across the state is beyond what can currently be supported by RPC organizations.

- 1. Prioritize continued investment in building overall RPC capacity across existing statutory service areas.** Based on feedback received during the survey and interview portions of this effort, RPCs are staffed at a minimally sufficient level to meet the current statutory programming requirements. Stakeholders acknowledged the condition of having limited staff working within the constraints of existing resources to manage deliverables and the ability to be responsive to local needs. The request for additional or enhanced services heard within the survey effort are beyond the existing staffing capacity of RPC organizations. As roles and expectations from member communities and the state continue to expand, the observed staffing levels will quickly become insufficient without additional supporting resources.

## Conclusion

This research effort has highlighted information and perspectives that illustrate why the RPC network in Vermont is strong, effective, and accountable. NADO finds that the RPC network is well situated for future success and offers a variety of recommendations for improvements that could be considered by the State of Vermont, VAPDA, and individual RPCs to strengthen the performance and overall outcomes for the benefit of Vermont communities. These recommendations cover a number of topics from enabling language considerations, communications strategies, equity practices, organizational efforts, and other related items.

NADO staff worked with RPC representatives to learn about staffing trends, program offerings, financial practices, and communications considerations. Findings indicate that program offerings are consistent with Vermont enabling language found at 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345a and also consistent with regional organizations representing communities in similar environments across the country. Staffing in support of these statutory responsibilities has grown by 62% since 2011 and could stand to grow further to better respond to the needs of local communities. This is especially true in the unique situation of Vermont where there are no operating county governments and state policy directives move directly to towns for implementation.

The survey and interview process undertaken led to 385 unique interactions with stakeholders from across the state and provided the research team with a wealth of perspectives to utilize in this assessment. Overall the findings of the survey effort found that respondents highly value the services provided by RPCs and expressed a desire for increasing levels of service as resources can be made available. The value of RPC work and partnerships was expressed repeatedly. To enhance these partnerships, a renewed focus on more frequent and substantive communication with member communities was requested.

In a detailed statutory comparison, other state models were identified that possess active examples of roles and responsibilities that Vermont RPCs wish to entertain to better serve citizens now and in the future. These models point to a 'council of governments' organizational arrangement that would empower RPCs with greater flexibility to work with, and on behalf of, local communities who may be struggling. Resource scarcity was a common theme of surveys and interviews, with many indicating that the smallest communities struggle to meet their service obligations and that RPCs could be well positioned to help fill some of those gaps. Similarly,

recommendations are provided for strengthening governing board membership to ensure that municipal perspectives are central to RPC operation.

Working with an external partner, diversity, equity, and inclusion considerations were evaluated for the Vermont RPC network. After a scan of current resources, a series of focus group meetings were held where individuals could speak with peers about ideas for practice improvements that would benefit the targeted populations and increase the level of communication between RPC and these audiences. The considerations and recommendations around these improvements can be further evaluated by the RPCs pursuant to any state or federal level policies that may be in effect in the near future. There are existing and identified frameworks within the State of Vermont that VAPDA and RPCs could work to implement as needed.

Overall, the RPC network is well situated to continue as a key component in the success of local communities and the development priorities of the State of Vermont.

### About VAPDA

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) is the statewide association for the State of Vermont's 11 regional planning commissions. Regional Planning

Commissions (RPCs) are Political Subdivisions of the State of Vermont created by their member municipalities (24 VSA §4341). RPCs provide technical assistance to municipalities, and since Vermont does not have county governments, Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions act as a link between municipal affairs and state government. RPCs work in fields that directly and indirectly affect the public at large: land use, transportation, housing, economic development, environmental quality, and more.



### About the NADO Research Foundation

The NADO Research Foundation (NADO RF) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that offers technical assistance, education, research, and training to support and strengthen the national network of RDOs. Established in 1988, NADO RF provides thought

leadership, conducts research, convenes partners, and produces publications focused on promising practices and innovative approaches to regional economic development.



### About NADO

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) provides advocacy, education, research, and training for the nation's RDOs. Founded in 1967, NADO and its nearly 400 members

promote regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions to strengthen the economic competitiveness and quality of life across America's local communities.

