

# BENNINGTON COUNTY REGIONAL COMMISSION

## Bennington County Regional Commission Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Report

The Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC) was created by the seventeen towns and villages it serves and works on behalf of those municipalities to build strong, resilient, and sustainable communities, to foster economic prosperity, and to promote a high quality of life for residents of the region. This mission is accomplished through direct planning and community development assistance to town and village governments, through preparation and implementation of regional plans and studies, and through synergistic working relationships with local and regional organizations. The BCRC works cooperatively with local governments to establish and advance regional cohesiveness, actively advocates for adherence to adopted regional policies, and facilitates effective communication between local, state, and federal levels of government.

The BCRC maintains an office in an historic building in the center of Bennington's downtown. The Commission is overseen by municipally appointed commissioners representing each of the member towns and villages as well as eight commissioners representing specific interests such as economic development, housing, transportation, and public health. The BCRC employs eleven full-time staff, including one person who directs a community health coalition overseen by the BCRC, and two full-time AmeriCorps VISTAs. Principal program areas with assigned staff responsibilities include: municipal and regional planning, transportation, environmental/water quality planning, community and economic development, emergency management planning, energy planning, public health, and solid waste planning and management.

### Municipal Planning and Implementation

Regional Planning Commissions act as a cost effective professional planning staff for many of Vermont's municipalities. Work in recent years been focused on improving town plans and local permitting through education and regular consultations (on-site training), bylaw modernization, assisting with implementation of local development review boards, support for development in downtowns and village centers, and meeting new requirements for economic development and flood resiliency planning. Municipal plans and regulations that are clear and up-to-date are essential in smooth state and local permitting. The BCRC's work in municipal planning is supported through municipal and regional planning funds, payments from member towns and villages, and other grants. All technical assistance provided this year is shown on the At Work map; highlights include:

- ◆ The BCRC helped develop new comprehensive plans or plan updates for Manchester Village, Old Bennington Village, Glastenbury, Peru, and Stamford. Each new plan is reviewed for conformance with statutory requirements and implementation projects are clearly delineated.
- ◆ Assistance was provided to the Town of Shaftsbury as that community began work on a comprehensive set of revisions to their land use regulations. Important aspects of the work have included ensuring consistency with statutory requirements and the Town Plan as well as sup-

porting appropriate development in the designated village center of South Shaftsbury.

- ◆ The BCRC continued to provide support for village center designation applications for Arlington and East Arlington (approved), and assisted with new/renewal applications for village centers in Peru and North Bennington.
- ◆ BCRC staff helped plan and organize a public meeting in Dorset, attended by over 100 residents, focusing on historical development trends in the town's two village centers and physical and regulatory barriers to making the centers more economically vibrant and attractive to new businesses and residents. BCRC staff have followed up by working with the town to outline needed pedestrian improvements, assisting with a planning grant application, and helping to develop land use regulations that support compact mixed use development.
- ◆ The BCRC managed and actively participated in a planning study that examined a key block of underutilized and vacant properties in the center of downtown Bennington. A plan for redevelopment was produced that included site and building design alternatives, market analyses, and a description of how the development would support the town's land use goals and policies. A group of local investors representing important local businesses and institutions has decided to purchase all of the property involved in the study and pursue a redevelopment plan based on the alternatives presented in the BCRC planning study. The BCRC is working with the investor group to coordinate the redevelopment project.
- ◆ BCRC staff responded to requests for assistance with various planning and zoning issues in 14 municipalities and conducted training for municipal officials on a variety of planning and land use topics including: procedures for land use administrators, boards, and commissions; new water quality rules/green infrastructure and low impact development; land conservation and watershed planning; energy efficiency for downtowns and village centers; and economic development planning. Representatives from each municipality attended at least one of the training sessions.

### Regional Planning

RPCs coordinate planning at the regional level through the adoption and implementation of a comprehensive regional plan and related studies. These plans guide local planning and the investment decisions of the public and private sectors.

The Bennington County Regional Plan, most recently updated in 2015, is a significant resource document for local officials, organizations, and residents of the region. The Regional Plan includes extensive information about the region and its communities, specific policies to guide growth and development, and direct links to numerous sources of information on a wide variety of topics.

An important aspect of this plan update was inclusion of closer ties between the plan and various topic specific plans developed by the BCRC. The plan also includes implementation guidance supported by specific recommendations for projects and improvements that will benefit the region. Implementation tasks are identified in each of several key areas: comprehensive municipal planning (specific schedules for assistance with plan and bylaw updates and training), regulatory review (guidelines for participation in Act 250 and Section 248 reviews – BCRC participated actively in four Act 250 and ten Section 248 hearings during the year); transportation (a list of priority projects and initiatives and links to action-oriented plans); environmental planning (identification of water quality improvement projects, partner organizations and key areas of focus); community and economic development (including links to strategy based economic development plans for the

northern and southern parts of the region); emergency management (grant funding obtained to support specific municipal hazard mitigation planning work); energy planning (a comprehensive new regional energy plan with policies and targeted actions for conservation and efficiency as well as maps/guidelines related to siting new renewable energy based generation facilities); and solid waste (a new plan that includes specific action items to ensure that projects designed to meet specific waste reduction and recycling targets are met).

Improved regional planning for community and economic development has been a key component of the BCRC's work over the past five years. Implementation of these plans has been greatly facilitated through a new contract with the Bennington County Industrial Corporation (the regional development corporation) that establishes a direct link between planning and business development activities, and facilitates engagement with other economic development interests across Southern Vermont.

### Brownfields

Vermont RPCs have sought and have been awarded over 10 million dollars for this economic development initiative. Environmental site assessments allow properties to be sold, developed or re-developed in ways that benefit the local and state economy, create or protect jobs, and increase housing opportunities.

Although the BCRC has concluded work under its most recent EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant, it has continued to identify sites that would benefit from assessments, provide information on Brownfield redevelopment, and monitor redevelopment of sites that have been assessed in the past. Brownfield funding awarded to BCRC and the Town of Bennington during the past year has led to the initiation of a major redevelopment effort in the heart of the downtown. Recent community development achievements accomplished through brownfield redevelopment planning include:

- ◆ "Barlow Gravel Pit/Landfill" property – Pownal. This property has been sold and is currently being used by a commercial excavator; the balance of the gravel pit land is the site of a new 500 kW solar energy development.
- ◆ "Vermont Tissue" property – Bennington, Walloomsac River. Following completion of extensive site assessments and remediation work, the site has begun generating hydroelectric energy. The balance of the former mill building is now occupied by a new craft distillery.
- ◆ North Pownal Dam - Pownal. Brownfield funding was used to assist with environmental assessments and remediation related to contaminated sediments. The hydroelectric generating capacity of the dam is being restored as a result, with operation expected to begin in 2017.
- ◆ Brownfield funding was used to complete an area-wide plan for part of downtown Bennington. The first part of the plan involved a complete inventory of vacant, underused, and potentially contaminated properties. The second phase of the plan involved a broad-based community effort to identify preferred redevelopment scenarios, including market and feasibility studies, for one specific block in the center of the downtown. With the block now subject to a purchase agreement, additional brownfield funding will be used for more extensive Phase II environmental assessments, with remediation plans to be based on specific redevelopment plans created during the area-wide planning process.

## Economic and Community Development

Economic growth is supported best when development efforts are partnered with solid planning functions. RPCs work with towns and in strong partnership with Regional Development Corporations (RDCs) to this end in a number of ways, including development of comprehensive strategies that will help to position Vermont for long term economic gain.

The BCRC has maintained a staffed program in community and economic development for several years. Successful economic development planning in both the Southshire (Bennington area) and Northshire (Manchester area) led to increasing levels of collaboration with the Bennington County Industrial Corporation (BCIC, the RDC for the area), and in January of this year, following a series of meetings between the boards of the two organizations, the BCIC decided to close its office and contract with the BCRC for the conduct of its annual work plan. This partnership, together with BCRC's active role in redevelopment projects, has allowed for the hiring of additional staff, supporting economic development initiatives throughout the region and in cooperation with the Windham Region through the Southern Vermont Economic Development Zone initiative. Highlights from the past year include:

- ◆ Completion of the Northshire Economic Development Strategy (NEDS), an asset-based economic development program. With the closing of the Manchester and the Mountains Chamber of Commerce, the BCRC has worked with the Shires Marketing Organization to bring local officials and business leaders from around the region together to begin a discussion of how to most effectively tie the NEDS recommendations together with ongoing efforts to implement elements of the Bennington Economic Development Strategy (completed with management provided by BCRC last year).
- ◆ As noted above, the BCRC led an effort to study and produce a plan for redevelopment of a large block located at the intersection of Main Street and South Street in downtown Bennington. As a result of this planning effort, and the collaborative relationships developed during the process, a group of local businesses and institutions formed the Bennington Redevelopment Group and purchased the property. The BCRC is now coordinating work between the investor group, developers, consultants, and prospective business and residential tenants, to begin the development process.
- ◆ The BCRC continues to work to forge a strong relationship between business, educational institutions, and economic development officials in the northern and southern parts of the region. The BCRC is leading an effort to develop a countywide economic development program that will complement, and may be combined with, the Windham County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. These efforts are being coordinated with funding provided to support the Southern Vermont Economic Development Zone.
- ◆ The BCRC is continuing its efforts to support workforce development through regular consultation with businesses and educational institutions, fostering of a business-based internship program, and conducting regular outreach and educational programs in cooperation with the BCIC's workforce development committee.

## Transportation Planning

Through a contract with VTrans, RPCs coordinate the Transportation Planning Initiative (TPI). This effort has provided a statewide framework for public involvement in planning the improvements to Vermont's transportation system, with local communities represented through regional Trans-

portation Advisory Committees (TACs). Each regional TAC prioritizes projects, identifies local and regional transportation needs, and provides the platform for public involvement in the planning and development of the state's transportation system. RPCs serve as the point of delivery for the statewide transportation planning process to support local, regional, state and federal transportation network advancement. Accomplishments over the past year as they relate to the BCRC's TPI work program include:

- ◆ *Cooperation and coordination between VTrans, RPCs, and Municipalities*
  - ◇ The BCRC's Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) met quarterly during the past year. TAC meeting attendance has consistently been at about ten members; the full TAC consists of 15 members. Over the course of the year, all TAC members have attended at least one meeting. Principal functions of the TAC are to provide input on specific projects and to prioritize projects in several program areas.
  - ◇ The BCRC also conducted outreach and education through the following means:
    - Direct outreach to each town and village regarding codes and standards, and ERAF funding requirements.
    - Organized and participated in road foreman/commissioner meetings, focusing this year on road erosion inventories and the Better Roads program.
    - Presentation at the Vermont Bike-Ped Summit.
    - Presentations on Bennington connectivity and streetscape improvement projects at a meeting of the full BCRC, with local officials in attendance as well.
    - Presentations to select boards and planning commissions in Dorset, Manchester, Sunderland, Arlington, Shaftsbury (part of a village center presentation), North Bennington, Old Bennington, Bennington, Stamford, and Pownal.
    - Participation in a road safety audit – Route 7A and Houghton Lane in Bennington.
    - Hosting a Regional Safety Forum in Bennington.
    - Active participation in the intercity rail / direct bus link public transit studies.
- ◆ *Conformance with Act 200 and Facilitating Centralized Decision Making*
  - ◇ The BCRC's Regional Transportation Plan was updated and adopted in 2015, at which time it was formally incorporated into the comprehensive Bennington County Regional Plan.
  - ◇ The BCRC has been actively involved in development activities for a wide range of transportation projects, including:
    - Scoping and project management for the Willowbrook-Applegate Path in Bennington.
    - Participation in the Rensselaer – Bennington – Manchester rail shuttle (public transit) planning study and the recently initiated project development study for the same project.
    - Project management for the Main Street sidewalk project in Stamford.
    - Project management for the Ninja Trail scoping and design-build project in Bennington.
    - Project management and design support for the Route 67A – Bennington College highway safety and crossing project.
    - Project management for the Manchester Elementary School and Arlington Recreation Center pedestrian access scoping studies.

- ◇ The BCRC participated in the review of four major Act 250 projects. Transportation issues included: need for ongoing maintenance to ensure safety at the Hill Farm Road/Route 7A intersection in Sunderland/requirement for traffic control during events at Hill Farm Inn; coordinating redevelopment of the Manchester Shopping Center with improvements planned for Routes 11/30; review of traffic impact study for 24-unit apartment project in Bennington.
- ◆ *Providing Transportation Planning Support for Municipalities*
  - ◇ Provided 2017 Better Roads Application assistance to Rupert, Sandgate, Manchester, Arlington, and Pownal.
  - ◇ Managed 2016 Better Roads Grants for Arlington, Pownal and Shaftsbury.
  - ◇ Acquired Ecosystem Restoration Grants for Stormwater Master Planning in Sandgate and Sunderland.
  - ◇ The BCRC worked closely with the Town of Manchester to develop a complete redesign of Depot Street (Routes 11/30) and is assisting with project development activities.
  - ◇ The BCRC worked with the Town of Sunderland and a consultant to develop a “Safe Roads” plan for the community, with targeted improvements to promote safety and mobility for bicyclists and pedestrians.
  - ◇ BCRC staff completed a roadway and streetscape design project for the critical Benmont Avenue corridor in Bennington.
  - ◇ BCRC staff assisted the Town of Manchester with a pedestrian improvement scoping study for School Street, and incorporated ideas for new mixed use development and streetscape improvements.

### Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Resiliency

RPCs play key roles in the mitigation and preparedness phases of emergency management in partnership with Vermont Emergency Management, the Vermont Homeland Security Unit, VTrans and the Agency of Natural Resources. RPCs provide direct staff support to the State Emergency Operations Center, administrative support to the Local Emergency Planning Committees, and coordination among responders and planners throughout the State’s four Public Safety Districts. RPCs also help update floodplain bylaws and FEMA-required hazard mitigation plans, coordinate updates to municipal emergency plans, and assist as needed in special circumstances like Tropical Storm Irene and other declared disasters.

- ◆ The BCRC continued to support municipalities in developing and updating Local Emergency Operations Plans (LEOPs); all municipalities in the region either have updated and approved LEOPs (14) or are in the process of working with BCRC and DEMHS to finalize approval (3).
- ◆ The BCRC provides support for development and updates to municipal hazard mitigation plans. Nine of the region’s seventeen municipalities have approved hazard mitigation plans. In addition, Manchester’s plan is approved pending adoption, and the Select Board should adopt that this month. Plans are nearing completion for Manchester Village and
- ◆ North Bennington, and plans are actively being developed for Bennington, Glastenbury, and Pownal. The BCRC will be updating the Arlington hazard mitigation plan, which was approved in 2012.
- ◆ The BCRC provided assistance with revisions and updates to flood hazard area regulations and has supported development and use of new regulatory flood maps through workshops and

direct technical assistance.

- ◆ Ongoing support for the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) is provided by BCRC staff; facilitating emergency response exercises, implementation of an effective mass care/mass surge facility, completion of a hazardous materials emergency planning study, and region-wide emergency planning activities.
- ◆ Hoosic River Corridor Plan: Work is progressing on the Hoosic River Corridor Plan in Pownal – a hazard mitigation plan addressing residential developments and municipal infrastructure in that community.
- ◆ Lye Brook Study: The BCRC is working with students from the University of Vermont engineering program on a project along Lye Brook in Manchester. Under consideration is removal of a berm, possible reconnection of Lye Brook with adjacent wetlands, and needed improvements to Richville Road.
- ◆ Invasive Species Surveys: The BCRC has completed surveys of ash trees in North Bennington and Manchester Village because of their potential vulnerability to the Emerald Ash Borer. The BCRC also supported the Bennington County Sustainable Forest Consortium and the Batten Kill Watershed Cooperative Invasive Species Management Association in their surveys and treatments in the Batten Kill watershed.

### Geographic Information System Services

The BCRC uses its geographic information systems capability to produce maps and conduct analyses in support of virtually all of its programs. RPCs also provide municipalities, state agencies, and regional groups with mapping and data analysis in support of their projects.

Particularly valuable GIS projects completed during the past year have included:

- ◆ Assessment of the amount of existing and recent development in each of the region’s centers.
- ◆ Energy resource maps showing locations having high potential for renewable energy development as well as areas with significant constraints to development.
- ◆ River corridor mapping to support resiliency planning for each town in the region including depiction of former and new flood hazard areas, and maps to support watershed planning and development of river corridor regulations.
- ◆ New maps to support municipal plan updates in five municipalities; mapping of proposed adjustments to zoning bylaw revisions were completed for three towns.
- ◆ Transportation system and corridor mapping near Routes 7A-67A to highlight safety concerns and potential solutions, and to locate potential multi-use routes and possible resource constraints (e.g., wetlands, river corridors, rare species).
- ◆ Parcel and infrastructure maps supporting the Bennington downtown area-wide plan.
- ◆ Comprehensive map and plan for a system of trails and supporting facilities in Bennington and surrounding towns and villages.

### Energy Conservation and Development

A renewed focus on clean, renewable, sustainable and affordable energy presents Vermont with great opportunity and significant challenges. RPCs integrate energy planning with land use, transportation and natural resources efforts, and work with municipalities to assist with project implementation. RPCs participate in Section 248 proceedings and support comprehensive planning at the local and regional level to inform the permitting process.

- ◆ The BCRC has taken a lead role working with the Public Service Department, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation, Energy Action Network, and two other regional planning commis-

sions to develop new regional energy plans that focus specifically on energy conservation, efficiency, and renewable generation targets tied to Vermont's energy goals and new comprehensive energy plan. A final draft plan was completed and will be used to support development of municipal energy plans and to represent the region's position on applications for new generation projects before the Public Service Board.

- ◆ BCRC staff appeared before state agencies, local and regional planners, legislative committees and others to provide background and examples of energy resource mapping, planning for future energy supply and demand, and integration of land use and transportation planning with energy planning.
- ◆ The BCRC helped organize workshops on building energy codes, cold climate heat pumps, and best practices for weatherization and use of alternative heating systems in multifamily housing units.
- ◆ The BCRC cooperated with Efficiency Vermont in the implementation of a multifaceted program to promote energy efficiency and conservation in Bennington's downtown and the surrounding area.
- ◆ The BCRC has worked with a hydroelectric developer and town officials in Bennington and Pownal to advance two hydroelectric projects with a combined capacity of approximately 1 MW.
- ◆ The BCRC has worked with towns and villages concerned about the large number of new commercial solar energy projects being proposed in the region. Information on specific sites as well as guidelines for siting such facilities have been shared with local officials. The BCRC's energy and development review committees meets with developers and invites local officials to participate in those meetings and technical reviews.

### Watershed Planning and Project Development

RPCs work with the Agency of Natural Resources to assist with completion of the EPA required watershed plans. RPCs also work with municipalities to implement river corridor assessments in local planning and regulations which result in better and safer growth management decisions.

- ◆ The BCRC has worked with the Agency of Natural Resources and local officials to develop watershed plans and to pursue flood resiliency projects in the Batten Kill, Walloomsac, Hoosic, and Mettawee river basins. The BCRC has organized public meetings on the Basin Plan that covers these watersheds involving river corridor engineers, watershed association managers, land conservation experts, and fisheries biologists.
- ◆ Assisted VT ANR with completion and associated outreach on the Basin 1 Tactical Plan and convened a regional stakeholder/public meeting.
- ◆ The BCRC organized and held a public meeting on Act 64 and Clean Water Initiative funding.
- ◆ The BCRC organized and participated in a Green Infrastructure/Low Impact Development public workshop.
- ◆ The BCRC provided Manchester, Manchester Village, Peru, Landgrove, Stamford, and Old Bennington with Flood Resiliency information, text, and graphics for use in the municipal plans.
- ◆ The BCRC helped Manchester develop a stormwater section for their town plan and provided that town with a model stormwater ordinance.
- ◆ BCRC staff has attended monthly meetings of the Batten Kill Watershed Alliance and assisted with their education and water quality improvement projects.
- ◆ The BCRC secured Ecosystem Restoration Grants for stormwater master planning in Sandgate and Sunderland.

## Special Projects

The BCRC has developed programs in solid waste management and planning and healthy community design that have led to numerous special projects and ongoing actions.

The BCRC has helped organize, developed a plan for, and provide staff support for a thirteen town solid waste alliance. Some of the Bennington County Solid Waste Alliance's ongoing activities include:

- ◆ Household hazardous waste collection events in the northern, central, and southern portions of the region, and investigation of options for establishment of a permanent household hazardous waste collection facility.
- ◆ Education and outreach to schools, municipalities, solid waste service providers, and the general public on requirements of the new state and regional solid waste plans and requirements.
- ◆ Cooperation with developers and local officials in the establishment of a new recycling center in Pownal and onset of operations at the new regional composting center.
- ◆ Production and distribution of a regular newsletter on solid waste issues and maintenance of a web page dedicated to solid waste information.

Other special projects pursued in cooperation with local community coalitions, nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and local governments in the past year have included:

Working to improve regional food systems. Specific activities have included development of a market study and related coordination related to the potential for a downtown food store in Bennington's "food desert," and a USDA-funded grant to develop a strong regional food organization that establishes ongoing regional and inter-regional partnerships while addressing food security issues in Bennington.

Obtaining multi-year grant funding of approximately \$125,000 per year to support the Alliance for Community Transformation's work in the area of "Drug Free Communities." Programs cover activities including youth engagement, coordinated planning among social service organizations, development of community facilities, and support for recovery efforts.

Support for business groups and arts organizations in Bennington in furtherance of a "Cultural Bennington" plan and strategy.

## Administration and Funding

Each program manager at the BCRC is responsible for work plan and budget development. The executive director/planning coordinator, financial manager, and assistant director/economic development coordinator cooperate to ensure that all required tasks and reporting are completed and advance the Commission's mission. The BCRC reported total revenues of approximately \$1.242 million in FY 2016 and total expenditures of approximately \$1.201 million. The majority of revenues are derived from grants that support specific work programs. Municipal appropriations and a portion of funds allocated to the BCRC from the municipal and regional planning fund provide critical support and matching funds to all of the diverse program areas operated through the Commission.

An annual financial audit is completed during August of each year. The FY 2016 audit has confirmed the accuracy of the BCRC's financial records and reports no significant findings.

Regular meetings of the BCRC are held bimonthly with special meetings held during the intervening months. Most meetings include presentations and information on specific topics that support commissioners' understanding and involvement in regional planning projects. The BCRC also is responsible for organizing regular meetings of the Bennington County Industrial Corporation, the Bennington County Solid Waste Alliance, and the Local Emergency Planning Committee. Several board members attend special training each year (e.g., financial management, land use law) to assist in the carrying out of their responsibilities to the organization. Staff regularly attend trainings and participate in online webinars on a variety of topics specific to their program areas.

