

NORTHWEST REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

Northwest Regional Planning Commission Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Report

The Northwest Regional Planning Commission (NRPC) serves the 23 municipalities (19 towns, 3 incorporated villages, and 1 city) located in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties in northwestern Vermont.

Municipalities in the region appoint two representatives to serve on the Board of Commissioners. This board governs the policies and activities of the Commission, and elects an Executive Committee and officers to oversee NRPC programs and staff.

The Mission of the Northwest Regional Planning Commission is:

- ◆ To assist local municipalities, through education, technical assistance, grants and funding; and to aid municipalities in their planning efforts as authorized by Vermont planning laws.
- ◆ To serve as a center for information and as a resource to support the region and its municipalities' interests, growth patterns and common goals.
- ◆ To provide a forum for the discussion of issues which are regional in nature and/or unique to our area of the state, and to serve as a mediator to resolve conflicts as appropriate. Common sense and a spirit of compromise must be allowed to enter the discussion so that the impacts of development may be mitigated.
- ◆ To conduct regional planning programs.

Municipal Planning and Implementation

RPCs act as a cost effective professional planning staff for many of Vermont's municipalities. Work in recent years has been focused on improving town plans and local permitting through education and enhanced consultations (on-site training), bylaw modernization, facilitating transition to Development Review Boards and implementing new requirements for economic development and flood resiliency planning. Current and clear plans and bylaws are essential in smooth state and local permitting. This work is supported through local and regional planning funds, local contributions, and other grants. All technical assistance provided this year is shown on the At Work map; highlights include:

- ◆ Completed workshops attended by municipal staff and volunteers from 18 municipalities on the Essentials of Land Use Planning and the Open Meeting Law.
- ◆ Assisted Alburgh and Sheldon in basic updates to their municipal plans, including the addition of a new flood resiliency section as required by statute.
- ◆ Completed comprehensive municipal plan updates for the Town of Montgomery and the Town of Georgia with Municipal Planning Grant funding. Each plan focused on making their communities more flood resilient.
- ◆ Reviewed and provided regional approval to 7 municipal plans.
- ◆ Consulted with St. Albans City, Franklin, Alburgh, and Grand Isle on local planning and con-

firmed their planning efforts to retain eligibility for municipal planning grants.

- ◆ Assisted the Town of Grand Isle in developing a draft Capital Improvement Plan.
- ◆ Assisted the Town of Sheldon with transitioning to a Development Review Board.
- ◆ Began working with the Village of Enosburg Falls, Town of Bakersfield, and Town of South Hero to complete bylaw amendments with Municipal Planning Grant funding.
- ◆ Helped Bakersfield, Richford and Montgomery complete their renewal applications for designated village centers.
- ◆ Answered general planning and zoning technical assistance questions for the towns and villages of Berkshire, Bakersfield, Enosburgh, Enosburg Falls, Fairfax, Georgia, Grand Isle, Highgate, Montgomery, Richford, Sheldon, St. Albans Town, and South Hero.

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 Northwest Regional Plan was adopted unanimously by the Board of Commissioners in July 2015. The revised plan has clearly stated goals and policies, relevant data and indicators, and a strategic implementation plan. The plan is based upon NRPC’s Healthy People, Strong Communities project and has three major components: Healthy Physical Region, Healthy Social Region, and Healthy Economic Region.

NRPC published its first annual regional plan implementation report in July 2016. The [report](#) showed that NRPC has already made progress on 33 of its 39 short term and ongoing implementation priorities.

NRPC reviews state permit applications to ensure proposed projects conform with the regional plan. The Policy and Project Review Committee reviewed eighteen Section 248 and four Act 250 major applications for conformance with the regional plan. The committee made final determinations on eleven of the projects and determined they conformed with the plan but in some cases offered comments and suggestions for permit conditions.

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.

[NRPC currently has 4 active EPA Brownfields grants](#), including one Revolving Loan Fund (awarded in 2010), two hazardous materials assessment grants (awarded in 2013 and 2014) and a petroleum assessment grant (awarded in 2013). During FY16, the following projects were either finished or started:

Assessment Projects:

- ◆ *St. Albans City Department of Public Works.* St. Albans City is interested in exploring redevelopment opportunities for the property currently housing their Department of Public Works,

which may be relocated to the Fonda property. NRPC has funded a Phase 1 Assessment and a Quality Assurance Project Plan and a workplan for a Phase 2 Assessment. Once these are approved by regulatory agencies, NRPC anticipates funding a Phase 2 Assessment to characterize any contamination at the site and help the City better understand redevelopment opportunities and cleanup costs.

- ◆ *Former Fonda Container Company Feasibility Investigation.* NRPC is funding a redevelopment feasibility investigation exploring the potential for locating a new police and fire station and Department of Public Works at the St. Albans City owned Fonda site. The project has developed a conceptual site plan that leaves all but a few small areas of the existing slab in place by designing around PCB and TCE use limitations. The project also involves coordinating with federal and state regulatory agencies on cleanup requirements. The next phase of the project will be the development of a corrective action plan.
- ◆ *Catherine St., Stebbins St., Market St. Targeted Area Wide Plan.* NRPC is working with a team of consultants to prepare a targeted area wide plan around an intersection of the planned Federal Street Multi-Modal Connector Project. The goal of this area wide plan is to encourage and guide public and private investment around a community supported vision. The plan will develop market based re-use concepts and feasibility analysis that can be used to attract investment.

Cleanup Projects:

- ◆ *43 Lake Street, St. Albans City.* 43 Lake Street is in the heart of downtown adjacent to the City Center Project that includes a new State Office Building and a Parking Garage. After funding a Supplemental Phase 2 Assessment looking at vapor intrusion potential, NRPC sub-granted cleanup funds to transport and dispose of contaminated urban fill at the site. The cleanup is complete and construction of a new hotel is underway.

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.

- ◆ Re-established the [Northern Vermont Economic Development District \(NVEDD\)](#) in partnership with the three RDCs and RPCs in the six northern counties. A new advisory Board helped to create a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy that was adopted in April 2016 and approved by EDA. NRPC serves as the administrative coordinator for NVEDD.
- ◆ Completed a [Grand Isle County activity guide](#) that promotes tourism opportunities in the Lake Champlain Islands.
- ◆ Key partner and organizer of *In Good Taste*, an annual local food event.
- ◆ Assisted with promotion and grant writing for the Northern Border Regional Commission implementation grants.

Transportation Planning

Through contract with the 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

Transportation 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.

Objective #1 - Cooperation and Coordination between VTrans, Regions and Municipalities

- ◆ **TAC activity** - NRPC Held 6 TAC meetings. Attendance ranged from 11-16 TAC members per meeting, a 53% municipal participation rate.
- ◆ **TAC Outcomes**
 - ◇ Participated in the Transportation & Inclusive Communities Project, a joint effort between NRPC, CCRPC, AARP, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, Vermont Natural Resources Council and the Vermont Energy Investment Corporation.
 - ◇ Held a Regional Transportation Roundtable for TAC members and local legislators.
 - ◇ Hosted a VTrans presentation on Class 1 Town Highways.
- ◆ **Outreach**
 - ◇ Hosted a November 2015 Transportation Board Forum in St. Albans.
 - ◇ Hosted **2** Public Transit E&D meetings.
 - ◇ Initiated **4** Roadway Drainage & Erosion Inventories.
 - ◇ Participated in **4** Road Safety Audit Reviews.
 - ◇ Provided outreach to **10** municipalities on the General Roads Municipal Permit.
- ◆ **Data collection**
 - ◇ **5** bridge and culvert inventories (Alburgh, Enosburgh, Fairfield, Swanton and Grand Isle). Tech assistance to 1 other town for culvert inventory update.
 - ◇ **2** pedestrian counts.
 - ◇ **2** traffic counts.

Objective #2 - Conformance with Act 200 and Facilitating Decentralized Decision Making

The Regional Transportation Plan was adopted July 29, 2015 and is integrated into the Regional Plan.

NRPC participated three project scoping efforts and attended one 502 hearing (VTrans right-of-way acquisition). NRPC also assisted with outreach for **3** bridge projects: North Hero/Grand Isle drawbridge, Georgia I-89 culvert, and North Hero Bridge #5.

Through our Policy and Project Review Committee, NRPC reviewed and/or provided comments on **6** Act 250 applications with substantial transportation elements. As a result of NRPC comments sidewalks were added to two projects to conform with the transportation plan.

Objective #3 - Providing Transportation Planning Support to Municipalities

Short-range transportation planning providing direct assistance to municipalities is **27%** of NRPC's transportation budget. A large portion of the coordination activities also include municipal assistance. Municipal projects included:

- ◆ Wrote or provided significant technical assistance to **14** transportation-related grant applications for municipalities. Includes Better Roads Program, Transportation Alternatives, Strong

Communities/Better Connections, Bicycle and Pedestrian, and ACCD Municipal Planning grant applications.

- ◆ Completed culvert inventory updates for Alburgh, Grand Isle, Enosburgh, Fairfield and Swanton.
- ◆ Identified **3** culvert replacement projects in the Town of Richford to increase aquatic organism passage and expand access to upstream habitat for brook trout. Vermont Fish & Wildlife funds will be used to design replacements for these structures which will have water quality and resiliency benefits in addition to providing additional aquatic organism passage.

Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Resiliency

RPCs play key roles in the mitigation and preparedness phases of emergency management in partnership with Vermont Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, VTrans and the Agency of Natural Resources. RPCs provide direct staff to the State Emergency Operations Center, local Emergency Operations Centers, administrative support to the Local Emergency Planning Committees and coordination among responders and planners throughout the State's four Public Safety Districts. RPC's also help update floodplain bylaws, write flood resiliency sections of Municipal Plans and FEMA-required hazard mitigation plans, coordinate updates to municipal emergency operations plans and assist as needed in special circumstances like Tropical Storm Irene, the Lake Champlain Flooding of 2011, and other declared disasters. Twenty-two municipalities (96%) in the region currently have an updated local emergency operations plan. Ten municipalities (43%) in the region currently have a local hazard mitigation plan either adopted or under review. During the last fiscal year, NRPC:

- ◆ Staffed the two Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC #4 and #13) within the region, as well as the greater St. Albans Area Incident Management team and Grand Isle County Mutual Aid Association. The activities include improving capacity to respond to all hazards incidents, ensuring that municipalities have hazard mitigation plans in place, and updating Local Emergency Operations Plans (LEOPs).
- ◆ Served as the Local Liaison to municipalities for the Planning Section of the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) following severe weather events. Duties including reaching out to local EMDs /EMCs to assess damages, compiling damage assessments in coordination with Vermont Agency of Transportation and reporting local damages to the Planning Section of the SEOC. Work is performed under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Public Safety.
- ◆ Provided direct staff support for Operation Vigilant Guard: a state-wide emergency management exercise involving the Vermont National Guard and various state and local agencies that tested the state's ability to respond to a state wide catastrophic exercise. Three NRPC employees served in the State Emergency Operations Center during the Vermont Yankee graded exercise. The exercise simulated a series of simultaneous catastrophic events, testing state-wide capacity to communicate, respond to, and manage such an event.
- ◆ Served on the State Emergency Response Committee which oversees the state's hazard materials program including carrying out the state and federal requirements of the committee.
- ◆ Served on the State Citizens Corps Council Working Group which oversees the Community Emergency Response Teams, Volunteers in Police Service, Disaster Animal Response Team and Neighborhood Watch Program.
- ◆ Advised on the allocation and use of US Department of Homeland Security training and exercises funds through service on the Vermont State Training & Exercise Working Group.

- ◆ Provided data and information to municipalities for hazard mitigation grant program applications for transportation infrastructure improvements, home buyouts in hazardous areas and landslide risk analysis study.
- ◆ Assisted Grand Isle County Mutual Aid Association with the transition of Emergency Dispatch Services.
- ◆ Mapped potential emergency repeater locations for the Grand Isle County Mutual Aid Association.

Geographic Information System Services

In addition to enhancing the RPC work, RPCs provide municipalities, state agencies and regional groups with mapping and data analysis in support of their projects.

- ◆ Completed Town Plan & Zoning Maps for over half of our municipalities.
- ◆ Prepared Village Designation Maps for communities seeking village designation.
- ◆ Completed E911 Maps for all municipalities for use by town officials, emergency responders and others. The maps include a community poster map, a bound atlas with individual pages for each roadway and basic road map.
- ◆ Assisted Enosburgh Town and Sheldon with parcel mapping projects funded through the Northern Borders Regional Commission.
- ◆ Created interpretive panels for the Lake Champlain Byways Kiosk, including recreational resources, activities and places of interest.

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.

- ◆ Actively participated in the Section 248 proceedings for the New England Clean Power Link transmission cable project, the VELCO transmission cable project, Vermont Green Line Develco, LLC transmission cable project, and 15 other renewable energy generation projects between 20 MW and 500 kW in size.
- ◆ Continued work on a pilot project, along with three other RPC, to draft regional energy plans focused on achieving the state goal of 90% renewable energy usage in Vermont by 2050 and meeting the requirements of Vermont's new energy law, Act 174. The project includes energy demand and generation modeling and mapping of areas with renewable generation potential in the region.
- ◆ Provided a workshop attended by municipal officials and volunteers about municipal participation in the Section 248 process.

Watershed Planning and Project Development

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

- ◆ Provided direct training to municipal boards and regional commissioners about Act 64, the Vermont Water Quality Bill, which was enacted during 2015 session.
- ◆ Worked with the towns of Berkshire, Highgate, Swanton and Bakersfield to develop water quality related language in town plans and bylaws related to shoreline, stream buffers and river corridor regulations.
- ◆ Developed and presented a property owner training that focused on assessing and solving stormwater problems.
- ◆ Assisted the state's Watershed Coordinators with Plan development for the Missisquoi River and Lamoille River basins.
- ◆ Identified innovative stormwater practices and projects in the Northern Lake Champlain and Missisquoi Basins that incorporate green infrastructure or road management best practices. This information was incorporated into an [online map](#) to share information with partners and educate the public.

Special Projects

The Town and City of St Albans have partnered with NRPC to manage and implement their public education and outreach components of their MS4 stormwater permit. Outreach materials, a new website and landowner and teacher trainings have been developed with the aim of reducing negative impacts of stormwater on water quality.

NRPC has assisted the Vermont Natural Resources Council on a project to promote an understanding of how housing location affects transportation costs, energy use and inclusiveness with a goal of creating housing opportunities that are affordable and inclusive. This project covers Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle Counties and includes a partnership with Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, AARP, and Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity.

Administration and Funding

NRPC purchased a building in September of 2013 to serve as a permanent office location. This provides budget certainty and enables NRPC to hold and manage an asset rather than pay rent. Building costs will increase slightly over the next five years due to renovations and the Board adopted mortgage repayment plan. Annual building expenses are projected to decline within ten years of purchase.

A Board adopted reserve fund policy provides guidance for long term financial planning. NRPC maintains Board designated reserve funds to cover operating shortfalls, accrued leave time, building renovations and equipment replacement. The Commission maintains a three-year plan for equipment and software upgrades and replacement.

The FY 16 NRPC budget was approximately \$1.2 million. Revenue sources included state and federal performance contracts, grants and local assessments. Virtually all of the NRPC's revenue sources are tied to contracts with scopes of work, guidelines and/or performance measures. This means that the NRPC has limited flexibility in how it chooses to use the vast majority of its funding. Funding received through town assessments is the exception, which makes this funding stream particularly important because it gives us the greatest latitude to respond to NRPC-identified needs in the region. The grants we receive enable us to work with our towns on areas such as transportation, emergency planning, community development, brownfields redevelop-

ment, energy, and natural resources. Revenue from virtually all federal and state grantors requires non-federal matching funds ranging from 10 percent (Transportation Planning Initiative) to 50 percent (Emergency Management Planning Grant). Town assessments and regional planning funds passed through to NRPC under a performance contract with the Department of Housing and Community Development provide matching funds required by grantors.

An audit is currently underway and will be completed in the fall of 2016. NRPC has had no audit findings in recent years and as such is considered a 'low risk' grantee by federal agencies. Staffing in FY 16 included 8 employees: the Executive Director, Assistant Director, Senior Planners (2), Regional Planners (2), GIS Technician and Office Administrator. Six of the eight employees have been with NRPC for over thirteen years.

