

WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION

Windham Regional Commission Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Report

Celebrating our 51st year, the Windham Regional Commission (WRC) is an important resource to the 23 towns of Windham County, the towns of Readsboro, Searsburg and Winhall in Bennington County, and the town of Weston in Windsor County. Our mission is to assist towns in Southeastern Vermont to provide effective local government and work cooperatively with them to address regional issues. Towns choose to be members of the WRC.

Each town's selectboard determines who will represent the town on the WRC. Each member town can appoint two commissioners who represent that town's interest in regional affairs. The exception is Somerset, where the single commissioner is appointed by the Governor. Additionally, the WRC has up to ten citizen interest commissioners who represent other regional interests such as business and industry, healthy communities, agriculture, natural resources, energy, and housing. The WRC is organized around a strong committee structure. These committees are where most of the work gets done and the decisions made. Commissioners serve on these committees and make the decisions. The WRC has 10 highly-qualified staff with more than 80 years of combined professional experience who provide support to the committees, and execute the Commission's program of work.

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:

- ◆ Provided assistance to 22 towns with plans, zoning, updating flood hazard area regulations, and community revitalization. This included extensive work with 11 towns, in 12 different projects, on updating town plans, zoning bylaws, and subdivision regulations under municipal planning grants and municipal services contracts, as well providing general technical assistance with Chapter 117 processes and requirements. Work with towns on updating town plans included addressing the relatively recent Economic Development and the newer Flood Resilience Plan requirements.
- ◆ Conducted 6 municipal consultation meetings involving town Planning Commissions and Selectboards, and provided individualized town-level "planning 101" training for Planning Commissions and interested others (e.g., Selectboard and ZBA/DRB members) in 5 towns.
- ◆ Assisted 8 towns in developing and submitting Municipal Planning Grant applications (5 were

funded) for plan and zoning updates and a town-wide natural resources inventory.

- ◆ Coordinated a regional Zoning Administrators (ZA)/Floodplain Administrators (FA) brown bag lunch meeting; attendees included ZAs/FAs and Selectboard members from 8+ towns, all of whom enthusiastically endorsed a continuing meeting series on a quarterly or semi-annual basis.
- ◆ Continued discussion among towns about how they might share services or functions, and whether or not they felt the WRC could play a helpful role, with the goal of potentially reducing costs to towns, reducing administrative burdens, and obtaining more value and quality of service for public dollars spent. Created a list-serv to facilitate communications among towns about the topic.

Regional Planning

RPC's 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 WRC completed its two-year comprehensive regional plan update and adopted the new plan in September, 2014. This highly public process benefited from the use of a website dedicated to presenting plan drafts and collecting public comment, in addition to face to face public meetings throughout the region and other traditional public engagement methods. Comments were also solicited from multiple state agencies and subject area experts.
- ◆ During this reporting period the WRC reviewed 34 Act 250 applications and 13 Section 248 applications. The latter were mainly solar projects. Act 250 applications included those related to Haystack/Hermitage Resort, Mount Snow, an affordable housing project, a stone quarry, and a self-storage facility.

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.

- ◆ WRC was fortunate this year to receive from EPA an additional \$400,000 for its Brownfield assessment program and \$350,000 to recapitalize its Brownfields clean up revolving loan fund. From the program's inception in 2000 it has brought in a total of \$4.4 million dollars in federal Brownfields funds to the region for assessment and cleanup of Brownfields sites.
- ◆ Attended National Brownfields Conference in Chicago—August 31 to September 4th and accepted a Brownfield Phoenix Award on behalf of Algiers Village Redevelopment project. During the past year the WRC Brownfields program has worked on the following sites:

SITE	TOWN/ VILLAGE	BROWNFIELDS WORK	REUSE PLAN
Roberston Papermill	Village of Bellows Falls	Continue to assist Town and BFADC on Brownfield issues related to redevelopment. Participated as part of the Vermont's BERA team this site. Provided assessment funds for historic and archeological assessment (106).	Purchased by Bellows Falls Area Development Corp (BFADC) for Redevelopment.
Former Planet Gas	Brattleboro	WRC RLF Grant for cleanup of site.	Cleanup was completed for the Brattleboro Area Farmers Market owned site. The site was landscaped and developed for parking.
Estey Organ - Root	Brattleboro	Corrective Action Planning (CAP) and WRC Brownfields RLF Loan	Redeveloped by owner for light industrial/storage. Clean up will begin in FY 17
Estey Organ – 108-130 Birge Street	Brattleboro	WRC Brownfields RLF Loan	Redevelopment to improve parking. Clean up will begin in FY 17.
Barnboard	Wilmington	WRC Brownfields RLF Grant and Loan	Cleanup completed for Deerfield Valley Transit Association new bus facility.
Tri-State Auto	Brattleboro	WRC Brownfields RLF Grant and Loan	A loan/grant to New England Youth Theater; partial cleanup of their site completed.
Chemco/ Liberty Mill	Bellows Falls	Phase II ESA	When work began on this site BFADC was working with Windham County Sherriff Department for redevelopment as a Justice Center (dispatch, education, etc.). The Sherriff decided not to pursue the site; currently the site remains empty with additional Phase II testing needed.
Arch Street	Brattleboro	Phase II and CAP	Brattleboro Museum and Art Center to redevelop the building with possible arts related business, housing, and education space.
Next Stage Theatre	Putney	Clean up grant	Asbestos cleanup complete for performing arts center.
Twin Valley High School	Wilmington	Phase I ESA	Community considering purchasing the former High School for community center.

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.

- ◆ Participated on Southeastern Economic Development Strategies (SeVEDS) Board and the Windham Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee.
- ◆ Continuing to collaborate with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC) in assisting the State of Vermont with the administration of the Windham County Economic Development Program, funding for which is provided through the settlement agreement between the state and Entergy Vermont Yankee.
- ◆ Participated in the work of the bi-regional (Windham and Bennington) Southern Vermont Economic Development Zone created by the legislature in its 2015 session and the production of its report and recommendations.
- ◆ Began participation in the USDA-funded Rural Community Development Initiative being led by the BDCC to develop regional capacity to support economic development across Windham and Bennington counties. The goal of the effort is to improve coordination by and between public and private sector partners concerning economic development initiatives such as workforce training, retention, recruitment, and sustainable business investment.
- ◆ Provided data and analysis for the United Way of Windham County's community indicators.
- ◆ Worked with Windham Region Working Forests Workgroup on ways to educate the public about the importance of forestry in the regional economy. As part of this work an Art exhibit of paintings called *Shedding Light on the Working Forest* at Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) was held. Organized and participated as moderator in panel discussion at BMAC titled: *Turing Local Wood into Local Good*.
- ◆ Assisted the Town of Whitingham on an arts/infrastructure project for Jacksonville.
- ◆ Assisted the Vermont Department of Health and the Windham County Prevention Coalition to update *A Primer on Planning for Prevention* to make it relevant to the Windham Region.
- ◆ Continued to assist Windham Region communities with village center and downtown applications.
- ◆ Began working with Green Economy Innovation Hub on [Living Communities Challenge](#) program.
- ◆ Provided resource assistance to Vermont Council on Rural Development Community Visit in Vernon.

Transportation Planning

Through contract with the VTTrans, 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** – WRC held 10 TAC meetings. Attendance ranged from 4-8 TAC members per meeting, a 5-100% participation rate.
- ◆ **TAC Outcomes**
 - ◆ Continued to host the Aesthetic Evaluation Committee organized to advise VTrans and contractors on the aesthetic elements of new I-91 Bridge 9 over Vermont Route 30/West River.
 - ◆ Hosted Jim Ryan of ANR to discuss the provisions of the Vermont Clean Water Initiative and the Municipal Roads General Permit. This meeting was recorded for broadcast by Brattleboro Cable Television and posted to the WRC website for on-demand viewing.
 - ◆ Hosted Pam Thurber of VTrans to discuss the funding, inventory, maintenance and management of bridges.
 - ◆ Hosted a VTrans presentation on the Vermont Local Roads program.
- ◆ **Outreach**
 - ◆ Hosted a November 2015 Transportation Board Forum in Brattleboro; organized September 2015 Hearing on the inclusion of Readsboro in Route 100 Scenic Byway
 - ◆ Participated in 5 Connecticut River Transit/Deerfield Valley Transit Association Board Meetings.
 - ◆ Participated in 2 Elderly & Disabled Meetings
 - ◆ Met with the U.S. Department of Energy and the Vermont Public Service Department to discuss the movement of spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste from Vermont Yankee.
- ◆ **Data collection**
 - ◆ 7 bridge and culvert inventories (Halifax, Newfane, Putney, Rockingham, Townshend, Wardsboro, Weston).
 - ◆ 27 pedestrian counts.
 - ◆ 20 traffic counts.
 - ◆ 5 sign inventories
 - ◆ 2 parking inventories

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

- ◆ The Regional Transportation Plan was adopted in June 2013 and is integrated into the Regional Plan.
- ◆ WRC attended public meeting for Rockingham I-91 bridge reconstruction project.
- ◆ Reviewed the proposals for the Federal Land Access Program and the Methods and Tools for Transportation Resilience Planning.
- ◆ Through our Project Review Committee, WRC reviewed and/or provided comments on 4 Act 250 applications with substantial transportation elements: Denison Quarry, Mount Snow Resort, Hermitage Resort, and Snow Vidda helipad.
- ◆ Serving on the Municipal Roads General Permit Core Team.

Objective #3 - Providing Transportation Planning Support to Municipalities

Short-range providing direct assistance to municipalities is 42% of NRPC's transportation budget. A large portion of the coordination activities include municipal assistance. Municipal projects included:

- ◆ Wrote or provided significant technical assistance for 10 transportation-related grant applications for municipalities, including Better Roads Program, Transportation Alternatives, Strong Communities/Better Connections, and Bicycle and Pedestrian grant applications. Completed the Route 30 Transit Feasibility Study.
- ◆ Developed the scope of work for and kicked off the Route 30 Gateway Mini Corridor Study for the Town of Brattleboro which is examining the evolving land uses in the vicinity of the I-91 bridge over Route 30 and the West River, and opportunities for improved bicycle and pedestrian use.
- ◆ Other examples include facilitating discussion among the Town of Rockingham, New England Central Railroad and VTrans about subsidence concerns above railroad tunnel; reducing the speed limit on Route 9 in the vicinity of Marlboro Elementary School; and assisting multiple towns with development and review of requests for proposals related to transportation infrastructure work.

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 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. RPC's 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 WRC develops local hazard mitigation plans for our towns, with the exception of Brattleboro which created its own. Of our 27 towns, 19 (70%) have hazard mitigation plans either adopted or under review. Twenty-five of the 27 (93%) currently have updated local emergency operations plans in place.
- ◆ WRC worked with FEMA and the Vermont Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS) on the development of a Vermont Local Hazard Mitigation Plan template outline to expedite the review of the towns' plans.
- ◆ The WRC staffs the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC-6). This year it made a big push to improve the collection and organization of Tier II hazardous materials reports from local businesses and other entities, as well as improving access to this information by dispatch and fire departments. LEPC membership increased as a result. Other LEPC-6 topics covered included US Army Corps of Engineers dam failure response and evacuation planning; U.S. EPA Tier II training workshop; Northeast K9 Search and Rescue demonstration; a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Critical Facility Anti-Terrorism Standards presentation; and a site visit with Green Mountain Railroad. WRC staff and the LEPC-6 chair together attended the New Hampshire Hazmat Conference.
- ◆ In conjunction with partners from the University of Massachusetts, WRC developed a *Municipal Guidance for Flood Emergencies* document specific for Vermont towns. This document details important steps and considerations to be made before a flooding event, during response, and in recovery. It will soon be available electronically and in hard copy.
- ◆ The WRC serves as the local liaison to communicate damage to and needs of towns to the State during disasters. WRC staff, in conjunction with the regional ANR River Management

Engineers and VTrans Districts 1 and 2, created a damage reporting/situational awareness protocol that will expedite the gathering of accurate information from towns with the goal of minimizing duplicate requests for information.

- ◆ WRC developed revised model floodplain bylaws which incorporate the new state river corridor requirements for our towns with or without zoning.
- ◆ WRC developed an Evacuation Plan template for use by our towns. DEMHS will be adding this as a new appendix in the 2017 LEOP.
- ◆ Two WRC staff participated in the Vigilant Guard state-wide exercise. They assumed roles within the State Emergency Operations Center.

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.

- ◆ WRC GIS staff provided support to the Transportation Planning Initiative for all data collection activities under Objective #1, which included culvert inventories, sign inventories, parking inventories, traffic counts, park and ride counts, and bike/ped counts.
- ◆ Town plan maps were updated for Dover, Putney, Westminster, Whitingham, and Winhall. Zoning map updates were done for Dummerston and Stratton.
- ◆ Assisted the Village Center renewal process for six towns by updating village center maps of Jamaica, Algiers, Putney, Saxtons River, Readsboro, and Weston. In addition, the downtown district map for Bellows Falls was updated.
- ◆ WRC continues to further efforts to improve the status of digital parcel data in the region. We provided advice to two towns on their parcel data. We also gathered updated data from towns, processed the data to match state guidelines, provided the data to VCGI for public distribution, and posted KML files on WRC's web site for access to those with no GIS capabilities.
- ◆ Began work with Vermont Land Trust on a Climate-Resilient Biodiversity Conservation Planning project for the West and Deerfield River Watersheds.
- ◆ Provided mapping assistance to the Guilford, Marlboro, Rockingham, and Westminster Conservation Commissions.
- ◆ Gave two presentations at the Vermont Geospatial Forum, one on Trail Mapping and one on using Collector for ArcGIS software.

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 WRC has partnered with local and regional organizations to create the Windham Wood Heat Initiative, a program designed to assist public schools and municipalities in Windham County transition their buildings to wood heat. The program is working with 12 public schools and 6 municipalities (on 12 town-owned buildings) to assess the feasibility of installing wood boilers in their buildings as well as providing assistance to two schools that have wood boilers installed. The funding for this \$1.6 million project is through the Clean Energy Development

Fund (CEDF) which was made possible through the state's settlement agreement with Entergy Vermont Yankee.

- ◆ WRC was granted \$400,000 through the CEDF to create the Windham County Renewable Energy Program, through which the WRC will provide grants for smaller scale renewable energy generation projects. The design of the program got underway in FY 2016 and grant applications will be solicited beginning November, 2016.
- ◆ WRC served as a communication conduit to the legislature and Governor's administration for its 12 towns that contain TransCanada power generation facilities, lakes, lands, recreational facilities, and flowage rights. These holdings total more than 20,000 acres within the region, and the sale of the TransCanada facilities could have wide ranging fiscal, economic development, and ecological impacts on these 12 towns.
- ◆ WRC continued its engagement in the Public Service Board docket for Entergy Vermont Yankee's application for a second spent fuel storage facility.

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.

- ◆ Conducted several public outreach meetings throughout the region to explain the Vermont Clean Water Initiative with a particular emphasis on the responsibilities of towns. A video of a public forum is [available](#).
- ◆ The Saxtons River Watershed Collaborative formed in the spring of 2015 as a partnership to creatively, collaboratively, and actively explore new ways of addressing flood resiliency. With funding and support from the High Meadows Fund, the 18-month project takes a watershed-scale approach to resiliency through a multi-faceted partnership that integrates conservation, education, and policy to protect public safety and infrastructure while helping to protect our water resources. The partners in the collaborative are the Windham Regional Commission (WRC), four towns (Windham, Grafton, Rockingham, and Westminster), the Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District (WGNRCD), the Vermont River Conservancy (VRC), the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Grafton Elementary School and the Windham Foundation.
- ◆ Assisted ANR with development and public roll out of the Basin 11/13 Tactical Basin Plan.
- ◆ Participated in Deerfield Headwaters Committee with ANR, Trout Unlimited, Franklin Regional Council of Governments (MA), Franklin Land Trust (MA), and others pursuing and supporting efforts to protect and restore water quality and habitat in Deerfield River headwaters.
- ◆ Secured 3 Ecosystem Restoration Program grants for: Stream Geomorphic Assessment and Corridor Plan for the North River in Halifax and Whitingham; Green River Floodplain Attenuation in Guilford; and Adams Brook Restoration (of post-Irene bed armoring) in Newfane.
- ◆ Participated in various collaborative efforts, including FERC relicensing of hydro projects on the Connecticut River, Creating Resilient Communities (focused on Deerfield River watershed in MA and VT, producing scalable, widely applicable products); Stratton Water Quality Remediation Plan; and Connecticut River Streambank Erosion Committee (VT, NH, and MA).
- ◆ Facilitated communication/collaboration among ANR, Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District, Connecticut River Watershed Council, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Ver-

mont River Conservancy, landowners, town officials, and citizens to clean up, stabilize, and conserve the site of an Irene-damaged house on the Green River.

Special Projects

- ◆ Continued collaboration with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, and our counterparts in NH and MA, to address the economic impacts of the closure of Vermont Yankee. This included the development and release of a report prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute that explores the impacts that income lost from the closure of Vermont Yankee will have throughout the economy. We also brought together key economic development stakeholders from each of the three states to connect and generate discussion on how we could mitigate these losses and advance our shared economy. This convening was supported by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (U.S. EDA) and the National Association of Development Organizations. This group also made successful application to the U.S. EDA through a grant initiated by the BDCC to support its business incubator and accelerator projects, for support to explore common ground in our respective economic development strategies, opportunities for collaboration, and lessons learned from other nuclear host regions.
- ◆ Met with staff of Vermont's federal delegation in D.C. to make the case for the substantive inclusion of host communities in the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's policymaking process that is creating nuclear power plant decommissioning policy, as well as the U.S. Department of Energy's consideration of a consent-based spent fuel and high-level radioactive waste siting initiative.
- ◆ Actively engaged as a member of the Vermont Nuclear Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel, which was created by the legislature to advise state agencies, the Governor, the Legislature and others about matters related to the decommissioning of Vermont Yankee.

Administration and Funding

Virtually all of the WRC's revenue sources are tied to contracts with scopes of work, guidelines and/or performance measures. This means that the WRC has limited control over 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 WRC-identified needs in the region. Town assessments, and the funding received through the WRC's performance contract with the state, are also necessary to provide matching funds required by grantors. The grants we receive enable us to work with our towns on areas such as transportation, emergency planning, community development, Brownfields redevelopment, energy, and natural resources. Revenue from virtually all federal and state grantors requires matching funds, and typically non-federal matching funds. Required match ranges from 10 percent (Transportation Planning Initiative) to 50 percent (Emergency Management Planning Grant).

The WRC has a single audit on an annual basis. For FY 2015, as in past years, there were no significant findings.

The WRC has adopted a [Municipal Services Policy](#) that is intended to provide guidance for the Commission in the delivery of professional services to member municipalities. It describes technical assistance available to member towns as part of the commission's core activities, and the opportunities for expanded service when funded as a special project.

