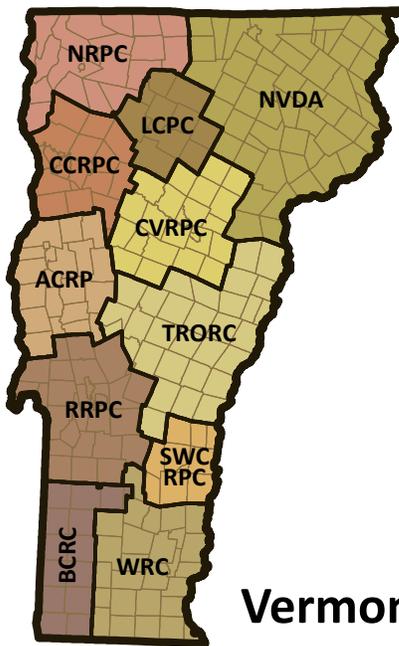
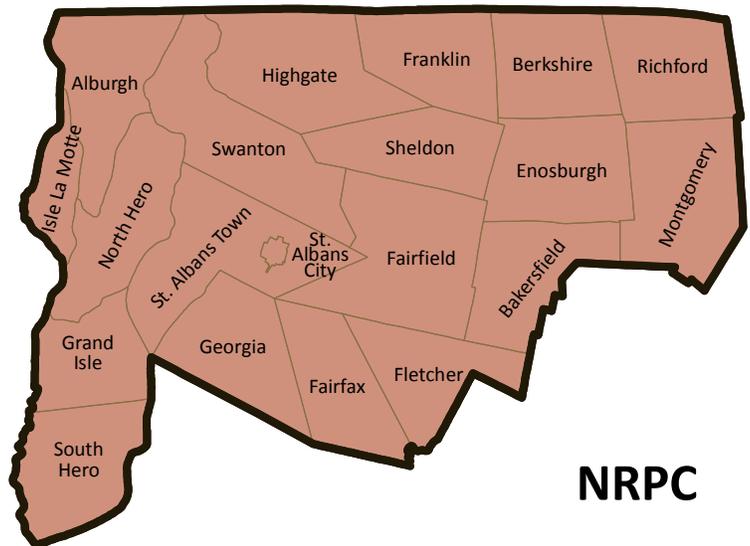


NORTHWEST REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2015



Vermont



NRPC

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NORTHWEST REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

Northwest Regional Planning Commission Fiscal Year 2015 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:

- ☞ Provided Berkshire, Highgate and Enosburgh with advice and assistance regarding ongoing zoning violations.
- ☞ Assisted Bakersfield, Highgate, North Hero, Swanton, Berkshire and South Hero with updates to their municipal plans, including the addition of a new flood resiliency language as required by statute.
- ☞ Assisted the towns of Highgate and Grand Isle in developing draft Capital Improvement Plans.
- ☞ Completed a bylaw review for the Town of Sheldon and contracted with them to complete a bylaw update focusing on clarifying vague language.
- ☞ Drafted amendments to municipal plans for Fairfield and Richford to comply with new state requirements for the designated village center program. Also assisted both municipalities in their renewal applications for designated village centers.
- ☞ Completed enhanced consultations for the Towns of Berkshire, Bakersfield, Highgate, North Hero, South Hero, and Swanton.

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 new 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.

Over 25 public meetings were held to gather input about priorities in economic development, public health, complete streets and disaster resilience. The community goals and priorities were used to rank implementation projects funded through the Healthy People, Strong Communities Program. Fourteen implementation projects totaling \$212,000 were funded.

NRPC reviews state permit applications to ensure proposed projects conform with the regional plan. The NRPC Policy and Project Review Committee reviewed five Section 248 and two Act 250 major applications for conformance with the regional plan. The committee determined all proposed projects conformed with the plan but in some cases offered minor 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 FY15, the following projects were either finished or started:

Assessment Projects

- ☞ 43 Lake Street, St. Albans City. 43 Lake Street is the site of the former Loyal Order of the Moose Lodge. St. Albans City currently owns the site, which is adjacent to their City Center Project that includes a new State Office Building and a Parking Garage. The City plans to develop a hotel on the property. NRPC funded a Supplemental Phase 2 Assessment looking at vapor intrusion potential. The assessment is complete and permitting for the new hotel has begun.
- ☞ 111, 113 Main Street, Richford. The 111, 113 Main Street property (.42 acres) is owned by the Richford Economic Advancement Corporation. In preparation for the demolition of the building located there, NRPC funded supplemental building material sampling for asbestos. NRPC also funded the preparation of a Corrective Action Plan/Analysis of Brownfields Cleanup Alternatives and the closeout of the monitoring wells that were installed for site investigation.

Cleanup Projects

- ☞ 113 Main Street, Richford. NRPC granted the Richford Economic Advancement Corporation \$120,000 for overall clean up and soil disposal. Also included in the project was an overlook and access to the Missisquoi River and recreation features near the river.

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 economic development district in northern Vermont with a grant from the Economic Development Administration received in FY14. This project builds upon previous efforts to retain the district, including five years of work managing the minimum district requirements in partnership with the RDCs and RPCs in the six northern counties. A new advisory Board has been formed and work has begun on the creation of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.
- ✧ Funded the Healthy Roots coordinator position through our HUD Sustainable Communities grant. The coordinator worked with local partners to help establish a local food distribution network while helping to build demand for locally produced foods through education, targeted marketing, improved distribution and outreach.
- ✧ Partner in organizing In Good Taste, a local food event that has over 500 attendees.
- ✧ Partnered with the State of Vermont, Enosburg Falls and Enosburgh Town on the Vermont Economic Resiliency Initiative. This effort evaluates where flooding risk intersects with the communities economic activity and infrastructure. The overall goal to develop implementation strategies that both protect businesses and infrastructure and help them recovery more quickly after a disaster.
- ✧ Funded “Business Matters in the Islands” featuring two semesters of workforce classes (in spring and fall 2014), a monthly breakfast meeting (monthly from 2014 through May 2015), and an Islands Summit in February 2015 that attracted 55 people who discussed what initiatives are important to Islanders.

Transportation Planning

Through 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 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.

- ✧ Hosted a tour and meeting with the House Transportation Committee, VTrans staff and local officials in St. Albans. The event highlighted successful transportation projects in the area.
- ✧ Completed a Complete Streets Implementation Table for the regional plan and as a guide for local officials to use during project evaluation.
- ✧ The NRPC executive director served as the Chair of the Chittenden County Transportation Authority board and participated in the hiring of a new General Manager, union negotiations, organizational development and other activities of the leadership committee.
- ✧ Continued to promote the adoption of the 2013 Town Road and Bridge Standards to assist towns with increased match eligibility under the Emergency Relief Assistance Fund rules.
- ✧ Completed culvert inventories for Enosburgh, Grand Isle, North Hero and Swanton.
- ✧ Conducted five traffic counts in Franklin, Saint Albans Town and Highgate to support town and regional planning efforts.
- ✧ Began developing a capital budget and program for the Town of Grand Isle focusing on transportation assets.

- Facilitated public meetings and provided mapping services for the Town of Fairfax in a feasibility study that assessed alternatives to improve pedestrian transportation between two village growth centers within the Town of Fairfax, north and south of the Lamoille River.
- Prepared five successful Better Backroads Category A Erosion Inventory grant applications.

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 assisted as needed in special circumstances like Tropical Storm Irene and other declared disasters. Twenty-two (96%) of municipalities in the region currently have an updated local emergency operations plan. Ten municipalities (43%) of municipalities in the region currently have a local hazard mitigation plan either adopted or under review.

- Developed a regional all hazards risk assessment that formed the basis of the resiliency section of the regional plan.
- 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 State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) following severe weather events.
- Provided direct staff support for the City of Saint Albans Emergency Operations Center during a prolonged frozen water main break that impacted the Northwest Medical Center and the City's water storage tank.
- Served in the State Emergency Operations Center during the Vermont Yankee graded exercise. The exercise simulated a series of simultaneous catastrophic events, testing statewide capacity to communicate, respond to, and manage such an event.
- 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.
- Mapped potential propane event evacuation routes for the Grand Isle Mutual Aid Association.

Geographic Information System Services

In addition to enhancing the RPC work, RPC's 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.

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.
- Worked on a pilot project, along with three other RPCs, to draft regional energy plans focused on achieving the state goal of 90% renewable energy usage in Vermont by 2050. The project includes energy demand and generation modeling and mapping of areas with renewable generation potential in the region.

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.

- Participated in the legislative effort surrounding 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.
- Completed low-impact development and green stormwater infrastructure assessments for the towns of St Albans, Highgate and Swanton. The assessment identified implementation barriers and gaps in plans and regulations and included recommended amendments.
- Assisted the ANR Watershed Coordinator with Plan development for Basin 7 (Northern Lake Champlain).
- 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.
- The Towns and City of St Albans have partnered with NRPC to manage and implement their public education and outreach components of their MS4 permit. This is resulting in development of outreach materials on impacts of stormwater and overall water quality.

Special Projects

- The Healthy People, Strong Communities project aims to support job growth and inspire a happy, healthy and prosperous lifestyle for this generation and the next. HPSC is a partnership of over 20 regional organizations developing strategies in Community Health & Economic

Development which formed the basis of the Healthy People, Strong Communities Regional Grants program and the updated regional plan. Fourteen mini-grants were awarded to local and regional organizations to help implement the strategies. The project was funded by a \$480,000 grant from the US Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities program.

- ✎ In partnership with VFPR and seven regional planning commissions, NRPC developed a plan for the management of our forest resources at the regional or landscape-level. This Forest Stewardship plan identifies how the forests are valued in the Region and what measures can be taken to ensure that the forests will be maintained in a healthy state in order to “keep forests as forest.”
- ✎ 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.

NRPC maintains Board designated reserve funds to cover operating shortfalls, non-federal match required for several contracts and long-term and equipment reserves. The Commission maintains a three-year plan for equipment and software upgrades and replacement. A new Board designated reserve fund has been established to provide for long term building repairs.

The FY 15 NRPC budget was approximately \$1.3 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. 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 the funding passed through to NRPC under a performance contract with the Department of Housing and Community Development provide matching funds required by grantors.

NRPC has had no audit findings in recent years and as such is considered a ‘low risk’ grantee by federal agencies. Staffing in FY 15 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 twelve years.

