

Bennington County Regional Commission

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Friday - April 28, 2023
8:30 AM
Meeting Conducted via ZOOM**

In attendance: Cinda Morse, Shelia Kearns, Dan Monks, Nck Zaiac, James Salerno, Dimitri Garder, Janet Hurley (staff), Bill Colvin (staff)

The meeting was called to order at 8:33am.

Morse moved approval of the minutes of the Feburay 24, 2023 Executive Committee Meeting. Seconded by Kearns. Approved with Garder abstaining.

Annual Meeting - Executive Committee Nominations

Colvin told the Committee the BCRC Annual Meeting will take place on Thursday, May 18th at the Bennington Museum. It will begin with a social hour catered by Pangaea at 4:30pm with the business meeting commencing at 5:15pm. Guest speaker will be Dr. Jude Smith Rachele, founder of Abundant Sun, a justice, equity, diversity and inclusion consulting and training firm with offices in the UK, Portugal and Vermont. The Bongartz Award will be presented to Jim Sullivan.

The Executive Committee discussed a proposed slate of officers to be voted on by ballot with results announced at the Annual Meeting. Following discussion of roles and reposnibilities it was decided the proposed slate of officers will be:

Nick Zaiac – Chair
Dan Monks – Vice Chair
James Saerno – Treasurer
Sheila Kearns – Secretary.

Colvin and the Executive Committee members thanked Cinda Morse for her years of service on the Execuitve Committee and as Treaurer.

A meeting of the BCRC Economic Deveopment Committee (former BCIC Board) will be held to determine its two appointees to the Executive Committee.

Colvin reported that Gordan Black has volunteered to serve on the Executive Committee. It was agreed that John Lavecchia, Jr. would be the Chair appointee following the Annual Meeting.

Staffing Update

Allison Strohl is leaving BCRC and relocating to Minnesota to be closer to family. We have advertised the position for a person to spend approximately half-time overseeing the Emergency Management Program and half-time supporting general land use planning and other special projects. The position has been posted.

Act 250/Section 248

Colvin and Hurley updated the Executive Committee on three projects.

Green Mountain Reserve/Benson Road: This application was approved and it has been appealed. BCRC comments were addressed in the findings, but the decision remains inconsistent with BCRC testimony. The decision to approve the project contains language suggesting that it should not be used to establish precedent for commercial development of this type in rural areas of the region. Previously, the BCRC through the Executive Committee determined that the best course of action is to provide testimony during the appeal process only as requested and work on an amendment to the Regional Plan to specifically address this type of “resort” development in the Plan’s Rural land use district. This permit has now been appealed.

Shaftsbury Solar: Still in the advanced notice of intent period, this potential project has generated much discussion and a fair amount of controversy. As currently envisioned this 20MW project would be tied for the largest in Vermont with an existing array in Ludlow. Neighbors and Shaftsbury community members have rallied opposition to the project even in advance of a formal filing. Stop Shaftsbury Solar is well organized, and representatives have attended numerous public meetings. A meeting to allow for community input on the project was hosted by the Shaftsbury Planning Commission at Shaftsbury Elementary School on February 8th. Over 150 people attended in-person or remotely. The Shaftsbury Planning Commission reached out to BCRC requesting a proposal for BCRC to assist with the development of an enhanced energy section for the Shaftsbury Town Plan. The Shaftsbury Select Board approved our proposal and we have initiated this work with the town. The project development team is planning an open house for the community on May 2nd to provide additional information in several categories such as aesthetics, traffic, project engineering and design, natural resources, and others.

Manchester Cell Tower: A proposal by AT&T to construct a cell tower on property owned by Don Dorr just south of Depot Street in Manchester Center is generating a lot of attention. An advance notice has been filed with the Vermont Public Service Commission. A public meeting to discuss the project is scheduled for Tuesday, May 2nd in Manchester.

Program Updates: Q&A Time with Bill & Janet

Community and Economic Development

- April Career Month: April Career Month activities are back in full swing and back in person following a pause and then move to virtual platforms during the pandemic. Organized by BCRC’s Workforce and Education Committee, this year includes over twenty events including a number of open houses, class sit-ins and the return of the Financial Reality Fair. Once again, the

Bennington Banner has been a terrific partner in the endeavor hosting op-eds by regional businesses and attending and writing about several events.

- Putnam Phase 2: Planning for the next phase of the Putnam Block Redevelopment is picking up steam as M&S Development has completed an initial feasibility study and a draft investor pitch deck. Investors and other funding will be sought through the fall and winter with the goal of lining up all financing by summer 2023. BCRC continues to support the effort and has a new pre-development services agreement for FY23.
- Southern Vermont College Redevelopment: Jonathan and Bill met with a representative of the Alfred Weissman Real Estate (AWRE) the development group hoping to attain the former Southern Vermont College campus from Southwestern Vermont Healthcare and to convert it into a high-end resort. AWRE has over fifty years experience developing hospitality and commercial properties, primarily in the Northeast. The representative noted the work BCRC did on the Everett Reuse Study and Trails Report. BCRC will continue to serve as a resource to the developers assisting them with state, local and regional connections and weighing in on permitting issues.
- Dorset Housing Study: BCRC has completed work on the Dorset Housing Study and presented its findings to the Dorset Select Board at its February 21st meeting. The study examines creative public/private partnerships where municipalities have incentivized the development of housing in communities like Dorset. To extend this work, the voters in Dorset supported the creation of a town housing committee at its Town Meeting in March. BCRC hopes to support the town in that endeavor.
- Armory Reuse Study: BCRC has completed its work on the Armory Reuse Study in Bennington. Unfortunately, just as this work was concluding the Vermont National Guard announced that it would not be proceeding with a new readiness center in Bennington due to low recruitment numbers.
- Pownal Commercial Siting Criteria Study: A delayed round of municipal planning grant (MPG) funding is supporting this project in which BCRC will work with the Town of Pownal to develop siting criteria and identify potential sites for commercial and industrial uses in the community. We are reviewing source material and recent business development activities within Pownal – including the redevelopment of highly-visible assets within Pownal Center Village and along Route 7 – to refine our list of potential interviews beyond the Planning Commission and Select Board. A list of forty-seven potential sites has been presented to the Planning Commission which will be narrowed to a list of about twenty priority sites over the course of the project.
- Community Recovery & Revitalization Program (CRRP): CRRP grants are available to for-profit, nonprofit, and municipal applicants. The funding is intended for projects making capital improvements or capital expansions

that spur economic recovery and revitalization in communities across the state. Eligible projects may include those that assist industries most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic such as arts and entertainment, hospitality, agriculture, and educational services. The funding is also available for capital expenditures that support childcare and affordable housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income households, and to establish or improve municipal water and wastewater systems to build housing or create jobs through business creation and expansion. Projects must show a COVID impact. In the first round three awards were made to three Bennington County entities – \$603,776 to the Town of Manchester for a sewer line extension and water system upgrades, \$500,000 to Hale Resources for the creation of housing at the former Benn High building and \$36,944 to Bennington Museum for upgrades to its roof and HVAC system. Bill attended a Vermont Economic Progress Council meeting in March to support Dorset’s application for water system upgrades and it was announced this week that Dorset received \$1,000,000 toward that project from the CRRP.

- Southern Vermont Economic Development District Planning: Work on a submission to the United States Economic Development Administration (EDA) to establish a formal Economic Development District across Southern Vermont (Bennington and Windham counties) is nearing completion. Legal work for the formation of the entity, which will help guide revisions to and implementation of the *Southern Vermont Economic Development Strategy* is complete. BCRC staff and those from our Windham County partners spent the fall months visiting municipalities seeking letters of support as well as soliciting letters from regional businesses, and institutions. BCRC is partnering with Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and Windham Regional Commission on this effort.
- Southern Vermont Economy Summit: The 6th annual Southern Vermont Economy Summit set to take place in Wilmington on May 23, 2023. The theme of the 2023 Southern Vermont Economy Summit is “Forging our Future”.

Planning Programs

- Regional Planning: The regional plan is coming due for an update in 2025. The current regional plan was adopted in 2015 with minor revisions and graphic improvements to the previous plan. Then in 2017, the regional energy plan was adopted, which reset the 8-year clock on plan expiration. Janet Hurley met with our counterparts at Windham Regional Commission about their effort to develop a web-based plan begun last year and anticipated for adoption in 2024. Windham planners have agreed to present their work and lessons learned at BCRC’s July commission meeting. Janet asked for input from the Executive Committee regarding the possibility of a move to a web-based plan. Garder was supportive and noted this was exactly the type of project that could make a region stand out. Zaiac was

supportive and suggested emphasis be given to making the plan digestible and that BCRC work to secure a web design consultant to assist. Kearns and Garder agreed to meet privately to discuss ideas related to this project and report back to BCRC staff.

- Municipal Planning: Work is continuing on nine municipal land use regulations as part of the bylaw modernization grant (BMG) program. This work is set to wrap up by the end of 2023 and is well under way with revisions actively being pursued in four municipalities (Manchester Village, Sandgate, Shaftsbury, Stamford), revisions being reviewed by three others (Rupert, Peru, Landgrove), and monitoring of adoption of basic provisions that will remove housing barriers in two villages (Old Bennington, North Bennington). BCRC is also monitoring adoption of a revised zoning ordinance for Arlington, which was accomplished separately under Municipal Planning Grant (MPG) funds. BCRC is assisting Sunderland in the development of an application for Village Center designation for the section of the community along Route 7A near the access road to Equinox Mountain. Previously, BCRC assisted Stamford in gaining a village center designation as a precursor to the BMG bylaws work.
- BCRC assisted four communities with new MPG applications:
 - Woodford – relatively simple town plan update, BCRC expected to do all of the work. – **Not Awarded**. BCRC will still do this work with Woodford. The town has agreed to pay BCRC for a portion of its work.
 - Bennington – phase one of a town plan update focusing on public outreach, development of themes, especially around DEI. BCRC has submitted a proposal to assist with this work. - **Awarded**
 - Pownal – planning and conceptual design for a “town green” or park adjacent to the new town hall, with BCRC potentially coordinating the public outreach and report development. - **Awarded**
 - Manchester - a new town plan focusing on updated demographic and housing data, public outreach, and an action-oriented structure. BCRC is optimally positioned to function as the planning consultant on the effort. – **Awarded**. It is uncertain if Manchester is going to accept the MPG and move forward with the project.

In addition to these grant funded efforts, BCRC has offered planning and zoning assistance to Manchester and Manchester Village on an hourly contractual basis until staff vacancies are filled. Manchester has authorized BCRC to prepare zoning revisions under this agreement.

- Janet Hurley conducted the annual land use and planning training for municipal officials on April 13th in Sunderland. There were 14 participants, 12 in-person and 2 via Zoom representing nine municipalities. So far we have received positive feedback from participants, as well as suggestions for future trainings - including leaving more time for questions and discussion,

breaking up the topic matter between multiple trainings, or allocating twice the amount of time under a brown bag lunch structure.

- Energy: The BCRC has been coordinating work statewide, with the Public Service Department, on updates to energy data, electricity generation modeling, and local and regional energy plan guidelines. Callie Fishburn has been appointed to a team of three energy planners statewide to coordinate directly with BGS, on behalf of all the RPCs, on the roll out of the program. Applications are live for the \$4,000 mini-grants for public education efforts and regional municipalities have been applying for funding.

In addition to this work, as noted above, BCRC has entered into an agreement with Shaftsbury to develop an enhanced energy plan. Callie Fishburn, Samantha Page, and Janet Hurley will spearhead this work with Shaftsbury.

- Environmental: BCRC applied to the EPA for a \$500,000 Brownfields assessment grant. If funded this award would be good for a period of three years. We have completely exhausted our previous (2017 – extended twice due to Covid) \$300,000 EPA assessment grant, as well as \$99,000 in additional State of Vermont assessment money made available last year. Priority projects listed in the grant included All Service Citgo, Bradford Mill and Lauzon Machine in Bennington, and Sweeney Sawmill and 301 Depot Street in Manchester. Grant award announcements are expected in Spring 2023. We are also continuing to assist towns and villages with municipal roadway general permit requirements and other stormwater management and flood resiliency projects.

Other Business

Kearns mentioned the success of the Southern Vermont Communications Union District and the recent rollout of new fiber in Londonderry as well as the very positive press of late. She lauded Jonathan Cooper and Callie Fishburn for their work on behalf of the CUD.

Morse inquired if an RFP had been developed for auditing services in light of the retirement of long-time BCRC auditor Steve Love of Love, Cody & Company. Colvin confirmed there was a draft of an RFP and a list of firms to distribute it to. Zaiac confirmed that a three-year engagement made sense based upon his recent experience with a similar RFP for the Town of Arlington.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 9:36am.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Colvin
Director