

Bennington County Regional Commission

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

Friday - October 28, 2022
8:30 AM
Meeting Conducted via ZOOM

Present: Dan Monks, Cinda Morse, Janet Hurley, James Salerno, Dimitri Garder, Nick Zaiac (joined at 9:15 AM)
Jim Sullivan, Bill Colvin

- Noted that Janet Hurley has accepted a staff position with the BCRC (Assistant Director and Planning Program Manager) that will begin on November 28. As such, she stepped down as Commission Chair, effectively immediately, and will resign from her position as a commissioner after this meeting. As Vice-Chair, Dan Monks assumed the Chair's duties for this meeting and will Act as Chair at least until the Committee reorganizes at its next meeting.
- Approval of Minutes: August 26, 2022. Motion to approve by Morse. Second by Salerno. Passed unanimously.
- Staffing Update

Advertised for two regional planning positions, one that was included in the budget to help with municipal/land use planning, special transportation work (see note below), and general support for projects as needed, and one made necessary by the internal hire for executive director (community and economic development project work as well as support for land use and energy planning projects). Interviews conducted with several promising candidates. Offer extended to Haley Moccia who may relocate from North Carolina if her partner can find appropriate work as an engineer in the area (contacts have been made).

Catherine Bryars, BCRC's Director of Planning, submitted her letter of resignation on October 16, indicating that her last day of employment with the BCRC will be October 31. As noted above, Janet Hurley applied for and was offered the position that Cat would have held at the BCRC if she had not decided to move on. All agreed that Cat has been a tremendous asset to the BCRC, wished her well in her new endeavors at Shires Housing, and decided that language in the Personnel Policies tying length of departure notice to "standing" should be removed. To wit, Garder motioned and Monks seconded an amendment to the Personnel Policies to remove said "good standing" phrase from the Personnel Policies. Motion passed with all in favor (Hurley abstaining).

Given the nature of the various changes in commission membership and staffing, it was agreed that the, now acting, chair (Monks) should be the single point of contact for media inquiries to the Executive Committee on those matters.

Sullivan noted the acute need for GIS technical skills at the BCRC. Janet will be the only staff person with any significant level of GIS experience and, while she will refresh her skill set, it was agreed that other staff will need to be trained on ArcGIS platforms as soon as possible (a possible future hire definitely should include GIS skills as a key job requirement).

- Transition Update/Discussion

Bill is assuming more of the Executive Director responsibilities every day; Jim has provided an annual calendar of ED has begun to deliver potentially useful contacts and files to Bill. Jim's last day as Executive Director will be November 18 (day after the November BCRC meeting). Bill will assume the ED title (and his new salary) on November 21. Jim will remain on to help with the transition until his last day of work on December 23.

- Executive Committee Vacancies

Appreciation expressed for the years of service provided by departing member John LaVecchia. With Janet also leaving her position on the Executive Committee, there are two open positions, one of which can be filled as an appointment of the Chair and one which will need to be elected by the full Commission. Several possible candidates for the appointed position were discussed. Importance of having one or more new Committee members from a Northshire town was noted, as was the value of having another woman on the Committee. Nancy Faesy (Dorset) and Sheila Kearns (Sandgate) were favored candidates. Jim or Bill will reach out to gauge their interest and report back to Dan. The elected position will be noted in the mailing to be sent to commissioners prior to the November meeting and interest/nominations will be sought at the meeting.

- Office Lease Update

We have come to an agreement with our landlord on an extension of our existing lease to cover rental of the adjacent office suite, with the term of the lease extended to five years. The cost per square foot will be the same as we currently are paying (the new space is about half the size of our existing suite). The landlord has agreed to build a new wall to create a separate conference room (also a new floor which already has been installed) closest to the front door, and an for four new workstations (we will be paying to put up 5-foot-high partition walls to create semi-private workstations). In addition to allowing us to spread out a bit and have room for new staff, the new space also provides a quiet room for private meetings/phone calls and a separate space that will be used to consolidate our office supply storage shelves while also serving as a second quiet room for calls. We've reviewed the plans with our IT consultant who already has extended data lines (the space already is covered by our WIFI). We also are working with the IT consultant to replace our phone system with a VOIP system that will improve communication logistics. We are hoping that construction will be completed by the end of the year.

- Program Updates:
- Community and Economic Development
 - Communications Union District: The Southern Vermont Communication Union District (CUD) on its third meeting the Vermont Community Broadband Board (VCBB) was finally awarded its request for \$9.1MM in funding to support the build out of fiber to remote locations in the region through a partnership with Fidium Fiber/Consolidated Communications. It is likely the BCRC will be asked to continue to contract with the CUD to provide administrative services.
 - 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.
 - Public Health Equity Projects: All three public health equity projects on which BCRC is working are hitting full stride. On the VT PHI “backbone” project, eleven grant applications were received for \$150,000 in funding to support local public health equity projects. A review committee made up of community members awarded funding to five projects. Projects included a free pop-up medical clinic, the creation of an orchard and greenhouse at the middle school, development of a revolving fund for housing stipends for refugees, distribution of personal hygiene products to disadvantaged youth, and distribution of bikes and training classes for low- and moderate-income people.

The VAPDA/Regional Planning Commission Health Equity Planning Project is also gaining momentum. BCRC is leading the food access component of the toolkit development work which has been submitted. There is an implementation aspect of this grant, as well, which will support some BCRC work at the Bike Hub and Bennington Community Market and work with unhoused youth in the community.

For the GBICS Homeless Health Equity project, partnering consulting firm Proscenium and BCRC have nearly completed the initial draft of the Unaccompanied Youth Assessment. The report will go to the project steering committee for review and comment before being finalized. The second part of this project entails working with a design professional to identify design, programming, and possible locations for a public sanitation/homeless services facility in the community.

- Dorset Housing Study: We have started work on a housing study for Dorset, providing an initial pass on some of the key economic and demographic metrics impacting housing in the community. The study will also examine creative public/private partnerships where municipalities have incentivized the development of housing in communities like Dorset. First draft of the report will be submitted to the town in November.
- Armory Reuse Study: Jonathan and Scott have begun working with the Town of Bennington on a reuse study for the National Guard Armory on Franklin Lane. That facility will become the property of the Town when the National Guard’s new

armory is constructed on Bowen Road. Work thus far has focused on an analysis of existing conditions which was discussed at the first meeting of the in project steering committee meeting. Two tours of the space have now occurred with Town of Bennington staff and leaders of some community organizations.

- 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. The first meeting with the Pownal Planning Commission to kick off this project occurred earlier in August.
- 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) will be on tap this fall. 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. The next steps are to gather letters of support from regional municipalities, businesses, and institutions. BCRC is partnering with Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and Windham Regional Commission on this effort.
- Planning Programs
 - Transportation: Several communities have recently expressed interest in our traffic/speed monitoring equipment and reports. We have deployed the unit along a number of local roadways where concerns have been expressed by local officials and residents. Some of the data may be used to pursue lowering of speed limits, some to support reclassification of roads, and in North Bennington, where we have conducted numerous counts, to provide the basis for a village center planning project that BCRC will complete using TPI funds. We are hoping that one of our new hires will be able to kickoff a regional bike-ped planning study that is part of our TPI work program for the coming year (TPI “year” begins October 1 because of federal funding).
 - Municipal Planning: Work is continuing on five municipal land use regulations, with four more to be completed during 2023, as part of the “bylaw modernization grant” program. Although there is another round of “BMG” funding, the Department of Housing and Community Development discouraged us from applying since most of our work would be extensions of existing projects. We are instead focusing on working with towns on new municipal planning grants (applications due December 1).
 - Energy: Big news on this front is that ACT 172, the municipal building energy efficiency program, has gotten the official go-ahead to be implemented as planned. Once the Department of Buildings and General Services sorts out what it is going to look like, RPCs will receive up to \$2.5 million over the next two (three?) years to assist with implementation. We had budgeted to begin this work in FY 23, but have been on hold waiting for various issues to be resolved at the state level. Our lead staff on the project has been able to work instead on two public health initiatives

for the first half of the FY, but, fortunately, will be able to begin charging time to Act 172 in the second half of the FY. We also are working with a UVM intern to gather information from towns and villages that we hope will expedite access to grant funds. We organized and held an EV event in Bennington that garnered a lot of interest, and we continue to help local energy committees as they work on this year's "Window Dressers" program. 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.

- Environmental: Five brownfields assessment projects are underway in Bennington and Manchester and we are working with some prospective purchasers/redevelopers. Assisting towns and villages with municipal roadway general permit requirements and other stormwater management and flood resiliency projects.
- Other Business and Adjourn
 - Section 248:
 - Discussed third go-round on the "Chelsea Solar" project in Bennington; agreed that BCRC position hasn't changed, no need for new testimony or involvement.
 - 20MW solar project being planned for a location west of Route 7 and south of Holy Smoke Road in Shaftsbury. Would occupy close to 100 acres of land which, while not highly visible, is large enough to warrant close BCRC review and regional plan testimony once a petition is filed with the PUC.
 - 2+ MW wind project proposal in Stamford: location not yet specific; will monitor.
 - Act 250:
 - Green Mt Reserve permit issued by the District Environmental Commission. Janet and Jim both noted that the findings are a bit obtuse, but there was a finding that the town and regional plans are consistent with each other (good!) even though they were interpreted differently by different parties in this case. Findings under Criterion 9L (related to rural sprawl) and similar findings on development in Regional Plan (Criterion 10) rural land use district are concerning as far as establishing precedent, although the decision notes that the findings shouldn't be read as establishing precedent (???). Consensus of the Executive Committee is to not get directly involved in an appeal, provide testimony related to the Regional Plan if asked, and to begin development of an amendment dealing specifically with this type of land use in the Rural land use district in the near future. Intent of an amendment is to solidify BCRC land use policy for future development and to provide a better guide for development of municipal plans.

Respectfully submitted,
Jim Sullivan