

Bennington County Regional Commission

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Friday - February 24, 2023
8:30 AM
Meeting Conducted via ZOOM**

In attendance: Dan Monks, Cinda Morse, Sheila Kearns, Nick Zaiac, James Salerno, Janet Hurley (staff), Bill Colvin (staff)

The meeting was called to order at 8:31am.

Morse moved the approval of minutes from of December 23, 2022 Executive Committee meeting. Seconded by Kearns. Approved.

Financial – Audit, Midyear Budget Review, VSECU Credit Card Closing

Colvin overviewed the FY22 BCRC Audit which was completed in early January and has been sent to our funding agencies as required by various agreements. There were no significant findings of concern. Morse asked if the auditors typically presented the audit to the Executive Committee. It was agreed that while this had only occasionally happened in the past, it would be good practice in the future. Monks noted that Steve Love is retiring and BCRC may need to solicit a new audit firm.

The proposed midyear budget adjustment was reviewed. Several revenue and expense categories have shifted. Revenues are below projection, primarily due to a long delay by the State in implementing the Act 172 Municipal Energy Resilience Plan. Expenses overall are also down due largely to a delay in the ability to hire a new planner. Overall, the total projected surplus did not shift much from June, except for rapidly declining confidence in the likelihood of being paid this fiscal year by FEMA for administrative work provided to the Town of Sandgate following flooding there in July 2021. Morse moved and Salerno seconded approval of the midyear budget adjustment. Approved.

Morse moved and Zaiac seconded a motion to authorize Executive Committee members and BCRC staff Bill Colvin, Janet Hurley and Amanda Stevens to execute documents required to establish a BCRC credit card account at the Vermont State Employees Credit Union (VSECU). Approved.

Staffing Update

Colvin and Hurley provided a staffing update. Samantha Page began her part-time work with BCRC in mid-January and is off to a great start. Samantha has been spending time working in the transportation and land use programs, as well as deploying her GIS skills. She will begin full-time work with BCRC following her graduation from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (Masters in Urban Planning) in late Spring. Part-time financial assistant Jan Buonanno has resigned due to family medical issues. Given, the many transitions at BCRC as well as numerous potential funding implications (both positive and negative) incorporated in various legislation currently being considered in Montpelier, all agreed to hold off on advertising for any additional positions until the financial picture for FY24 becomes clearer.

VAPDA Funding Request

There are many issues being discussed in the legislature which RPCs could help address if adequate funding is provided. These issues include rural capacity, housing, shared services, climate change, economic development, etc. To address this, the RPC Directors are recommending full statutory formula funding be provided to RPCs. If full statutory formula funding was provided, it would approximately double our regional planning funds. These funds are our core funding which we use to support all our regional planning work including being used as match funds for other grant funding.

The VAPDA Government Relations Committee developed the language with the intent that RPC board members across the State could sign onto this concept and that we could transmit it to the appropriate committees. Morse moved and Kearns seconded the approval of the following motion:

As members of the Executive Committee of the Bennington County Regional Planning Commission, we are requesting support from the Legislature to provide full statutory formula funding to regional planning commissions. The capacity of our towns is strained, which has resulted in towns not taking advantage of federal and state funding opportunities. The continued underfunding of RPC's has resulted in lost opportunities and support for our towns. The Property Transfer Tax funding is the foundation that RPC's use to provide support to leverage federal and state resources. We hereby ask the Legislature to support full statutory formula funding for the RPC's, increasing the funding from \$4,574,416 in FY23 to the full property transfer tax formula amount of \$10,134,624.

The motion was approved unanimously.

Act 250/Section 248

Green Mountain Reserve/Benson Road: You will recall 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.

Shaftsbury Solar: Still in the 45-day 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 been in attendance at 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. I was on hand to speak to BCRC's role in the Section 248 process as well as to describe how the town could develop and adopt an enhanced energy section in its town plan.

Executive Committee Vacancies

One position on the Executive Committee remains open and a second will be opening in May. I met Cinda Morse indicated she wishes to step down from the Executive Committee after the May Annual meeting. Monks offered sincere thanks on behalf of BCRC and the Executive Committee for the dedicated service Morse has provided to the organization.

It was agreed that at the April 2023 Executive Committee meeting a final determination on a suggested slate of officers to be proposed to the full Commission at the BCRC Annual Meeting in May will be made. The Executive Committee asked Colvin to follow up with John Lavecchia, Jr. (Rupert) and Martha Cornwell (Shaftsbury) to see if they would be willing to serve on the Executive Committee.

Program Updates

Community and Economic Development

- Communications Union District: An agreement extending BCRC support services to the CUD through the end of 2022 was secured and another one to provide expanded administrative support for calendar year 2023 was also finalized in January.
- 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. No-cost extensions have been issued for each removing the pressure to complete the projects by May 31, 2023. The January BCRC Commission Meeting was dedicated to learning more about all three public health equity projects.

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. Those projects are now all underway.

For the VAPDA/Regional Planning Commission Health Equity Planning Project the Planning Toolkit has been completed in draft form and comments have been submitted to Lamoille County Planning Commission, which is coordinating the work on behalf of VAPDA. Deadline for completion of the toolkit is year-end and is also gaining momentum. There is an implementation aspect of this grant, as well, which will support some BCRC work at the Bike Hub, the Bennington Community Market and other public-health focused efforts in the community.

For the GBICS Homeless Health Equity project, partnering consulting firm Proscenium and BCRC completed the Unaccompanied Youth Assessment. The second part of this project entails working with a design professional to identify design, programming, and possible locations for a public sanitation/wellness hub in the community. Placework of Portsmouth, NH was hired as the consultant and a kick-off meeting with the Steering Committee was held on February 8th.

- Dorset Housing Study: BCRC has completed the data collection/summary task and are integrating that data into a readable and user-friendly report along with public-private partnerships and best practices research that is nearing completion. The report will be presented 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. An overview of the project will be on the agenda for the March BCRC Commission Meeting.
- Armory Reuse Study: We have completed the revised site inventory and history phase of the project and have issued our survey for input from potential user groups. That phase will be completed by early January, and we expect the full reuse plan to be in final form by the end of March.
- 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.

- 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 Bennington there are also two qualified census tracts (QCTs) that provide additional flexibility for applicants. During December and January, BCRC provided letters of support for sixteen (16) CRRP requests from a range of applicants. Bill attended the Vermont Economic Progress Council (VEPC) Board meeting on January 26th to support the Town of Manchester’s application to assist with water system upgrades and a sewer line extension. VEPC approved the request, moving the application to the next round of the review process.
- 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: Planning is well underway for the 6th annual Southern Vermont Economy Summit set to take place in Wilmington on May 23, 2023. BCRC and Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation staff are working to secure sponsors and panelists and presenters in a wide range of topical areas for the event. The theme of the 2023 Southern Vermont Economy Summit is “Forging our Future”.

Planning Programs

- Transportation: Several communities have recently expressed interest in our traffic/speed monitoring equipment and reports. We have deployed the unit along several 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 kick off 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). We plan to assist the Town and Village of Manchester to apply for a Bike/Ped Enhancement grant to perform a scoping study for a shared use path along Main Street between Union Street in the Village and Function Junction in the Town.

- 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 largely complete other than monitoring adoption of basic provisions that will remove housing barriers from these zoning bylaws. 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.

BCRC assisted four communities with new MPG applications:

- Woodford – relatively simple town plan update, BCRC expected to do all of the work.
- Bennington – phase one of a town plan update focusing on public outreach, development of themes, especially around DEI, with BCRC likely coordinating, possibly with a subconsultant.
- 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.
- 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.

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.

- 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. BCRC and the other RPCs have now received an initial \$120,000 payment (of about \$188,000 total to BCRC). Once the Department of Buildings and General Services sorts out what it is going to look like, to begin implementation work. This funding is through 2026 but the vast majority of our work will occur in the next two years. 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 fiscal year. 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.

- Environmental: BCRC applied for 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.

At 9:56am, Morse moved adjournment of the meeting. Seconded by Monks. Approved.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Colvin
Director