



Bennington County Regional Commission

News and Notes

January 2021

BCRC New Office Location

The BCRC has just completed a move to a new office! Not too much of a change, though, as it is just across the street from our previous location. Our new office suite is in the office building at 210 South Street (mailing address: 210 South Street, Suite 6 - Bennington, VT 05201). All phone numbers and emails remain the same; see the listing provided at the end of this newsletter.

The new office features workstations for all staff, an in-suite conference room, and access to a large meeting room. Parking is located in the lot off Union Street or on the street. The main entrances are accessed from the parking lot or from Union Street (follow the signs, we are on the first floor).

Of course, most of our employees still are working remotely and meetings are being held via ZOOM, but we look forward to spending more time in the new offices and hosting in-person meetings sometime in 2021. Stay tuned for updates!

January Meeting Topics: COVID Public Health Response and the Bennington-Williamstown Trolley Line Trail Study

The regular January meeting of the BCRC will be held remotely, via ZOOM, on **Thursday, January 21 at 5:00 PM** (note start time). The link for access to the meeting is:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87358468801>

Meeting ID: 873 5846 8801

Phone access: 1 929 205 6099 .

While the BCRC has been working to provide comprehensive information on COVID resources, assist municipal governments with maintaining operations and seeking grant assistance, and engaging with businesses to support them in their efforts to obtain loans and grants during this uniquely challenging time, it is important to recognize the heroic work being done by the many people working for and in partnership with public health and human service agencies in our communities. While not possible to highlight all of this critical work, we will hear from several agencies about their work responding to critical needs during the pandemic. In particular, we will hear from:

- ◆ Megan Herrington, District Director for the Vermont Department of Health about the key work they have done coordinating the overall public health response in our region;
- ◆ Lorna Mattern, Executive Director of UCS of Bennington County, concerning that organization's response to the mental health, family service, and related needs of residents;
- ◆ Scott Winslow, Executive Director of Greater Bennington Interfaith Community Services, for their work to ensure food security and help meet other basic needs; and
- ◆ Stephanie Lane, Executive Director of Shires Housing, regarding the quick turnaround of some Covid relief funds to improve and provide housing for a number of local families.

There will be time for questions following the presentations. We hope you will take this opportunity to learn more about these essential organizations and the services they are providing and to bring that information back to your communities. The second half of the meeting will feature a presentation on

a planning study that looks at the potential for developing a pathway along the former trolley line that ran between Bennington and towns in Berkshire County.

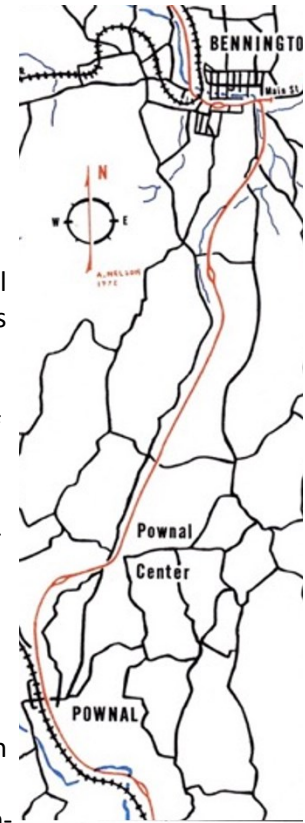
Trolley Path Scoping Study

In the early 20th Century, the Berkshire Hills Trolley Line connected a string of communities nestled in the narrow valley between the Green Mountains and Taconic Mountains, operating regular service between Bennington, Pownal, and Williamstown and North Adams, MA. To limit construction costs, the trolley company built the line away from roads, routing it through picturesque fields and woods. It cost less than a dollar and took 35 minutes to travel between Williamstown and Bennington by trolley car. Today, daily commuters make this trek by motor vehicle along the busy Route 7 corridor, which provides no safe access for pedestrians or cyclists.

Since late 2018, BCRC has studied the feasibility of reusing portions of the abandoned trolley bed to create a 12-mile bicycle/pedestrian path connecting downtown Bennington to Williamstown, where it would link with the planned Mohawk Shared Use Path to North Adams, which will eventually connect to the popular Ashuwillticook Rail Trail. If fully realized, this vision would create a 33-mile bicycle/pedestrian path stretching from Bennington to Pittsfield, MA. Locally, it would provide a safe and scenic connection for pedestrians and cyclists in Bennington, Pownal, and Williamstown, generating health benefits and catalyzing economic development in the region.

The Trolley Path Scoping Study, funded by a VTrans Bicycle/Pedestrian grant, reviews the overall viability of the path proposal, considering various barriers including right-of-way acquisition and impacts to environmentally sensitive areas, as well practical elements of the proposal such as projected construction costs and alternate routing of the path. Development of the scoping study has been supported by a 20-member Steering Committee comprised of representatives from the three municipalities impacted by the proposal. This fall a group of Williams College students contributed to the project by studying strategies to overcome various barriers to project development. The student [report and a presentation are available to view on BCRC's website](#).

The presentation at the January 21 BCRC meeting will include images of the trolley bed as it exists today (very cool to see!) and a discussion of what happens after the scoping report is finalized. For more information, contact Cat Bryars (cbryars@bcrcvt.org) at the BCRC.



Map Shows
BERKSHIRE STREET RAILWAY
Trackage into Vermont and
New York State.



The Berkshire Hills Trolley Line as it looked during its heyday and the way that much of the disused corridor looks today.



December 2020

Municipalities Assisted by RPC

- ◊ ACRPC: 15
- ◊ BCRC: 9
- ◊ CVRPC: 20
- ◊ CCRPC: 16
- ◊ LCPC: 4
- ◊ NVDA: 12
- ◊ NRPC: 10
- ◊ RRPC: 11
- ◊ SWCRPC: 6
- ◊ TRORC: 17
- ◊ WRC: 13

EMPOWERING LOCAL COVID PLANNING AND RESPONSE: *Local Government Expense Reimbursement Program (LGER)*

Act 137 of 2020 provided Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to various entities in Vermont for necessary expenses incurred due to, or as a result of, the COVID-19 public health emergency. \$12.65 million was made available under the LGER Grant to eligible units of local government. The state's 11 Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs), led by Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC), worked cooperatively to develop and deliver trainings and provide targeted support, resulting in **\$7.9 million in expenses requested for reimbursement from 133 municipalities**. Municipalities utilized LGER funding for a multitude of COVID planning and response actions outlined in this report.

Assistance Provided

- ◊ Regional training on LGER program, application timeline, eligible expenses
- ◊ Determining eligible expenses
- ◊ Application assistance
- ◊ Documentation assistance

Community Impact



Supplies & Equipment

\$1.46 million



Wages

\$2.9 million



Sanitation

\$257,380



Facility Alterations

\$655,430

Other: **\$2.64 million**

New Look for MRGP Implementation Website

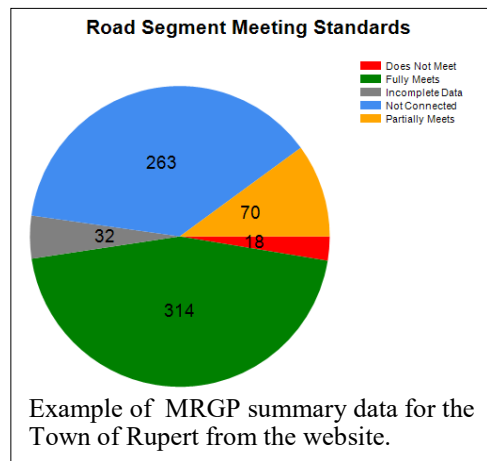
Revised tables for the Municipal Roads General Permit program now provide up to date road erosion inventory segment information. You can view the data for your town or village at:

<https://anrweb.vt.gov/DEC/IWIS/MRGPReportViewer.aspx?ViewParms=True&Report=Portal>

The new reports include:

- A baseline summary report- a one page narrative summary of the baseline REI (initial REI- “snap shot in time”) segment conditions, including segment compliance scores, % connected segments assessed, number of very high priority segments and the 15% segment number needed to be upgraded to MRGP standards.
- Baseline inventory- segment by segment individual scoring information based on the initial REI including road type, connectivity status, compliance scores, prioritization, and details.
- Current inventory- update of the baseline inventory indicating present conditions.
- Current summary- pie chart summaries of current compliance status, prioritization and road types.

For more information, contact Jim Ryan, Program Coordinator, at jim.ryan@vermont.gov.



Bennington and Manchester Village Receive Municipal Planning Grants

Municipal Planning Grants support local planning and community revitalization initiatives that build strong communities and improve Vermont's quality of life. Grants are awarded annually and are administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development. Since 1998, the program has provided approximately \$13 million to 237 cities and towns. This year, \$468,978 was awarded to 32 municipalities. In our region, Bennington and Manchester Village received grants that will help address important local needs and opportunities.

Bennington will combine the MPG award with a state Brownfields grant to develop a re-use plan for the recently closed Energizer battery factory. For more information, contact Shannon Barsotti, sbarsotti@benningtonvt.org. Total Project Cost: \$42,000 Grant Funds Awarded: \$22,000. The BCRC will help the Town manage the project, conduct public outreach, and complete elements of the site and area assessment.

Manchester Village will evaluate reuse potential of historic buildings and study roadway intersections, traffic flows, and pedestrian and bicycle needs to support the vibrant, mixed use development sought by the community. For more information, contact Catherine Bryars, cbryars@bcrcvt.org. Total Project Cost: \$15,280 Grant Funds Awarded: \$13,890. The BCRC will be working with the Village Planning Commission to complete the study.

New Study Highlights Value of EVs for Residents of Rural Communities

[A new analysis](#) of rural areas in four Northeastern states shows that shifting to a clean transportation system, including a bigger role for electric vehicles, has positive benefits across the region, with the greatest savings for rural drivers.

[The study](#), conducted by M.J. Bradley & Associates with the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), shows that cleaning up the transportation system reduces both pollution and costs for rural drivers in Maine, Maryland, Vermont, and Virginia. According to the study, a typical rural driver can save more than \$1,900 every year by switching from a conventional gasoline car to a comparable electric vehicle, adding up to tens of thousands of dollars over the life of the vehicle.

The study identifies several reasons why drivers in rural communities tend to spend more of their income on gasoline—which means bigger benefits from adopting an electric vehicle instead. Residents of rural communities, on average, drive longer distances than their urban counterparts, which means they spend more money on fueling their cars. Switching to an electric vehicle would result in savings ranging from \$1,900 to \$2,800 every year, according to the study. They also tend to drive larger and older vehicles with lower efficiency. In addition, rural residents are more likely than urban residents to live in single-family homes, improving their ability to charge their own vehicles.

UCS experts say that state governments can help their residents take advantage of the benefits of cleaner transportation through smart, targeted programs, including electric vehicle purchase incentives, public charging infrastructure, the electrification of public service fleet vehicles, outreach and education, and regional planning to improve transit, walking and biking options.

Final Report of the Covid-19 Recovery Forums

A series of COVID-19 County Recovery Forums were led by the Governor's Local Support and Community Action Team and facilitated by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. The full report, with recommended actions in a variety of areas, can be read at: [Recovery Forum Report](#).



[VIDEO: Explore Outdoor Recreation in The Shires of Southwestern Vermont](#)

From the Shires Outdoor Adventure & Recreation Chamber Committee

[Click to view video](#)

This video was made possible through COVID Relief Funds provided by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. The Restart Vermont Regional Marketing and Stimulus Grant Program through ACCD provided grants to organizations for efforts and activities related to economic recovery, consumer stimulus, marketing, or tourism related projects to support businesses that have suffered economic harm due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The grants are intended to enable local, regional, or statewide organizations to implement campaigns and initiatives that will increase consumer spending, support local businesses, and advance community recovery efforts.



The Southwestern Vermont Chamber of Commerce's Recreational Taskforce, SOAR (Shires Outdoor Adventure & Recreation), engages with businesses, government, the nonprofit sector and the public to promote recreational business opportunities, increase recreational participation opportunities, and strengthen the quality and stewardship of recreational resources in

Events and Opportunities....

Better Connections Grants: The Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT) and the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) today announced that the Better Connections program is accepting applications for grants totaling approximately \$260,000 bi-annually in planning funds to help cities and towns build stronger communities that are more livable and walkable. [Pre-application letters of intent are due by January 15. Grant applications are due February 19.](#)

In 2019, Better Connections funded three projects that are in progress:

- The Town of Fairlee created a Route 5 corridor plan to improve walking and biking infrastructure, better connecting the village and the Connecticut River and its recreational assets.
- The Town of Middlebury developed a downtown master plan to enhance the streetscape through green stormwater infrastructure, identify steps to improve the connection to Otter Creek, and revitalize the designated downtown.
- The Town of Northfield created a master plan to better connect Northfield's villages to one another, Norwich University, and their respective recreational centers by enhancing the streetscape and improving the water quality of the Dog River.

To learn more: [Jackie Cassino](#) or [Richard Amore](#) and visit the [Better Connections website](#).

Better Places Grants: The Agency of Commerce and Community Development and the Vermont Community Foundation along with the Vermont Arts Council, Preservation Trust of Vermont, and the National Life Group Foundation are pleased to announce \$90,000 in grant funding for [Better Places](#), a statewide partnership that will help communities reimagine and reopen public spaces for safe dining, shopping, and recreation, while showcasing the unique sense of place their community offers. [Applications are due January 22, 2021.](#) For more information and to apply, visit the [program website](#).

Zoning for Great Neighborhoods Online Workshops: [January 26th, 1:00 – 2:00 PM](#) and [January 28th, 1:00 – 2:30 PM](#). Many municipalities are learning how mid-century zoning values can suppress housing supply, drive up housing costs, and widen racial and economic disparities. While complete zoning overhauls are out of reach for most communities, -- smaller, [incremental changes](#) can make a big difference. Learn more about ways to make your community more inclusive and economically stronger by registering for interactive online training sponsored by AARP-VT, ACCD and CNU. Learn more and [register here](#).

Rural Energy for America Program Energy Audit & Renewable Energy Development Assistance (REAP EA/REDA) grants aim to help rural businesses gain access to more sources of renewable energy and establish energy-efficiency solutions. Applications are available for both energy-audit assistance and renewable energy site assessments and technical assistance. The maximum annual aggregate amount of an energy audit and REDA grant is \$100,000. [Applications due January 31, 2021](#). [Click here to go to the program website](#). For questions and guidance regarding REAP EA/REDA grant applications, please contact USDA RD Business Program Energy Specialist Ken Yearman at (802) 828-6070 or Kenneth.Yearman@usda.gov.

Efficiency Vermont will hold the **2021 Better Buildings by Design Conference** online. This year's conference theme is "Resilient Energy" and that concept has never been more pertinent than it is today. Conference dates: [February 2-4](#). [Review the conference schedule](#) and [register today](#). Group discounts and early registration pricing are available to help you save money.

Community Rating System/Flood Hazard Workshop: The national Insurance Services Office Community Hazard Mitigation program is offering a two-day online training called "Introduction to the Community Rating System" on [February 23 and 24](#). For more information and to register: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Oo9Ai20ARHORwDd8vn_mkw

The Department of Housing and Community Development is pleased to announce the availability of approximately \$490,000 in **Downtown Transportation Fund Grants (DTF)** to support revitalization efforts in [Designated Downtowns](#) and an additional \$67,000 in Clean Water Initiative funding for eligible storm water implementation projects. The Downtown Transportation Fund is a financing tool which assists municipalities in paying for transportation-related capital improvements within or serving a Designated Downtown. Past projects include streetscape improvements, bicycle & pedestrian amenities, park enhancements, utility relocation, street lighting, way-finding signage and other transportation related projects. Investment in the infrastructure of public spaces stimulates public investment and creates a sense of identity and pride in downtowns across Vermont. Since its inception in 1999 the program has awarded over \$11 million for 124 capital improvement projects in all 23 designated downtown communities leveraging over \$30 million in investments.

Grant applications for Downtown Transportation Fund Grants are due [March 8, 2021](#). See the [2021 Downtown Transportation Fund Program Description](#) for eligibility, funding and application requirements. Any municipality with a Designated Downtown may apply for funding so long as they don't currently have two or more open DTF grants open. The maximum grant amount is \$100,000 with a 50% match is required. Projects must demonstrate the ability to start the project within 18 months and complete within 30 months. Projects that have been identified, described, and well supported through a downtown area master planning process such as [Better Connections](#) or other planning process focused on the downtown, will receive additional bonus points.

SBA Working Capital Loans Available Following Disaster Declaration for Drought Beginning June 1

The U.S. Small Business Administration announced that Economic Injury Disaster Loans are available to small businesses, small agricultural cooperatives, small businesses engaged in aquaculture, and private nonprofit organizations in Addison, Bennington, Rutland and Windsor counties as a result of drought that began on June 1, 2020.

Under this declaration, the SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loan program is available to eligible farm-related and nonfarm-related entities that suffered financial losses as a direct result of this disaster. Except for aquaculture enterprises, SBA cannot provide disaster loans to agricultural producers, farmers and ranchers. Nurseries are eligible to apply for economic injury disaster loans for losses caused by drought conditions.

The loan amount can be up to \$2 million with interest rates of 3 percent for small businesses and 2.75 percent for private nonprofit organizations of all sizes, with terms up to 30 years. The SBA determines eligibility based on the size of the applicant, type of activity and its financial resources. Loan amounts and terms are set by the SBA and are based on each applicant's financial condition. These working capital loans may be used to pay fixed debts, payroll, accounts payable, and other bills that could have been paid had the disaster not occurred. The loans are not intended to replace lost sales or profits.

Applicants may apply online using the Electronic Loan Application (ELA) via SBA's secure website at DisasterLoan.sba.gov and should apply under SBA declaration # 16793, not for the COVID-19 incident. Disaster loan information and application forms may also be obtained by calling the SBA's Customer Service Center at 800-659-2955 (800-877-8339 for the deaf and hard-of-hearing) or by sending an email to DisasterCustomerService@sba.gov. Loan applications can be downloaded from sba.gov/disaster. Completed applications should be mailed to: U.S. Small Business Administration, Processing and Disbursement Center, 14925 Kingsport Road, Fort Worth, TX 76155. Submit completed loan applications to SBA no later than July 26, 2021.

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