



Bennington County Regional Commission

# News and Notes

## March 2021

### BCRC March Meeting Looks at: How Municipal Plans and Regulations can Support Housing Development

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development, working with each of the state’s regional planning commissions, contracted with the Congress for New Urbanism to develop a report on [Enabling Better Places: A Zoning Guide for Vermont Neighborhoods](#). The Guide is structured to help local planners determine where and how to engage in an incremental regulatory reform process and enact changes to their bylaws with the goal of improving housing access and affordability while supporting the vibrancy of village centers and mixed use neighborhoods.

The BCRC has itself been reviewing some of our communities’ land use regulations, identifying common areas of concern where bylaw revisions could support needed and appropriate housing development. The BCRC also has worked with the Town of Bennington on new “form-based design” zoning regulations designed to simplify the development process while supporting opportunities for higher density housing and mixed use development in the town center. The meeting will include an overview of the new Guide and the recent BCRC work in the area.

**The meeting will be held virtually via zoom at 5:30 PM on Thursday, March 18:**

Login: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88470693119?pwd=dVo3c1k4NHFFUWd4S1ByWHR6T3E2QT09>

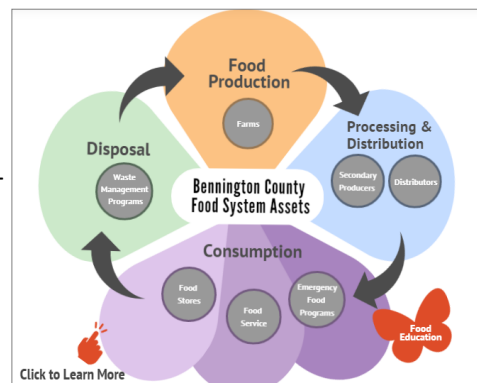
Phone-in: +1 929 205 6099 Meeting ID: 884 7069 3119 Passcode: 296260

This meeting of the Commission also is open to anyone with an interest in the topic. Contact Jim Sullivan at the BCRC ([jsullivan@bcrcvt.org](mailto:jsullivan@bcrcvt.org) or 802-442-0713 x5) for more information.

### Bennington County Food System Asset Map

[The Bennington County Food System Asset Map](#) is now publicly available on the BCRC website. The asset map is a project of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action at Bennington College in collaboration with the BCRC and consulting firm, Big Sky Education. The project was funded through a three-year [Mellon Grant](#) received by the college to address food insecurity in the county.

The asset map provides comprehensive information on the various components of the food system in the county including farms, secondary producers, food retail, food service, emergency food programs, and waste management. The map will be a valuable community resource for municipalities, policy-makers, food security advocates, and the general public to help them better understand their local food system. A series of infographics with more information about each category of the asset map has also been developed, along with additional resources for people facing food insecurity. For questions or feedback about the asset map, please contact Callie Fishburn at the BCRC: [cfishburn@bcrcvt.org](mailto:cfishburn@bcrcvt.org), or [BenningtonAssetMap@gmail.com](mailto:BenningtonAssetMap@gmail.com).



## Orchard Village – Willowbrook Path Construction

Casella Construction has signed a contract to construct the Orchard Village – Willowbrook Apartments Path in Bennington. Construction will begin in February and will wrap-up in the spring. The BCRC completed a scoping study for the project in 2014 and serves as the project’s Municipal Project Manager shepherding it through the project development process.

The multi-use path will span a challenging site (much of it is wetland, there is a stream and a significant slope) to connect a 104-unit affordable housing complex, Orchard Village, to the municipal sidewalk network on Willowbrook Drive. There is now no safe walking route connecting Orchard Village with nearby neighborhoods, schools, parks, and commercial areas. Students who reside there are bussed less than half a mile to the Molly Stark Elementary School and those who miss the bus often miss school. The path will provide a safe walking route to all of those critical destinations through connections to other recently completed and planned bike-ped projects in the area. It will be ADA compliant, will have a hard-pack gravel surface and two boardwalk sections spanning the wetland and stream, and will be lit at night.

The project is funded through federal and state grants with local grant matches from the Town of Bennington, Housing Vermont, the Bennington School District, the BCRC, the United Way, Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, and the Whipstock Hill Preservation Society.



*This make-shift path will be replaced with a fully-lit boardwalk and gravel path that will allow children residing at Orchard Village a safe route to walk to the Molly Stark School.*



## Report of The Vermont Racial Equity Task Force

Under Executive Order 02-20, the [Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#) was directed to examine structures of support for racially diverse populations; review current state and federal law on hate speech and freedom of speech; study and present options for encouraging Vermonters from diverse, marginalized, or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to run and serve in public office at all levels. The composition of the Task Force was designed to include equity practitioners and service providers, advocates, state government, and members of the community.

The Task Force’s first report, delivered September 1, 2020, contained 37 recommendations on topics including: housing, language access, public health, emergency response, broadband, employment law, and school discipline. Vermont’s Racial Equity Task Force recently released its most recent report, focused on free speech and public office. You can find the report at:

[Racial Equity Task Force Report - January 21, 2021](#)

## Act 164 Legalized Retail Cannabis – Municipal Next Steps

When Act 164 became law last October, Vermont legalized the retail sale of cannabis for recreational use. A Cannabis Control Board to be appointed by the Governor will oversee the regulation and licensing of growing, testing, and wholesale cannabis operations and of retail dispensaries (for more details, see [this VTDigger overview article](#)). It was originally projected that retail cannabis sales could begin as soon as October 2022, but setbacks in the establishment of the Cannabis Control Board appear likely to delay this timeline. The Board is charged with developing regulation, enforcement, and licensing standards as well as policy recommendations for cannabis advertising, efficiency standards for growing cannabis, and the role that municipal land use policies may play in regulating the cannabis industry.



The retail cannabis law establishes that municipalities must opt-in to allow retail sales. Some towns are already holding municipal votes on whether to allow retail sales, and others are waiting until more information will be made available by the Cannabis Control Board. Here is a breakdown of what is currently known and unknown based on the Act 164 legislation:

<i>What we know</i>	<i>What we don't know</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Municipalities must vote to allow retail sales of cannabis in the community. Otherwise, retail sales are not permitted.</li> <li>• Municipalities will not receive sales tax revenue from cannabis retailers. All taxes will go to the State.</li> <li>• Municipalities will receive licensing fee revenues. There will be a future option to add a 1% local option tax, but it would apply to <u>all</u> retail sales in the community and a portion of this revenue would go to the State.</li> <li>• Online sale and delivery of cannabis products is not permitted.</li> <li>• Municipalities can vote to allow retail cannabis sales by Australian ballot at town meetings or by special meeting. An approval vote may be overturned by a subsequent vote, but any approved cannabis operations would be allowed to continue even if approval is reversed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not yet clear how municipal regulations will apply to the cannabis industry. Rules developed by the Cannabis Control Board will clarify the role of municipal regulation to some degree, but Section 863 of the retail cannabis law is already being interpreted differently by attorneys. A legislative fix may be required to clarify the applicability of existing and future zoning as well as signage and public nuisance ordinances.</li> </ul>

As municipalities contemplate permitting retail cannabis, it can be helpful to consider overall health planning in the community. Regulatory and non-regulatory strategies to promote health and wellness in the region's towns are discussed in the [Bennington County Health Planning Primer](#). For more information about Act 164 please contact Cat Bryars of BCRC ([cbryars@bcrcvt.org](mailto:cbryars@bcrcvt.org)) or Maryann Morris of The Collaborative ([maryann@thecollaborative.us](mailto:maryann@thecollaborative.us)).

### ANR Debuts New Permit Navigator Website

The Agency of Natural Resources is developing a new tool to help people navigate their permitting system; a permit questionnaire is available to get a downloadable/printable guide to help explain what may be required based on their unique situation. Explore the site at:

[Permit Navigator](#)



A draft of the Vermont Rail Plan is available for review on the [AOT website](#). Find the Plan (and the Executive Summary) under the **Technical Memos, Reports, & Resources** section. Once you've accessed and downloaded the document, there are several ways to provide feedback.

- Explore the initiatives and respond in the Rail/Freight Plan [Webtool](#)
- Mark-up the PDF (digitally or print out), then email attachment to Zoe Neaderland ([Zoe.Neaderland@vermont.gov](mailto:Zoe.Neaderland@vermont.gov))
- E-mail your key points
- Call Zoe at 802-793-2778

All feedback will be compiled for consideration in finalizing the Plan. Future e-mails will convey the final Plan and implementation updates.

[Review the Draft Rail Plan](#)

## Guide to Residential Clean Heating and Cooling

Vermonters interested in heating their homes without fossil fuels have a new resource to help them navigate the path towards clean heating. The guide, titled "A Vermonter's Guide to Residential Clean Heating and Cooling," was produced by the nonprofit Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA) for the Vermont Public Service Department and is available at:

[www.bit.ly/35NaoEf](http://www.bit.ly/35NaoEf)

"Vermont has seen tremendous growth in interest in switching to clean heating sources and more efficient air conditioning" noted Public Service Department Commissioner June Tierney. "As thousands more Vermonters explore the possibility of switching to advanced wood heating and cold climate heat pumps, the Vermont Public Service Department is committed to providing quality information to help them navigate the process. It is our hope that affiliated agencies and organizations will help spread the word about this helpful new guide."

About twenty percent of Vermonter's heating needs are met local cord wood or wood pellets and over 25,000 cold climate heat pumps have been installed in Vermont. However, nearly eighty percent of Vermonters still heat their homes by burning fossil fuels which contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, are a drain on the local economy, and can worsen air quality. To align their interests in renewable, clean, and local energy with their home energy needs many Vermont homeowners are looking to transition to clean heating technologies. This guide provides information and guidance on how to make that transition.

Supporting the transition to cleaner heating and renewable energy is in-line with Vermont's Comprehensive Energy Plan, which calls for Vermont to increase the portion of renewable energy used to heat Vermont's building sector to 30 percent by 2025. This goal builds on the state statutory goal to weatherize 80,000 homes and reduce fuel use and utility bills by 25 percent.

# Municipal Road General Permit (MRGP)

## What's New (and Due) for 2021

Here are some upcoming important Vermont Municipal Roads General Permit (MRGP) related schedules and permit requirements, training opportunities, and resources available to towns in 2021.



### Due Dates and Requirements for 2021

Due Date	Requirement	Fee
June 1	Annual Fee	\$500, \$1350, or \$1800 - prorated based on pop. & road miles

### June 1, 2021 - MRGP Annual Fee Due

Towns are required to pay an annual fee (\$500, \$1,350 or \$1,800 based on population and road miles) before June 1, 2021. Towns will be sent a reminder email from DEC with additional information in early spring 2021. Find your town's fee on the [list of prorated MRGP annual fees](#).

### MRGP Implementation Requirements- 2021 and 2022 field seasons

The MRGP requires towns to upgrade 15% of non-compliant hydrologically-connected road segments to MRGP standards by December 31, 2022. What does this mean?

**Example:**

- Your completed initial inventory indicates that 100 road segments (1 road segment= 328 feet) scored "Does Not Meet" or "Partially Meets" standards.
- 15% of 100 segments or 15 segments (just under 1 mile of road) are required to be brought up to the MRGP standards by December 31, 2022.

This number will vary according to your REI results. Please keep track of where road segments have been upgraded and make those updates through the DEC Survey 123 app. If you need help, attend a Virtual Road Roundtable training or check out the [MRGP website](#).

#### **Annual Reports - Not due in 2021**

Because towns just submitted REIs in December 2020, 2021 is an "off-year" and annual reports will not be required. This requirement will be due again on April 1, 2022. More information will be forthcoming in early 2022. Heads-up.

#### **Road Erosion Inventory (REI) - December 31, 2020- (Past Due)**

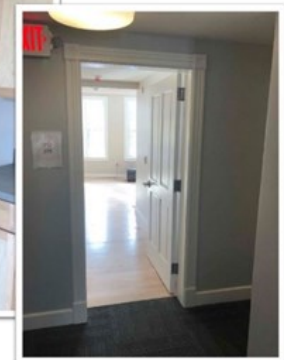
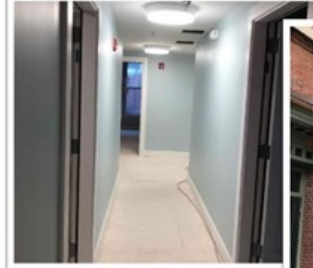
Towns were required to complete and submit REIs using DEC's template before December 31, 2020. If your town has not yet submitted this requirement, please do so as soon as possible. REIs are conducted to determine which road segments meet or do not meet MRGP standards. The REIs serve as a basis to determine which roads will be required to be upgraded to meet MRGP standards.

## Putnam Block Phase I Nearing Completion

Despite being shutdown for over eight weeks in order to comply with the Governor’s executive orders surrounding the pandemic, the Putnam Block Redevelopment Project was able to ramp back up to full speed and meet the deadline for “substantial completion of the Phase 1 construction contract on November 30, 2020. This was the final day to meet the obligations to maximize the level of historic tax credits for which the project was eligible. The Phase 1 shell contract with BreadLoaf Corporation included the exterior and fit up to vanilla box interiors for all three historic buildings – Court House, Putnam Hotel, Winslow as well as the full fit-up of all thirty-one residential spaces and the completion of the Bennington College Development Offices.

Since that time BreadLoaf has been working through a series of remaining punch list items on that contract and commercial tenants have commenced the design and interior fit-ups of their spaces. The first residential tenants moved in late in 2020 and there are now twenty (20) families living in the Hotel Putnam and Winslow buildings. An additional eleven (11) units will be occupied over the next few weeks.

Commercial tenants, including the Bennington College Development Office, Visiting Nurse Association of the Southwest Region, Southwestern Vermont Health Care and Bennington Bookshop will begin to move into their new spaces in the next couple of months. Additional commercial and retail occupancies will occur as we move into summer and early fall.



## BCRC Weighs in On Vermont State Colleges Restructuring

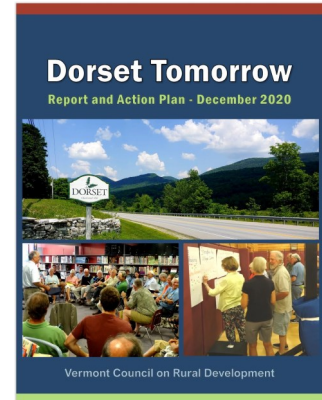
The BCRC and the Southwestern Vermont Chamber of Commerce took the opportunity to add our voice to the discussion surrounding the proposed restructuring of the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) system. The Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont report recommended, among other things, that to make the VSC more efficient and viable into the future that Castleton University, Vermont Technical College, and Northern Vermont University move to a single accreditation and consolidate administrative efforts. The BCRC and the Chamber were primarily concerned with the continuation of critical VSC programming in our region, including workforce development offers through the Community College of Vermont and nursing programs through Vermont Tech and Castleton. Castleton University and Southwestern Vermont Health Care have entered into a unique arrangement that provides access to a cadre of well-trained nurses for the medical system in return for SVHC paying some or all of the graduate nurse’s college debt based upon tenure with the system. Regardless of the ultimate structure of the Vermont State Colleges going forward, the need to maintain these vital programs in Southwestern Vermont is clear.

## Dorset Tomorrow Report

Dorset participated in VCRD's Climate Economy Model Community Program (CEMCP) in 2020. CEMCP is community-driven process with local leaders, VCRD, Green Mountain Power, and Efficiency Vermont to cultivate economic development, innovation, and affordability in the face of climate change. Over 110 residents participated in the "Dorset Tomorrow" process with support from 26 visiting resource team members. [Read the Dorset Tomorrow Report and Action Plan](#). Over 50 local volunteers joined task force groups that are working to:

- Increase Affordable Housing and Attract New Residents to Dorset
- Build Community Unity
- Transform Dorset's Energy Usage and Generate More Electricity Locally
- Improve Dorset's Transportation Options

As the task force groups move priorities to action they are supported for up to a year by VCRD and on an ongoing basis with resources from federal, state, regional, local, non-profit, and business leaders who participated in the process.



### Events and Opportunities....

**2021 Offers and Incentives from Efficiency Vermont:** For an always up-to-date list of offers, [the EVT website is the best place to check.](#)

Weatherization: Low- and moderate-income Vermonters can get 50% of their upfront project cost back, up to \$3,000, through the [Home Performance with ENERGY STAR®](#) program. Higher-income Vermonters can also get 50% back, but the cap is \$1,000. Commercial business and multifamily property owners can get 50% of the upfront project cost back, up to \$3,000, through the [Building Performance](#) program.

Heat Pumps: Heat pumps are [eligible for an upfront discount when Vermonters work with Efficiency Excellence Network \(EEN\) contractors](#). These discounts are offered jointly by Efficiency Vermont and the electric utilities, as part of Tier 3 of the Renewable Energy Standard. Some utilities may have an additional heat pump rebate. Low- and moderate-income Vermonters are eligible for a [\\$200 bonus on all types of heat pumps](#).

Lighting: Vermont is the first state in the country to sunset LED lighting rebates. Why? Because the market has transformed, and LED lights no longer need rebates to be competitive. This is exciting news! This allows us to refocus our incentive funding on new and emerging technologies. The focus in lighting is now on controls for commercial buildings and smart lighting for residential buildings. [These incentives are available through select distributors.](#)

USDA Rural Development is accepting applications for funding through the [Rural Business Development Grant program \(RBDG\)](#). RBDG funds are designed to provide technical assistance and training for small rural businesses, defined as having fewer than 50 new workers and less than \$1 million in gross revenue. [The deadline for RBDG applications is: Wednesday, March 31 @ 4:30PM EST .](#)

# 2021 Southern Vermont Economy Summit: Reconnect

***Virtual | Anywhere, VT  
May 12-14, 2021***

***during IEDC's Economic Development Week***

You are invited to join us at the virtual 4th Annual Southern Vermont Economy Summit on May 12th, 13th, and 14th. The Summit is a three-day learning and networking event designed with our business community in mind.

This year's program features more content than ever before for town leaders and community members who are looking at strengthening the future of their communities. Please check out the entire program, the terrific slate of expert presenters and speakers, and 9 sessions on every aspect of economic development. Of interest may be "New to Vermont Lunch Series: How New People Generate New Opportunities for Our Communities", "In Conversation with Governor Scott and Lt. Governor Molly Gray: Envisioning Southern Vermont's Future & The Future Talks Back: Young Professional Town Hall", "Small Scale Changes to Strengthen Our Towns" facilitated by Danny Litchenfield with the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, and "Community as Corporation: Talent-Retention in Low Status America" with Majora Carter, a Social-Enterprise Pioneer of the Majora Carter Group.

For a complete schedule, workshop descriptions, and profiles of expert speakers and presenters please visit [Summit | SoVermont Zone](#) where you can also register to attend.

The Summit is funded in part by the USDA through the Southern Vermont Economy Project, in partnership with the Bennington County Regional Commission, Bennington County Industrial Corporation, Southeastern Vermont Economic Development Strategies and the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation. A complete list of Summit Sponsors can be found at [www.sovermontzone.com/summit/](http://www.sovermontzone.com/summit/).





**The Municipal Grants-in-Aid program** has transitioned from DEC to VTrans. The Municipal Grants-in-Aid program made offers to towns in the fall of 2020 for implementation projects in the 2021 field season. It is anticipated that VTrans will again send letters to towns announcing the next round of GIA funding in the fall of 2021 for implementation of projects for the 2022 field season. Towns receive grant funding to help them bring their connected roads up to MRGP standards. Contact Joel Perrigo at VTrans for more information regarding the GIA program: [Joel.perrigo@vermont.gov](mailto:Joel.perrigo@vermont.gov)

**Grants-Aid-Small Equipment Grant:** DEC will continue to administer the GIA Small Equipment Grant. Each year, towns in different parts of the state will be given the opportunity to access funding to purchase equipment that can assist the municipality in implementing required MRGP practices. Equipment includes: hydro-seeders, hay bale shredders, plate compactors, road shoulder discs, and roller compactors. Please contact Helen Carr from DEC for more information: [Helen.carr@vermont.gov](mailto:Helen.carr@vermont.gov)

**VTrans Better Roads Grants:** VTrans Better Roads Grant funding can be used to develop MRGP Road Erosion Inventories (Category A), as well as implement road best management practices (Category B) that will assist municipalities in meeting MRGP implementation requirements. For more information visit the [Better Roads Grant Program](#).

The PSD **Wi-Fi Hot Spot Program** has concluded. Equipment was installed at [190 sites](#) across the state. Unfortunately, not everyone was able to be served. While the state-funded effort is over, the success attracted some national attention. The [Information Technology Disaster Resource Center \(ITDRC\)](#) operates a similar nationwide initiative this year to provide **free community Wi-Fi installations** to connect students and families to the internet, especially those living in rural and underserved communities. They have agreed to help the state fill our unmet needs free of cost. If an organization previously applied to the program but was not served, that information will be shared with the organization. The organization is also willing to install at multiple locations in a community and add on to networks we established with our program. If additional town offices, libraries, general stores, downtowns, or community spaces of any kind in your area would like equipment upgrades at no charge, please ask them to fill out this form: <https://www.itdrc.org/covid-19/projectconnect> .

There is a range of equipment available (Ubiquity and some Cisco Meraki) and are open to adding to existing networks. The equipment will operate off of the existing internet connection. Depending on the equipment provided (and installed), there may or may not be a license that the site will be asked to purchase after the first year.

Useful links:

Frequently asked questions: <https://go.itdrc.org/projectconnect-faq>

Photos: <https://go.itdrc.org/projectconnect-photos>

Flyer: <https://go.itdrc.org/projectconnect-flyer>

**Bennington County Food Distribution Sites/Dates** available at:

[Benn County Food Distribution](#)

## COVID-19 Resources on the BCRC Website

There was a tremendous influx of information in the early months of the pandemic: guidance for businesses and schools, municipal templates for pandemic planning, mask mandate information, state-wide response information, food resources and distributions, business support information, testing information, and more. It quickly became difficult to make sure this information was available to those who needed it. In an effort to house all this information in one place, where access was available to everyone, the [COVID-19 Resources](#) page was developed on the BCRC website where information is organized into several categories:

- Food Resources and Distributions
- Community and Individual Resources (e.g. public health, mental health, and support resources)
- Economic and Business Support Resources (e.g. grant information and guidance documents)
- Municipal Resources (e.g. planning templates and grant information)
- Restart VT Technical Assistance Program
- School and Childcare Resources (e.g. guidance documents)
- Volunteering and Ways to Help (with link to Bennington County Mutual Aid)

The page also provides Vermont COVID-19 Data and Modeling information developed by the state. These buttons take the reader to state sites and documents that provide information on the current activity of the virus, modeling data, a weekly summary of COVID-19 in Vermont, the Department of Health COVID-19 dashboard and vaccine dashboard, and a regional heatmap that shows the positivity rating per county and state. Other state agencies with important COVID-19 information are also listed: Vermont Economic Recovery Grants, Agency of Commerce and Community Development COVID-19 Recovery Resource Center, and Vermont Emergency Management COVID-19 Information.


At the bottom of the COVID-19 Resources page is recent case data for Bennington County. The most current five weeks are shown with case counts per day, and case totals for each week. The weekly case data is helpful to observe increases and decreases over time in Bennington County. Luckily for us, the trend has been going down for the past few weeks after a sustained peak following the holidays.

The information on the COVID-19 Resources page is updated and added to weekly, with some information updated almost daily. Please visit our COVID-19 Resources page at <http://www.bcrct.org/covid-19-resources.html>. If you have any questions or suggestions, or would like more information about the COVID-19 Resources page, please contact Allison Strohl at [astrohl@bcrct.org](mailto:astrohl@bcrct.org).

### BCRC Staff Contacts

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*Welcome to BCRC's new Financial Manager, Amanda Stevens!*