



Bennington County Regional Commission

News and Notes

May 2020

BCRC Continues Work (from home) while Responding to Community Needs

The BCRC has continued its work in all program areas during this most unusual time. Like many of you, we are working from home and spending a lot of time on a variety of online meeting platforms. While some staff are working reduced hours because of COVID-19 related school and childcare closings and other restrictions on doing business, everyone remains available to provide support to local officials and our many partner organizations. Of course, considerable staff time has been refocused on providing direct support for businesses, organizations, and local governments that are struggling to deal with the effects of the pandemic. The best way to contact a staff member is via email—please see the contact information below or check our website, www.bcrcvt.org.

Speaking of the BCRC website, we have been working diligently to create and maintain a comprehensive COVID-19 Resource section. [Allison Strohl](#) has been instrumental in collecting, organizing, and presenting a wide range of information and links for businesses, municipalities, human service organizations, and individuals. Anyone looking for information related to public health, business support and funding programs, food security, local government operations, ways to help meet specific community needs, and more, should go to: <http://www.bcrcvt.org/covid-19-resources.html>.

Although the BCRC had to cancel its annual meeting this year, we are looking forward to getting back together - with safe physical distancing - later this year. We will keep everyone apprised of our modified meeting schedule, webinar opportunities, and other developments. In the meantime, stay safe and enjoy some more online reading!

BCRC Staff Emails

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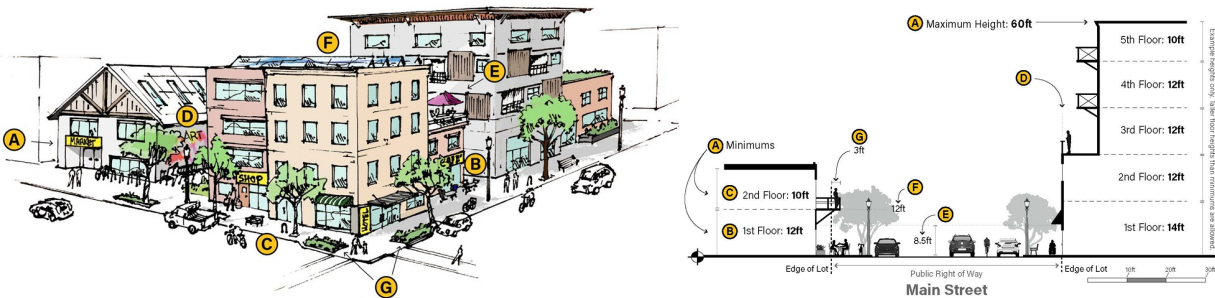
Jim Sullivan, Director: jsullivan@bcrcvt.org

The annual meeting of the Bennington County Regional Commission, scheduled for May 21, has been cancelled. Voting for officers is being held via mail-in ballot. Contact Jim Sullivan with any questions.

Activities and Accomplishments

With the BCRC's annual meeting canceled this year, we thought it would be beneficial to highlight some of the Commission's work over the past year in this newsletter. Feel free to contact the BCRC for more information on any of these projects and activities.

Municipal Land Use Regulations: The BCRC has been assisting the towns of Woodford, Pownal, and Stamford with comprehensive updates to their zoning and subdivision regulations, as well as the addition of special provisions to the Glastenbury zoning bylaw. A major revision of the Bennington Land Use and Development Regulations, supported by a Municipal Planning Grant, involves replacement of traditional zoning standards for several districts in the center of town with new form-based standards. A new planning grant is funding a region-wide review of local land use regulations pertaining to housing, especially focused on village centers and other higher density districts.



Graphics excerpted from the draft Bennington Land Use Regulation Form-Based Standards

Municipal Plans: Updated municipal plans were completed for Dorset, Shaftsbury, Arlington, and Rupert. The BCRC has assisted with development of municipal energy plans, consistent with requirements for approval under Act 174, for Manchester, Manchester Village, Arlington, Rupert, and Glastenbury. Energy plans for Bennington, Pownal, Stamford, and Sunderland were completed previously and approved by the BCRC.

Transportation Projects: The BCRC prepared a successful \$317,000 grant application for the Town of Bennington to the VTrans Bicycle and Pedestrian Grant Program for the Applegate to Willowbrook Path. 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, Applegate Apartments, to the municipal sidewalk network on Willowbrook Drive. There is now no safe walking route to Applegate. Students who reside there are bussed less than half a mile to the Molly Stark Elementary School. Students who miss the bus often miss school. The path will provide a safe walking route to nearby schools, grocery stores and jobs. It will be ADA compliant, will have a hard-pack gravel surface and two boardwalk sections spanning a wetland and stream, and will be lit at night. All necessary permits, rights of way, and VTrans/FHWA clearances have been acquired. Contract plans and bid documents have been approved by VTrans. The \$489,000 project is funded through federal and state grants with matching funds 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.

The BCRC advertised Bennington's Kocher Drive Shared-Use Path Project for construction bids in January. Casella Construction of Rutland was the lowest bidder and received the contract.

Construction is tentatively scheduled to begin June 1. The paved path will provide a safe bike/ped crossing at the US7/Kocher Drive intersection and will link an existing shared-use path on East Road to a soon-to be constructed rail trail along Benmont Ave. The \$1.1 million project is funded through a federal earmark, a VTrans grant, and local funds. BCRC is the Local Project Manager.

The BCRC completed collection and analysis of geographic data related to transportation infrastructure in the Batten Kill Watershed, in support of the VTrans “Transportation Resiliency Planning Tool.” The final report will help ensure that investments are targeted to most effectively protect critical roads, bridges, and culverts.



The Kocher Drive project will eliminate unsafe conditions like this one.

Opportunity Zones: The BCRC prepared an investment guide to showcase Bennington’s Opportunity Zones, which include the downtown core and northeastern quadrant of town. Experts from around the country reviewed the guide among others from around the state, and provided feedback on strengths and next steps. The team was uniform in its belief that the *Bennington OpZone Guide* was one of the strongest, and effectively leveraged the existing Opportunity Fund activity (at least five known investments at this time) in a way that would resonate with investors.

Putnam Block Redevelopment: Representative Peter Welch and Governor Phil Scott joined hundreds of attendees for the Groundbreaking ceremony on August 7 on the construction site in Downtown Bennington. Twelve speakers, including the Governor, Representative Welch, and representatives from the offices of Senator Leahy, Senator Sanders, financial institutions, supporting non-profits, and local and state government, shared thoughts on the process that had led to the day’s celebration and the importance of the project to Bennington’s future. ACCD Deputy Secretary Ted Brady referred to the Putnam Block as “the most important economic development project happening in rural Vermont today,” and VHCBC Executive Director Gus Seelig referred to the “conspiracy of goodwill” that allowed such a complex development project to move forward. Among the many complexities is the site’s ownership, which passed to BCIC in the course of the transaction. This allowed millions of dollars for remediation and other necessary work to flow into the project, and freed up project dollars for other uses.

Building Communities Grant Awards: BCRC staff prepared successful grant applications to the Building Communities Grants Programs of the Governor’s Office of Buildings and General Services. Through BCG’s Regional Economic Development Grant, Polar Composite LLC was awarded \$15,000 to support the installation of a new sprinkler system at their recently-acquired facility in Bennington, and the H.N. Williams Store in Dorset was awarded \$15,000 to offset the costs of an extensive expansion. This is the third consecutive year that our sponsored applications to this grant program have received funding, and we are particularly pleased to note that all of the applications in that time period have been successful. (Previous recipients include KOV Gym, K&E Plastics, Harvest Brewing, and the Orvis Company.) Congratulations to three other regional organizations that received funding through additional BCG grant programs this year:

- Prospect Mountain Association (Woodford): \$15,000 to replace the septic system.
- Sunrise Family Resource Center (Bennington): \$6,000 for renovations and improvements to the early childhood playground.
- Second Chance Animal Shelter (Arlington): \$9,000 for the installation of rain gutters and a storage shed.

Regional Workforce Summit: The Workforce and Education Committee is leading the region's workforce efforts with a variety of programs that develop and retain talent at all age levels: internship and certification programs for adults; the Reality Fair, Sophomore Summit, and Emerging Leaders program for high schoolers; the Shires Challenge and Seedlings program for elementary and middle school students; and the community-wide Career Week program held in April. On October 24, several dozen workforce service providers and employers gathered at the Bennington Museum for back-to-back sessions addressing statewide workforce shortages and regional scenarios. Led by former BDCC executive director Jeff Lewis and facilitated by BCRC staff, the event featured a panel discussion over lunch, during which employers and educators discussed successful initiatives and fielded questions about their respective programs. Topics addressed included workforce housing, apprenticeships, internships, and entrepreneurial training.

SoVermont.com: BCRC staff continue to promote and discuss SoVermont, the bi-county business retention and expansion program developed in partnership with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation. Three local organizations have asked about utilizing and participating in the program, with one providing printed SoVermont materials to an international recruitment prospect. On October 2, BCRC staff traveled to Albany for the Albany Job Fair, bringing SoVermont marketing materials and raising awareness at the job fair of the many employment opportunities in Southern Vermont. The SoVermont presence was the only location-focused participant and generated substantial interest, especially given state efforts regarding worker relocation incentives.

EPA Brownfields Multipurpose, Assessment, and Cleanup Grants: The BCRC received one of six grants awarded by the EPA to Vermont entities through its 2019 Brownfields MAC Grant program. The \$500,000 grant will be used for site remediation and cleanup on the portion of the Putnam Block parcel that is not associated with the Phase 1 redevelopment. This represents more than half of the estimated cleanup cost for the Phase 2 portion, and will go a long way toward bringing the full site back into productive use. The BCRC has also continued to support the process of redeveloping and reusing properties through its Brownfields Petroleum and Hazardous Materials site assessment grants.

Southern Vermont Communications Union District: In early March, voters in twelve Bennington County towns voted to form a new Communication Union District and BCRC staff will continue to provide organizational capacity as the new entity builds out its legal structure and positions itself for an application to the Broadband Innovation Grant program. That grant can provide up to \$60,000 of funding for a feasibility study and business plan for newly-formed CUDs. In the run-up to Town Meeting Day, BCRC staff joined with Southern Vermont CUD Task Force chair Tim Scoggins, who also chairs the Shaftsbury Select Board, at GNAT-TV's studios in Sunderland to discuss the CUD approach and potential impacts for the region. GNAT coverage:

<https://gnat-tv.org/the-news-project-in-studio-communication-union- districts-the-background/>

Working Communities Challenge: The BCRC is a core partner on a project with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC), that proposes a Southern Vermont-wide initiative to welcome 6,000 new Vermonters to the region by 2030. Current population estimates show that Southern Vermont lost over 4 percent of its population between 2010 and 2020, making such growth a highly ambitious goal. The distinguishing feature of this project is that it will focus on assisting individuals born outside the US, with the expectation that 1,000 new foreign-born Southern Vermonters will create enough interest in the region that an additional 5,000 US citizens will choose to relocate to Southern Vermont. GNAT coverage: <https://gnat-tv.org/the-news-project-in-studio-immigration-solution/>

FEMA Public Assistance Program

On April 8th, Vermont received a federal disaster declaration, DR 5342, which opens up federal disaster funds to assist state agencies, municipalities, critical private non-profits and some essential non-critical non-profits with emergency response expenses related to COVID-19. The declaration, which allows these sectors to apply for FEMA's Public Assistance (PA) program, provides reimbursement for 75% of the cost of emergency protective measures (explained below). Expenses must have been incurred on or after January 20, 2020, and have to be related to COVID-19. Eligible organizations must have a minimum of \$3,300 in uninsured expenses, and must submit a [FEMA Request for Public Assistance \(RPA\) form](#) to Vermont Emergency Management.

Emergency protective measures are actions taken to save lives, protect public health and safety, and protect improved property. Examples of eligible costs include: call center staffing, emergency operations center costs, food distribution staff and equipment costs, medical supplies and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), transportation of medical equipment and supplies, cleaning of facilities (due to COVID-19), staffing overtime, medical sheltering, security and law enforcement overtime, communications of general health and safety information to the public, and emergency medical care for COVID-19 patients.

Non-congregate sheltering is another eligible expense under the PA program, but will need to be approved by FEMA in advance. Non-congregate sheltering includes locations where individuals are separated from others (hotels, motels, or dorms). The housing must be pursuant to the direction of appropriate public health officials and not extend beyond the duration of the public health emergency. An example of those that may benefit from non-congregate housing would be frontline workers with an immunocompromised family member at home.

Other eligible expenses through the PA program are administration costs, such as managing PA projects and documentation. There are other expenses that may be eligible and potential applicants should review PA program documents on the Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) website. VEM and FEMA would be able to answer applicant question regarding the eligibility of specific COVID-19 related expenses not listed in the guidance. Lastly, make sure to document any and all expenses related to COVID-19.

For more information, please review the [Vermont Emergency Management COVID-19 Major Disaster Declaration](#) webpage. There you will find the [PowerPoint Presentation for Applicants Briefing, Information on Federal Public Assistance Eligibility for COVID-19](#), guidance documents, and other helpful information on the PA program. If you would like assistance with the grant process and connecting with VEM, please reach out to Allison Strohl at astrohl@bcrcvt.org.

Open Meeting Law Changes During the COVID-19 Emergency

According to recently enacted legislation, during the declared COVID-19 emergency, a public body does not need to designate a physical location for an open meeting or need to have a person physically present. A quorum or more of the members of a public body may attend a regular, special, or emergency meeting by electronic or other means. The public must be provided with electronic access (including telephone access when possible) to meetings in lieu of a designated physical location. The public body must post information about how the public can access the meeting and include that information on the published agenda. School boards and select boards (but not other public bodies) will need to record their meetings, unless unusual circumstances make it impossible to do so. In case of a staffing shortage, a public body may extend the time for posting minutes to ten calendar days.

Survey Looks at Food Access During COVID-19 Emergency

Researchers from the University of Vermont have issued reports on a statewide survey on coronavirus and food access/security. The survey was conducted statewide between March 29 and April 12, and a total of 3,251 people responded. Some key results include:

- * A 33% increase in food insecurity among respondents since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.
- * 45% of respondents indicating job loss or disruption (19.7% had a reduction in hours or income, 9.3% had been furloughed, and 15.5% had lost their job).
- * 38.5% of those with a job loss or disruption experiencing food insecurity.
- * 84.2% of respondents who experienced food insecurity at some point in the year before the coronavirus pandemic remained food insecure during the early days of the outbreak.
- * Respondents said the most helpful actions for meeting their food needs would be increased trust in the safety of going to stores and more food in stores.
- * Respondents worried most about food becoming unaffordable and running out of food if they were unable to go out.
- * Vermonters are using a variety of strategies to adapt: a majority of respondents are at least somewhat likely to buy foods that don't go bad quickly (90%); buy different, cheaper foods (69%); and stretch the food they have by eating less (52%).
- * Vermonters are helping each other - there was a reported doubling in the percentage of people receiving their food via delivery from other people.

Read more at:

Brief 1: A General Overview of Coronavirus and Food Access and Security in Vermont:

https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Department-of-Nutrition-and-Food-Sciences/covid_general_brief_1_FINAL.pdf

Brief 2: The Impact of Coronavirus on Vermonters Experiencing Food Insecurity:

https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Department-of-Nutrition-and-Food-Sciences/covid_foodsecurity_brief_1_FINAL.pdf

Brief 3: Job Disruption and Loss and Food Access During Coronavirus:

https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Department-of-Nutrition-and-Food-Sciences/covid_job_brief_1_FINAL.pdf .

Workplace Trends During (and after?) COVID-19

Google mobility provides data on commuting trends by state. The most [recent Vermont report](#) finds a 42 percent drop in workplace travel, reflecting disruptions in business as well as compliance with stay home-stay safe requirements for many workers.

With more than half of Vermonters now telecommuting to their jobs, what is the chance this behavior may continue after the public health crisis declines? Transportation planner Jon Slason of RSG projected the range of potential shift from between 9 to 37 percent, depending on the type of jobs, employers' willingness to allow employees to continue to WFH, and other factors.

[See Slason's talk and presentation here](#) and other related postings at [STVT.org](#).

~7% current work from home (per American Community Survey)

	Post-COVID Potential Vermont % of Remote Workforce
Low Uptake	9%
Med Uptake	22%
High Uptake	37%

Source: Slason analysis

Q&A with Efficiency Vermont

Efficiency Vermont staff ordinarily heads out to home shows around the state to meet and answer questions from attendees. With those events cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they have created a series of YouTube videos to answer the most frequently asked questions. Visit the Efficiency Vermont YouTube channel to find out more about rebates, home energy audit information, what to do about wet basements, and more.

[Answers to your Energy Efficiency Questions](#)

Energy Action Network Releases Annual Progress Report



This year's report highlights how much fossil fuel dependence is currently costing Vermonters and the Vermont economy, as well as how much Vermonters stand to save on energy costs as a result of a transition to more efficient and renewable technologies in heating and transportation.

The report concludes that what Vermont needs now is a comprehensive policy and regulatory framework to continue building on progress in the electricity sector and to reduce fossil fuel use in the transportation and thermal sectors.



Read the full report at: [2019 Progress Report](#) .

Vermont Housing Needs Assessment

The Department of Housing and Community Development hired the Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA) to conduct the 5-year Vermont Housing Needs Assessment. This Assessment is used to inform the State's 5-Year Consolidated Plan to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other statewide and county housing and policy decisions.

A new and exciting feature of this year's Assessment is that in addition to the written report, VHFA is hosting and regularly updating the data included as well as a number of other indicators on the [Community Profile](#) section of www.housingdata.org. This tool should prove to be a useful resource for anyone interested in the demographic makeup, housing needs, and economic indicators for communities and regions around Vermont.

Read the 2020 Housing Needs Assessment, including county-level indicators by going to: [2020 Vermont Housing Needs Assessment](#)

Summaries of major findings for each section are available here:

[Fact Sheet #1: Highlights](#)

[Fact Sheet #2: Demographics](#)

[Fact Sheet #3: Housing Stock](#)

[Fact Sheet #4: Renters](#)

[Fact Sheet #5: Homeowners](#)

[Fact Sheet #6: Seniors](#)

[Fact Sheet #7: Large and Small Households](#)

[Fact Sheet #8: Race and Ethnicity](#)

[Fact Sheet #9: Special Households](#)

[Fact Sheet #10: Homelessness](#)

VT Economic Mitigation & Recovery Task Force

The Agency of Commerce & Community Development (ACCD) established a task force charged with providing technical assistance and expertise to mitigate the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and develop strategies designed to speed long-term business and community recovery. The task force is made up of (3) action teams comprised of job creators, community leaders and business representatives from each region: Employer Financial & Technical Support Team; Local Support & Community Action Team; and the Restart VT Team. For a list of members and team rosters, visit:



<https://accd.vermont.gov/covid-19/economic-mitigation-and-recovery-task-force>

Events and Opportunities....

For COVID-19 related business, nonprofit, local government, and public assistance information, funding opportunities, and suggestions for donating to service organizations go to:

[BCRC COVID-19 Resource Directory](#)



NeighborWorks Wood/Pellet Stove Program

www.heatsquad.org



Looking for a new wood or pellet stove?

Up to \$3,800* off the cost of a new stove – ASK US HOW!

Income-qualified homeowners are eligible for rebates to help with the cost of purchasing a new pellet or wood stove plus rebates for weatherization measures, qualify for a reduced cost energy audit with HEAT Squad, and financing is available.

Eligible Household Locations:
All towns in **Rutland County** and **Bennington County**



Upgrade your old stove to an efficient, clean-burning pellet or wood stove. Improve air quality while saving money!

heatsquad.org | (802) 438-2303
HEAT Squad is a service of the nonprofit NeighborWorks of Western Vermont: www.nwwvt.org

February 2020

Thursday Evenings at BAM are back with Zoom!

Join Bennington Area Makers on Thursday evenings at 6:00 pm to learn about what your neighbors are making and share projects that you are working on. A great way to make connections, ask questions, and get new ideas for projects.

To register for Thursday Evenings at BAM, go to <https://forms.gle/1xnVUSBw271gkuYc6>.

For more information, visit our website, www.bamvt.org, or find us on facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/MakeBennington/>

Coronavirus Pandemic: Additional \$100 million available to Firefighters

Fire service organizations nationwide with membership on the front lines in the fight against the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic can apply for a share of \$100 million in funding to purchase personal protective equipment and supplies. The funding is part of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act through FEMA Assistance for Firefighters Grant Program (AFGP).

The deadline for applications is May 15. AFG-S provides direct financial assistance to eligible fire departments, nonaffiliated emergency medical service organizations and state fire training academies.

Those who would like to start planning their application before the application period can access the Notice of Funding Opportunity: [FEMA website](#). The online AFG-S Grant Program application is available through the AFGP [FEMA Grants Outcomes \(GO\) application portal](#).

The [Downtown and Village Center Tax Credit Program](#) helps to stimulate private investment, create jobs, restore buildings and jump start revitalization in Vermont communities. Successful projects range from small bed and breakfasts and rental apartments to multimillion-dollar downtown redevelopments. In 2020, \$2,600,000 in state income tax credits are available to projects that enhance the historic character and improve building safety of older and historic commercial buildings located in [Designated Downtowns](#) or [Village Centers](#). Credits support general rehabilitation work, code compliance work, and exterior façade improvements, and may be combined with the federal program.

Applications are due July 1, 2020 by close of business (4:30 pm). *Contact program staff before the deadline to discuss any delays in submitting application materials due to the Covid-19 Pandemic.*

For questions regarding this program, contact: Caitlin Corkins, Tax Credits & Grants Coordinator at: caitlin.corkins@vermont.gov or by phone at 802-828-3047.

VTrans is in the process of updating its **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Transition Plan**. The Transition Plan covers assets for which VTrans has jurisdiction like state Park and Rides, pedestrian signals, airports, etc. The purpose of this 2020 Transition Plan update is to identify the accessibility improvements completed since the last Transition Plan update in 2014, resolve accessibility deficiencies as they arise and ensure compliance with current standards or guidelines, establish a plan for addressing these issues, conduct a public involvement process to gather input, and establish a clear process for receiving any accessibility complaints.

The draft 2020 ADA Transition Plan and a comment form can be found at <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/content/ada-transition-plan>.

Comments are being received through May 31, 2020. A public meeting will be held on May 21st from 2 :00 to 3:30 PM using Zoom. Meeting details will be posted at the above link soon.