

# COMMISSIONER HANDBOOK

## I. WELCOME TO THE WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION

You have been chosen by your town's Selectboard to serve on the Windham Regional Commission and you're wondering...exactly what is the Regional Commission, and what does it do? What are my responsibilities? What is my role? What kinds of decisions must I be prepared to make?

This Handbook will help you better understand your role and duties as a Regional Commissioner. It discusses the Windham Regional Commission (WRC), what the Commission can do, and what you will be doing as a policy maker, and as a WRC Committee member.

The information in the Commissioners Manual, including this Handbook, was put together by WRC staff, although many individual documents have been voted on by the Commission itself. It has been prepared to give you answers to some of the questions often asked by Commissioners, and to start your thinking about the WRC and how you'll help it do its job.

## II. GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION

What are the best ways to learn about the structure, issues, and tasks of the Windham Regional Commission? There are several sources, including the WRC website, the Commissioners Manual, and orientation sessions.

The Commissioner orientation program is the best place to start. At least once each year, the WRC conducts a Commissioner orientation program for both new and veteran Commissioners. This session provides an ideal opportunity to learn more about the Commission and how it works, to learn more about the job of Commissioner and how to be effective at that job, and to get to know other citizens who serve as Windham Regional Commissioners. The program is designed to help new Commissioners "hit the ground running."

Veteran Regional Commissioners offer another invaluable resource for new Commissioners. Talk with your predecessor, the other Commissioner from your town, members of the WRC Executive Board, and Commissioners who serve on Committees that interest you. WRC staff can help you pair up with a veteran who shares similar interests and concerns.

Review the materials in the Commissioners' Manual (contents include: I - Commissioners' Handbook; II - Contact Info, Committees, the People; III - WRC Organization and Policies; IV - Important Miscellany; and V - State Laws). After reading this introduction, skip to the Commissioner Job Description if you were not given one prior to your appointment. The Commission Bylaws explain the nuts and bolts of the organizational structure. The legal basis for the WRC is contained in State law, Chapter 117 of Title 24 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated (V.S.A). Sections 4341-4352 can give you the basics on regional planning commissions.

Visit or call the WRC offices and talk with the Executive Director and staff. The Executive Director will be happy to brief you on the Commission's history, organization, work program, staffing, and funding. The Director can answer your questions and can recommend reports, textbooks, and laws for further reading.

### **III. WHAT IS THE WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION?**

The Windham Regional Commission is composed of Commissioners, appointed by their town Selectboards, who provide a voice for their respective towns in the business of the WRC, and who engage in policy making and policy implementation for the 27-town Windham Region. The Region consists of the 23 towns of Windham County, the towns of Readsboro, Searsburg, and Winhall in Bennington County, and Weston in Windsor County. The Region is composed of communities whose residents are linked economically, socially and geographically into one larger community--the Region. In the absence of county government, Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions provide the essential link between local, state and federal government. The mission of the WRC is to assist towns in southeastern Vermont with providing effective local governance and work collaboratively with them to address regional issues. This mission statement has been adopted by the Commission to guide all of our actions and programs.

In 1965, Selectboard members of towns in the Windham Region chose to form a regional organization designed to assist their respective towns to address local needs and work cooperatively on regional issues. The WRC is the oldest of Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions.

This is still our underlying purpose. Regional planning commissions are political subdivisions of the state, which are given the authority to develop regional plans that contain policies that have standing in state regulatory proceedings, such as Act 250 (land use) and Section 248 (energy). Regional planning commissions are charged with identifying and implementing regional priorities, but the development of regional plans, policies, and priorities is done through agreement among you and your colleagues - the town-appointed Commissioners. The WRC also assists towns to work together on matters that transcend municipal boundaries, typically at the request of, or certainly with the willing engagement of, those towns. The WRC also assists individual towns at the request of the Selectboard and/or Planning Commission, to address town-specific needs.

This regional organization, the WRC, shares many characteristics with regional organizations throughout the country:

- We are voluntary. Local financial contributions are voluntary, and local implementation of Commission recommendations is voluntary. We have no traditional local governmental authority such as taxation, ordinance making, or eminent domain.
- Our legal status exists through the agreement of member local governments and by virtue of specific state law.

- Our interests include a variety of public issues and needs, such as transportation, community development, natural resources and water quality, energy, emergency planning, and climate change resilience.

Like other regional commissions, the WRC differs from local governments in a number of ways.

- Commissioners representing towns are appointed by their respective town legislative bodies. The officers of the WRC are elected by its Commissioners from among its Commissioners. Citizen Interest Commissioners are appointed and elected by Commissioners.

The WRC receives most of its funding through performance-based grants and through a performance-based contract with the state. The funds we receive through the state performance contract are derived through the state property transfer tax. Town assessments constitute a small but very important percentage of our funding.

- The WRC is adaptable; it is relatively easy for its staff resource to change in size and specialty to meet the needs and interests of the member towns.

In short, the WRC works to maintain and improve the region's quality of life through planning for its future in direct collaboration with the towns we serve. We promote cooperation of local Planning Commissions, legislative bodies, and officials, encourage the coordinated development of the region, prepare and adopt comprehensive regional plans, and perform other acts or functions as appropriate to fulfill the duties and obligations we have undertaken.

#### **IV. WHO GOVERNS THE REGIONAL COMMISSION?**

You do (you and the other appointees of the town governing bodies that are members of the WRC). In addition to each town's two representatives, the Commission also includes up to ten Citizen Interest Commissioners to represent other important regional needs including conservation, healthy communities, business and industry, natural resources, energy, economic development, arts and culture, agriculture, tourism, and housing. The interests that need representation or engagement are up to the Commission, so these topics or needs may change as the Commission deems advisable.

The WRC has a voting and representation system that reflects an equal status of all towns regardless of size. The most critical votes are on regional policies, which guide all actions of the Commission. All of the Commission's authority comes from local or state action, and is guided by the region's government officials. Our work is inherently collaborative. While we represent regional plan policies in regulatory proceedings, we have no permitting authority. While we have regional priorities, we implement those priorities in collaboration with towns, and frequently in collaboration with other entities such as the regional development corporation (the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation), the Windham County Natural Resources Conservation District, watershed groups, recreation organizations, housing trusts, and many other collaborating partner organizations.

Commissioners actively participate in the work leading to WRC decisions through the Commission's Committees. Our Committees and subcommittees work in partnership with professional staff to develop and guide the preparation and implementation of WRC plans, positions, and programs. As part of their responsibility of being a WRC Commissioner, Commissioners serve on one or more WRC Committees, which may also include other town officials and citizens. These Committees are charged with conducting a detailed analysis of issues facing the Commission and then recommending major position statements, and plan and program decisions to the Executive Board and full Commission.

## **V. COMPROMISE AND COLLABORATION**

The voluntary nature of the Commission points out one of the underlying and crucial tasks that you face. The art of compromise was never as vital as it is in regional intermunicipal government affairs. You must be able to "walk a mile" in your colleague's shoes, as well as express to other Commission members your own concerns and the concerns of your town.

You must serve your local interests in a gathering of equals and try to balance local concerns with what's best for the regional community as a whole. You must work to reach a consensus and then work to gain the support of your colleagues and the public back home.

You are a representative and a diplomat and should be open to new approaches and ideas. You may experience times of uncertainty and confusion, but veteran Commissioners and WRC staff provide a wealth of resources to assist you in your job. Whether you are the quiet, "working behind the scenes" individual or the outspoken, highly visible type, the Commission staff and the public look to you for leadership.

## **VI. JUST WHAT WILL YOU BE DOING?**

Your WRC tasks and duties will vary depending upon the programs in which you participate and, of course, what attitudes and priorities you bring to the WRC. All Commissioners contribute to directing the professional staff through policy decisions. Some of the decisions you'll be making include:

- Determining the WRC's Budget and Annual Work Program, albeit within the constraints of the performance-based grants we receive.
- Setting regional policies and approving or revising plans prepared by Committees and staff.
- Working with staff through the Committee structure on special regional or local projects and/or studies.

Decision-making is only part of the job, however. After the decisions are made they have to be implemented, and that is often more difficult on a regional basis than at the local level. Since regional commissions have little authority, they must rely on collaboration to implement their decisions. That means that you have the responsibility of bringing awareness of regional initiatives to your town Planning Commission and Selectboard, and bringing their interests back to the WRC.

Some techniques and tools for building local support are outlined in Section VII.

Your WRC responsibility includes your relationship with the WRC’s professional staff. The Commission directs the staff through the Executive Director by establishing goals, formulating policies, and setting priorities. The staff handles the day-to-day administrative details and technical tasks, but the resolution of policy matters will always be your responsibility. The staff is there to assist you. If you need more information to make an informed decision, please ask staff for what you need.

## **VII. TECHNIQUES FOR THE EFFECTIVE REGIONAL COMMISSIONER**

### **KEEP INFORMED**

Do your homework. Read and study staff reports and generally stay informed about what’s going on in the region and in Vermont.

Monitor the WRC’s administrative areas, such as budget reports and progress on implementing the work program, by following the actions of the Executive Board

### **PARTICIPATE**

Attend and participate in WRC meetings. Please be sure to sign in on the attendance sheet; this is important for a number of reasons, such as documenting the presence of a quorum. If you cannot attend, call or email the WRC office so we’ll know. Make arrangements to get your opinions to the meetings and follow up to learn what you missed. (Please see the WRC Rules of Procedure if you find you will not be able to participate in two or more consecutive Committee meetings.)

Let the Executive Board Chair (or Executive Director) know of your Committee interests and work with other Commissioners in carrying out the work of the WRC.

Ask questions during meetings. Where you can, help other Commissioners see the whole issue and all sides of complex items. Create space for other Commissioners to have their voice heard.

Put your special expertise to work by serving on Committees.

Help new Commissioners become fully acquainted with the Commission’s background and current policies.

### **BUILD SUPPORT “BACK HOME”**

Brief your local Selectboard, Planning Commission, and other town officials on regional issues, deliberations, and decisions of the WRC. Attend Selectboard and Planning Commission meetings and offer a brief report.

Use additional and less formal methods of communicating with your town, such as chatting at the post office, gas station, passing along agendas, memos and meeting notices with your own notes added, or phone contacts. Remember, all local officials are busy and they want good information. Look for opportunities to communicate efficiently.

Work with your town to identify local and regional needs or concerns to be taken back to the WRC.

Advise your colleagues of regional activities benefiting your community.

Participate in other public meetings on specific issues to inform your constituents on regional plans and to seek their ideas and participation. Volunteer to chair or moderate workshops, seminars, or conferences on regional issues sponsored by the WRC, your town Planning Commission or Selectboard, or other interested groups.

### STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STATE AND FEDERAL OFFICIALS

Become acquainted with the state officials who deal with the region and build a friendly relationship with them. Provide them with basic information about regional planning-- what it is and what it means to the local governments of the region and the region as a whole.

Keep your calls or visits with your state legislators positive. Do not demand their help or criticize their position. Present your issue and ask if they can help. Concentrate on a single topic, rather than a "laundry list" of problems.

Assess your regional commission's priorities and link them, whenever possible, to the priorities of your state and federal representatives.

Let your representatives know your stand on the legislative issues and be prepared to explain how the legislation would affect the region.

When your representatives take a position you support, let them know you support them and ask how you can help.

### MEETING AGENDA

The meetings of the full Commission and its Committees follow an established agenda. To add an item to the agenda for a meeting, contact either the Chair or the Executive Director at least ten days prior to the meeting date.

### OFFICERS & EXECUTIVE BOARD

The Commission elects a Chair and other officers at the annual business meeting. A description of the offices and their responsibilities are included in the Commission Bylaws. The Executive Board consists of the officers and six additional Commissioners.

The Executive Board oversees the month-to-month activities of the Commission; the staff works on and makes recommendations on matters coming before the full Commission. Staff direction goes through the Executive Director.

### COMMISSION MEETINGS

- Executive Board meetings – 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of every month; 6:00 p.m., WRC offices
- Committees – (as scheduled and necessary)
- Full Commission – typically the last Tuesday of every other month; 6:00 p.m.
- Orientation Meeting – usually in the spring or fall when there are several new Commissioners.

All meetings are open for public attendance. An opportunity for public comment is provided.

### MOTIONS

When a motion has been made, seconded, and opened for discussion, no other business should be discussed until action has been taken on the motion before the Commission. All Commissioners are encouraged to add to the discussion of a motion. The Chair will make every effort to insure that all members are given the opportunity to speak. Please create space for all Commissioners who want to engage to do so.

### VOTING

Except where otherwise provided by the Commission's Bylaws, the WRC meetings and voting are conducted in accord with WRC Rules of Procedure. Some items, specifically votes on regional plan adoption or amendment, require extraordinary majorities or minimum votes by town representatives to the Commission as mandated by state law and the Commission's Bylaws. It is a general rule that no one can participate on a question in which he or she has a direct personal or pecuniary interest (except for voting for oneself for any office). Any Commissioner may, for reason, abstain from voting, but should indicate the abstention at the time of the vote.

Approved by the Full Commission: April 30, 2019