

# WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSIONER HANDBOOK

## I. WELCOME TO THE WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION

Congratulations on your appointment as a commissioner with the Windham Regional Commission (WRC)

Commissioners are appointed by their town's Selectboard to serve for a one-year term with the WRC. While each commissioner is elected for a single year, the WRC has no term limits, so it is not uncommon for commissioners to be re-appointed year after year, with some commissioners serving with the WRC for decades.

New commissioners often wonder what exactly is the Regional Commission, what does it do and what is my role as a commissioner within the WRC?

Here are four ways to learn more about the WRC and the role of its commissioners:

### 1. Read this handbook

This Handbook was prepared by a representative group of WRC staff and experienced commissioners to help commissioners better understand their individual role and duties as a Windham Regional Commissioner. It describes the work of the WRC, its structure and policies and outlines the work commissioners do as policy makers and committee members.

### 2. Visit the WRC website

The WRC website is a comprehensive public website that allows commissioners and the public to learn about the past, present, and future work of the WRC. It is recommended that all commissioners initially take some time to familiarize themselves with the website and then, as needed, revisit and explore the website regarding specific topics of interest or things that are unclear. Substantive changes to the website are announced as they occur.

### 3. Participate in the annual orientation session.

Each year, the WRC conducts an in-person commissioner orientation program for both new and experienced commissioners. This session provides an ideal opportunity for individuals to meet fellow commissioners, learn more about the WRC and its workings, and better understand the specific role and responsibilities of a commissioner. These orientation sessions are great refreshers for experienced commissioners, and they help new commissioners to "hit the ground running."

#### **4. Talk to other commissioners and WRC staff**

All commissioners are invited and encouraged to reach out to experienced commissioners and the WRC staff with any general or specific questions. Veteran commissioners and staff are invaluable resources for new commissioners. New commissioners should not hesitate to talk with their town predecessor, their fellow town commissioner, members of the WRC staff, active commissioners who serve on committees that interest them or the Executive Director. All commissioners are encouraged to visit or call the WRC offices and talk with the Executive Director and staff. The Executive Director is happy to brief commissioners on the commission's history, organization, work program, staffing, and funding. In addition to answering specific questions about a topic, the Director can recommend reports, textbooks, statutes and laws for further reading.

Upon request, a WRC staff member can also pair new commissioners with a veteran commissioner who shares interests and concerns similar to theirs. We highly recommend that new commissioners take an introductory tour of the WRC Brattleboro offices so they can envision where the daily work is actually being done.

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

In the absence of county government, Vermont's 11 regional planning commissions provide an essential link between the local, state and federal governments.

The WRC region consists of 27 towns -----23 towns located in Windham County, the three towns of Readsboro, Searsburg, and Winhall, in Bennington County, and the town of Weston in Windsor County. These 27 towns and their residents are linked economically, socially and geographically into one larger community referred to as "The Region".

The WRC is the oldest of Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions. In 1965, the Selectboards representing the 27 towns that comprise the region, chose to form a regional organization designed to help their respective towns to address local issues and needs and to work cooperatively with all towns on common regional issues.

The Windham Regional Commission is composed of commissioners appointed for a one-year term by their respective town Selectboards. While conducting the business of the WRC, commissioners provide a voice for their individual towns and engage in policy making and implementation for the entire 27-town region.

## **The WRC Mission**

***The mission of the WRC is to assist 27 individual towns in southeastern Vermont with providing effective local governance and to work collectively with them to address broader regional issues. This simple mission statement has been adopted by The WRC to guide all of our actions and programs.***

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 outline the basics of regional planning commissions. The WRC bylaws explain the particulars of the WRC's organizational structure.

The WRC interests and projects 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.

While Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are political subdivisions of the state and 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) they are not stand-alone regulatory bodies. RPCs can make suggestions and policy recommendations, but they cannot create mandatory, laws, bylaws, ordinances or other policies that are the responsibility of the Federal, State or Local Towns governing bodies.

We are voluntary based commission. Local financial contributions are voluntary, and local implementation of commission recommendations is voluntary. We have no traditional local government 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.

RPCs are charged with identifying and implementing regional priorities, but the actual development of regional plans, policies, and priorities is done through agreement among all the town-appointed commissioners. The WRC also helps towns to work together on matters that transcend municipal boundaries, typically at the request of, and 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 individual town-specific needs.

The WRC is not alone; it shares many characteristics with other regional organizations throughout the country:

**The WRC differs from local governments in these ways:**

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

**In Summary - What the WRC is and is not.**

**The WRC is:**

- One of 11 Regional Planning Commissions (RPC) in the State
- The oldest RPC in Vermont (founded in 1965)
- An essential link between local, state and federal governments.
- An organization designed to help towns within the Windham Region to address their local issues and needs and to work cooperatively with all towns on common regional issues.
- A political subdivision of the state and is 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)
- A voluntary based organization. Local town and individual financial contributions are voluntary, and local implementation of commission recommendations is voluntary.

- RPCs are charged with identifying and implementing regional priorities, but the actual development of regional plans, policies, and priorities is done through agreement among all the town-appointed commissioners. The WRC also helps towns to work together on matters that transcend municipal boundaries, typically at the request of, or certainly with individual town collaboration.
- Adaptable; it is relatively easy for its staffing to change in size and specialty to meet the needs and interests of the member towns.

**The WRC is not:**

- A stand-alone regulatory body. RPCs can make suggestions and policy recommendations, but they cannot create mandatory, laws, bylaws, ordinances, etc. Mandatory policies are the responsibility of the Federal, State or Local Town governing bodies.
- An organization with traditional local government 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.
- A permitting authority.

**III. WHO GOVERNS THE REGIONAL COMMISSION?**

Our commissioners do along with the other appointees of the town governing bodies that are members of the WRC. In addition to the two commissioners appointed from each WRC town, 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 WRC staff to develop and guide the preparation and implementation of WRC plans, positions, and programs. WRC commissioners may be asked to 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 plans and programming decisions to the Executive Board and full commission.

#### **IV. COMPROMISE AND COLLABORATION**

The voluntary nature of the Commission points out one of the underlying and crucial tasks that commissioners face. The art of compromise was never as vital as it is in regional intermunicipal government affairs. Commissioners must be able to “walk a mile” in their colleague's shoes, as well as express to other commission members their own concerns and the concerns of their town. Commissioners must serve their local interests in a gathering of equals and try to balance local concerns with what's best for the regional community as a whole. Commissioners must work to reach a consensus and then work to gain the support of their colleagues and the public back home. Commissioners are both a representative and a diplomat and should be open to new approaches and ideas. Commissioners may experience times of uncertainty and confusion which is normal. New commissioners are not left alone to wrestle with their confusion, veteran commissioners and WRC staff can provide a wealth of resources to assist commissioners with their job. Whether a commissioner is the quiet, “working behind the scenes” type of individual or the outspoken, highly visible type, the commission staff and the public look to commissioners for leadership.

#### **V. WHAT DOES A COMMISSIONER DO?**

Commissioner tasks and duties vary depending upon the programs in which they participate and, of course, what attitudes, background expertise and priorities a commissioner brings to the WRC. All Commissioners contribute to directing the professional staff through policy decisions. Some of the decisions commissioners make include:

- Determining the WRC’s Budget and Annual Work Program, albeit within the constraints of the performance-based grants the WRC receives.
- Setting regional policies and approving or revising plans prepared by committees and staff.
- Potentially working with staff 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 planning commissions have little regulatory authority, they must rely on collaboration to implement their decisions. That means that commissioners have the responsibility of effectively bringing awareness of regional initiatives to their town Planning Commission and Selectboard and communicating their interests back to the WRC.
- Some techniques and tools for building local support are outlined in Section VII.
- A commissioner’s responsibility includes their 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 day-to-day administrative details and technical tasks, but the resolution of policy matters will always be the responsibility of the commissioners. The staff is there to assist commissioners. If commissioners need more information to make an informed decision, the WRC staff will do all possible to assist commissioners.

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

### **KEEP INFORMED**

- Commissioners should do their homework. They must read and study staff reports and generally stay informed about what is going on in the region and in Vermont.
- They should also 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**

- Commissioners are expected to attend and participate in WRC meetings. Most WRC meetings are hybrid meetings. If a commissioner attends in person, they must 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 a commissioner cannot attend a scheduled meeting, they should call or email the WRC office, so they know. Absent commissioners should arrange to get their opinions to the meetings and follow up

by reading the meeting minutes to learn what they missed. (Commissioners missing two or more consecutive meetings should consult the WRC Rules of Procedure for resolution.

- Commissioners should inform the Executive Board Chair (or Executive Director) of their committee interests and work with other commissioners in carrying out the work of the WRC.
- Commissioners are encouraged to ask questions and express their opinions during meetings. Where possible, they should help other commissioners understand and see the whole issue and all sides of complex items. All commissioners should create space for other commissioners to have their voice heard.
- Commissioners with special expertise should look to serve on committees that address that expertise.
- Experienced commissioners should do all possible to assist new commissioners to become fully acquainted with the commission's background and current policies.

#### **BUILD SUPPORT “BACK HOME”**

- Commissioners should brief their local Selectboard, Planning Commission, and other town officials on regional issues, deliberations, and decisions of the WRC. When possible, they should attend Selectboard and Planning Commission meetings and offer a brief report on pertinent WRC activities and projects.
- When appropriate, commissioners should strive to use less formal methods of communicating with their town constituents such as chatting at the post office or gas station, and by passing along agendas, memos, phone numbers and meeting notices with their own notes added. Commissioners should realize that all local officials are busy and appreciate good and concise information. Look for opportunities to communicate efficiently.
- Commissioners should work with their town to identify local and regional needs or concerns to be taken back to the WRC.
- Commissioners should advise their colleagues of regional activities benefiting their community.
- Commissioners should participate in other public meetings on specific issues to inform their constituents about regional plans and to seek their ideas and participation. Commissioners should strive to chair or moderate workshops, seminars, or conferences on regional issues sponsored by the WRC, their town Planning Commission or Selectboard, or other interested groups.

## **STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH STATE AND FEDERAL OFFICIALS**

### **Commissioners should:**

- Become acquainted with the state officials who deal with their region and strive to 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 their calls or visits with their state legislators positive. Strive not to demand their help or criticize their position. Present issues clearly and ask if they can help. Concentrate on a single topic, rather than a “laundry list” of problems.
- Assess their regional commission’s priorities and link them, whenever possible, to the priorities of their state and federal representatives.
- Let their representatives know their stance on the legislative issues and be prepared to explain how the legislation would positively or negatively affect the region.
- When their representatives take a position they support, commissioners should thank them and let them know they support them and are willing to help.

### **MEETINGS**

- The meetings of the full Commission and its Committees follow Vermont’s Open Meeting Law and have an established and published agenda. To add an item to the agenda for a meeting, a commissioner should contact either the Board 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 is 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, and the staff works on and makes recommendations on matters coming before the full Commission.
- Staff directions and assignments go through the Executive Director. Commissioners are invited to visit or call the WRC offices and talk with the Executive Director and staff about any questions or issues. The Executive Director will be happy to brief all commissioners on the commission’s history, organization, work program, staffing, and funding. The Director can answer questions and can recommend reports, textbooks, and laws for further reading.

## **COMMISSION MEETINGS**

- Executive Board meetings – 2nd Tuesday of every month; 6:00 p.m., virtually and at the 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 and 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 ensure that all members are given the opportunity to speak. Commissioners should 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 accordance 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 abstention at the time of the vote.

Adopted by the Executive Board April 14, 2026

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