

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## THE WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION

The Windham Regional Commission (WRC) is an association of 27 towns formed in 1965 and subsequently constituted by the State Legislature under the Vermont Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act (24 V.S.A. Chapter 117). The WRC's mission is to assist member towns to provide effective local government and to work cooperatively with them to address regional issues. Each member town appoints two commissioners to represent that town's interests in regional affairs. Additionally, the WRC has up to ten citizen interest commissioners who represent other regional interests such as agriculture, arts, natural resources, housing, and business and industry. The WRC is supported by an annual appropriation from member towns, an annual appropriation from the Legislature, and by private, state, and federal grants.

The WRC was created following Governor Philip Hoff's 1962 expansion of the state planning program, with four basic goals:

- Promote economic development, increasing jobs and income;
- Preserve the natural beauty of Vermont;
- Obtain and maintain efficiency in government expenditure; and
- Safeguard and extend local autonomy in planning and development decisions.

## PURPOSE AND USE OF THE WINDHAM REGIONAL PLAN

The purpose of the Windham Regional Plan (the plan) is to provide guidance for change in the Windham Region. The plan reflects shared values and concerns of the people who live in the 27-towns and it discusses issues facing the region. Based on a set of over-arching regional goals and priorities, the plan sets long-term policies for the region. The plan is a living document that must continually evolve to reflect the dynamic social, economic, and environmental conditions in the region. Statute requires that the regional plan be updated every eight years, but it is the WRC's intent that the review and update process should be an ongoing effort.

## WHO USES THE PLAN?

The plan is the basis for the WRC's day-to-day operations and guides regional planning efforts. The WRC commits its staff and resources to work on implementation of the plan's stated priorities, goals, and policies. The WRC's Executive Board, committees, and professional staff implement the plan. For more information on how the WRC uses the plan, refer to the Implementation Section.

Towns with active planning programs also use the Regional Plan as a guideline for local planning efforts, or they may adopt portions of this plan as their own. When applicable, the District Environmental Commission and other state agencies use the plan to review both public and private development proposals. The plan also serves citizens and government agencies as a source of regional information.

## LEGAL AUTHORITY AND USE OF THE PLAN

The plan is to be used by the WRC, town planning commissions, selectboards, state agencies, landowners, and citizens in a number of ways:

- To guide basic decisions for planning programs at the WRC;
- To provide guidance for planning and development initiatives at the local level;
- To serve as a basis to evaluate and review development projects proposed under [Title 10 V.S.A. Chapter 151: State Land Use and Development Plans](#) (Act 250) and [Title 30 V.S.A. § 248](#) (Public Service); and
- To assist, where needed, in determining compatibility of state and federal agency plans affecting land use with regional and local planning and development priorities.

## PLAN ORGANIZATION

With the adoption of the current Windham Regional Plan, the WRC has transitioned to an entirely web-based plan to improve navigation and use of the plan. The plan is organized around the following planning topics: Land Use, Energy, Economic Development, Transportation, Natural Resources, Housing, Education, Cultural and Recreational Resources, and Community Utilities, Facilities, and Services. Each section provides the current reference information, data, and analysis of the planning topics. The Introduction section presents the overarching vision and goals that influence all other elements of the plan.

Each planning topic also includes a set of policies that provide the framework for review and evaluation of projects and issues brought before the Windham Regional Commission. The policies provide direction for the Region. A

complete list of the Plan’s policies can be found under the Policies Section of the website and each planning topic area also links directly to its relevant policies. Other sections on the website include the Implementation, which provides a discussion on how the plan is put into action, and the Regional Profile, which provides a background on the Region’s geography, history, and current population and demographic data.

To take advantage of the web-based format, and to better inform the reader, embedded hyperlinks are found throughout the Plan to direct users to relevant websites and documents. The vision, goals, objectives and policies contained within this plan are not dependent upon access to these additional digital resources. The links are provided for additional reference information only.

## MAPS

This Plan contains maps that present important background information, and others that present a vision for the region’s future. The text and maps should be used together to be properly understood. The maps present information in a generalized format. More detailed information often is available from other maps or data sources, and those are referenced on the Regional Plan maps. Users of this plan and its maps are encouraged to consult those sources when more detailed information is needed regarding the presence, absence, or precise location of a given map feature.

## PLANNING PROCESS

Statute requires Regional Planning Commissions to review and update their Regional Plans every 8 years. WRC last completed an update to the Windham Regional Plan in 2025. The plan was adopted on July 29, 2025 and went into effect on September 2, 2025. The 2025 Regional Plan represented a major update to the plan, which was previously updated in 2014 and then re-adopted in 2022.

For the 2025 Regional Plan update, WRC completed public engagement over the course of several years. At the beginning of the planning process, a public webinar was held and WRC staff met with stakeholder groups. In February 2025, a series of four in-person meetings were held across the region, as well as one remote meeting, to present the draft Regional Plan and WRC’s priorities. The plan was revised based on comments received. Two public hearings were held in July 2025 prior to WRC adopting the plan.

Act 181 was passed in 2024 and included changes to regional planning requirements. In addition, Act 181 reformed Act 250 and the State Designation Program, as discussed in the Land Use chapter. Regional Planning Commissions are required to adopt an Act 181-compliant Regional Plan by December 31, 2026. Because WRC was already close to completing a draft of the 2025 Regional Plan at the time of Act 181’s passage, WRC chose to move ahead with adopting the current draft of the plan and then revise the plan to address the new planning requirements by the statute deadline.

WRC staff began initial outreach to municipal officials about Act 181, the new regional planning requirements, and the implications for towns in 2025. A public meeting for town officials was held in June 2025. A summary about Act 181 was distributed to towns in the region and WRC created a page on its website with information about Act 181, the draft regional future land use maps, and upcoming public meeting dates with towns. Over several months from October 2025 – May 2026, WRC staff met with each town in the region to review and finalize the draft regional future land use map, go over local housing targets, and discuss the purpose and role of the Regional Plan. The regional future land use map was updated based on local knowledge and municipal planning efforts. Many of these meetings were promoted as public meetings and often had large turnouts. In total, WRC staff held approximately 30 meetings in towns throughout the region and engaged with well over 200 local officials and members of the public.

During this time, WRC also hosted two meetings specifically about the Act 250 reforms under Act 181 and the new Tier system in response to numerous questions from town officials and members of the public. These meetings were attended by a member of the Land Use Review Board who provided an update on the mapping and rulemaking process for Tier 3 and the Road Rule. One meeting was held in the town of Grafton in December 2025 and a second meeting was held remotely in March 2026. Both meetings were well attended by members of the public and local officials.

A final public in-person meeting was held in Brattleboro in May 2026 and a virtual meeting was held in May 2026 to present a summary of the revisions to the 2025 Regional Plan prior to submitting a pre-application to the Land Use Review Board. The complete draft of the plan and regional future land use map were available on WRC's website for several weeks before these meetings. Both meetings were attended by members of the public, municipal officials, and WRC Commissioners.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

As part of the current plan update process, WRC also addressed the Act 181 requirement that Regional Planning Commissions consider the potential environmental benefits and environmental burdens of the proposed plan. Because the Regional Plan is not regulatory, the environmental equity goal is addressed primarily through the plan's policies and programs managed by WRC. WRC analyzed which census tracts met the state definition for environmental justice focus population and reviewed all of the plan policies to ensure they support the environmental benefits or mitigate the environmental burdens defined in 3 V.S.A. § 6002. See Appendix A for the complete analysis.

Environmental Justice communities, as defined by Act 181, are identified based on annual household income, percent of Persons of Color and Indigenous Peoples, and percent of households with limited English proficiency. In the Windham Region, the following municipalities are considered as having environmental justice populations:

- English Language Proficiency: Brattleboro and Weston
- Person of Color and Indigenous Peoples: Brattleboro, Halifax, Marlboro, Putney, and Rockingham
- Household Income: Dover, Brattleboro, Newfane, and Rockingham

In addition to the Vermont Act 181 defined environmental justice communities, Federal and State agencies have developed several tools to analyze data for social and environmental disparities. It is helpful to cross reference the results across these various tools to help identify trends in our communities. WRC looked at the following additional tools:

- Vermont Heat Vulnerability Index – Vermont Department of Health
- Vermont Social Vulnerability Index – Vermont Department of Health
- Vermont Environmental Disparity Index – University of Vermont
- The Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool - Federal Council on Environmental Quality
- Environmental Justice Mapper – Environmental Protection Agency

Looking at the trends across all of these tools, WRC noted that the communities with the highest disparities in social and environmental issues are the census tracts that include Downtown Brattleboro and the Village of Bellows Falls. These communities are the most densely populated in the Windham Region. While this tracks with what WRC experiences in our region, it is also important to note that due to the rural nature of our region, U.S. Census data can not drill down fine enough and has a larger margin of error in some communities. Therefore, it is important for WRC to consider the disparities that may exist within every community as well as the region overall.

## VISION FOR THE WINDHAM REGION

The following statements of long-range desires constitute a shared vision for the future of the Windham Region. They form the basis of this plan and will provide a background for understanding the plan's policies. When readers of the plan are uncertain about the reasons for a policy, returning to the vision statement should help. The vision is:

### FOR THE PEOPLE

- A high quality of life, defined as a composite of our economic, social, cultural, and ecological well-being;
- Support for modern infrastructure and telecommunications, while protecting the environment;

- A special place to live and work with a caring attitude for the environment, for each other, and for our communities and their institutions;
- A strong sense of history and culture;
- Stewardship of the region and its resources so that future generations will enjoy a sound economy, a healthy environment, quality education, and effective health services;
- A sense of independence and self-reliance that also recognizes our interdependence and the need for mutual cooperation;

## FOR THE PLACE

- A variety in land use that reflects the region's diverse mix of rural lands, small communities and large centers, with the natural environment and working landscape part of our daily lives;
- A region made better as a result of our efforts;

## FOR THE COMMUNITIES

- Individual places with their own identity and self destiny, commercial and industrial centers, historic villages and downtowns, residential communities, and recreational centers, all of which both contrast with and complement each other;
- A functional man-made environment, with interest, beauty, and value that complements our natural environment;
- Decision-making that encourages public involvement at every stage, and affirms the legal right and obligation of elected and appointed officials to act. An educated and informed citizenry ready to make effective choices;
- Dialogue within and among the region's towns about where and under what conditions change and growth should occur, and support for a type and pace of change that are appropriate for the region and its communities;

## FOR THE FUTURE

- A sustainable future with an identification of—and focus on—critical issues, especially including

environmentally and economically sustainable energy sources;

- Development, conservation, and preservation interests working together for the benefit of our communities and the environment;
- A regional commission that recognizes and supports the goals, policies, and issues of member communities as expressed in town plans, and that fosters cooperation among town, state, and federal governments and between public and private interests; and
- Recognition of the rights and responsibilities associated with property ownership.

## REGIONAL GOALS

A set of regional goals has withstood the test of time for relevance and importance to the Windham Region. These goals evolved from prior plans and they continue to be the subject of on-going dialogue between the WRC and its member towns. The regional goals which correspond generally to the Vermont Planning Goals are:

- To plan development in order to maintain the region's land use and historic settlement pattern of compact villages and urban centers separated by rural countryside;
- To encourage the availability of a reliable, sufficient, and economical energy supply, to support energy conservation and efficiency, to encourage the development of appropriately scaled and sited energy generation resources, and to facilitate conversations between towns where different interests exist;
- To provide for safe, convenient, economical, and energy efficient transportation systems including options such as public transit and paths for pedestrians and bicyclists, where appropriate;
- To provide a vital and diverse economy with rewarding job opportunities and high environmental standards for the region's citizens;
- To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest enterprises;
- To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife, and land resources in the region;
- To identify, protect, and preserve regionally important natural and historic features of the Vermont landscape;
- To provide for thoughtful and efficient use of the region's natural resources, including the prevention of surface water and groundwater pollution, the protection of fragile natural habitats and endangered or threatened species, the avoidance of agricultural and other land-use practices that lead to soil erosion, the

management of woodlands on a sustainable basis, and the sensitive treatment of scenic resources. Mineral extraction should have minimal adverse effects on aesthetics, water quality, air quality, and special community resources (such as historic sites, recreation, or scenic areas), and effective site rehabilitation plans should be provided and implemented;

- To plan for, and to educate the public about, natural and other hazards in the region, the prevention and mitigation of these hazards, and for preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience.
- To educate the public about the inherent risk to life and property associated with development within river and stream corridors, including fluvial erosion hazard areas, and to continue to develop actions and policies that prevent and mitigate these risks wherever possible.
- To promote the development of housing suitable to the needs of the region and to ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing for all citizens of the region;
- To broaden access to education and training for all citizens;
- To maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors in keeping with the carrying capacity of natural resources and public facilities;
- To plan for, finance, and provide an efficient system of public facilities and services (such as schools, water and wastewater facilities, highways and bridges) to meet future local, regional, and state needs; and
- To support affordable access to high-quality health care services for all citizens; and
- To equitably distribute environmental benefits and burdens across the region.