



Housing: What can towns, and the region, really do about creating more?

We're deep in a housing crisis that was decades in the making. What can towns, and the Windham Regional Commission (WRC), do about it? Towns can actually take concrete steps to create favorable conditions for more housing. Regions can help with higher-level planning and support of municipal efforts, but we don't have the authority to take the actions that towns are empowered to take like planning and building infrastructure, streamlining zoning and permitting, and even providing access to land. To that end it's often supporting the work of towns where we can make the most difference.

What can the WRC do?

We own no assets, nor do we have the ability to tax to raise public dollars to invest in the infrastructure (water, wastewater, sidewalks, roads, public services, etc.) necessary to support housing at scale, meaning housing developed in sufficient numbers to achieve economies of scale in materials, construction, and paying for the related support infrastructure. Our role in permitting is indirect - our plans only come directly into play through Act 250 when District Environmental Commissions take regional plan policy under advisement (i.e., our regional plan policies do not determine Act 250 permit outcomes). We can identify at a high level where infrastructure exists to support the development of housing, areas that are well-suited to additional housing if the corresponding infrastructure existed, areas that are less likely to be at risk of flooding and other hazards, and where in the region compact settlement expansion makes the most sense. Where we can make the most difference is supporting towns in their work.

What can towns do, and how can the WRC help?

Recognize the need for housing, and commit to planning for housing. Creating conditions for local housing for local residents is a local responsibility. This must be a priority of both the selectboard and the planning commission, and for it to be their priority, it must be a priority of the residents of the town. It is at the town level where land use and infrastructure decisions are made. We can help explain the Vermont land use planning context and why decision-making at the local level is essential.

Recognize the current and future housing realities. While this can certainly include single-family detached housing, unless there's a dramatic positive change in Vermonters' incomes and a dramatic decrease in land and construction costs, the future of housing will need to include two-family dwellings and multi-family dwellings. The WRC can work with the planning commission and selectboard to think through what housing solutions could make the most sense for your town.

Intermunicipal housing conversations. It could be that the best housing solution for the residents of your town will ultimately be found in a neighboring town. It can be very difficult to do some things on a town-by-town basis and a more intermunicipal approach can be beneficial. Housing is one of those. Some towns are better suited for housing than others because existing settlement patterns lend themselves to new housing and neighborhood development, land is available for compact settlement that is not likely at risk of flooding, there's existing infrastructure and the ability to expand that infrastructure, and other very practical considerations. The WRC can support these conversations.

Build infrastructure. Housing at scale, meaning building enough units at one time to capture material, labor, and permitting efficiencies, cannot be built in the absence of public water and wastewater. Developers can build their own wastewater and water systems, but that drives up costs even higher, making housing affordability even more unattainable. The WRC has gained experience working with towns designing and preparing to build community wastewater systems intended primarily to support existing uses within villages. We can help you think through the infrastructure planning and development process, and we can support that work if the town chooses to go forward. The [Vermont Community Housing Infrastructure Program \(CHIP\)](#) is a statewide tax increment financing tool that can facilitate investment in critical public infrastructure to support housing development.

Affect Housing Development Cost Factors. Towns can't directly affect major housing costs like labor and materials, but it is possible for towns to provide land. Some towns already own land that could be well-suited to housing development. The WRC can work with towns to explore what options might make sense. And while towns can't set interest rates, they can establish tools such as revolving loan funds to lend money at more favorable rates than what is commercially available, or utilize [tax stabilization](#). The amount of capital needed to establish the fund to support significant new housing would likely be beyond the capacity of most of our towns, but smaller amounts could be made available to make improvements to retain and improve existing housing, create new apartments within existing buildings, or for pre-development costs associated with larger projects. As with any lending there is a risk of loss, but the WRC could help towns explore what possibilities might make sense.

Make permitting easy. Towns that have zoning and permitting can make the regulatory pathway clear, predictable, and quick. The WRC has been working with towns on updating their zoning for housing, and we can advise on permitting processes. Act 181 gives towns new tools to make it easier to build housing in and near existing villages and downtowns through what is referred to as [Tier 1a and 1b status](#), which provide partial or full exemption from Act 250 permitting requirements. We can help towns understand what these Tiers mean, eligibility requirements, and how to request their inclusion in the Windham Regional Plan.