

The Windham Regional Commission



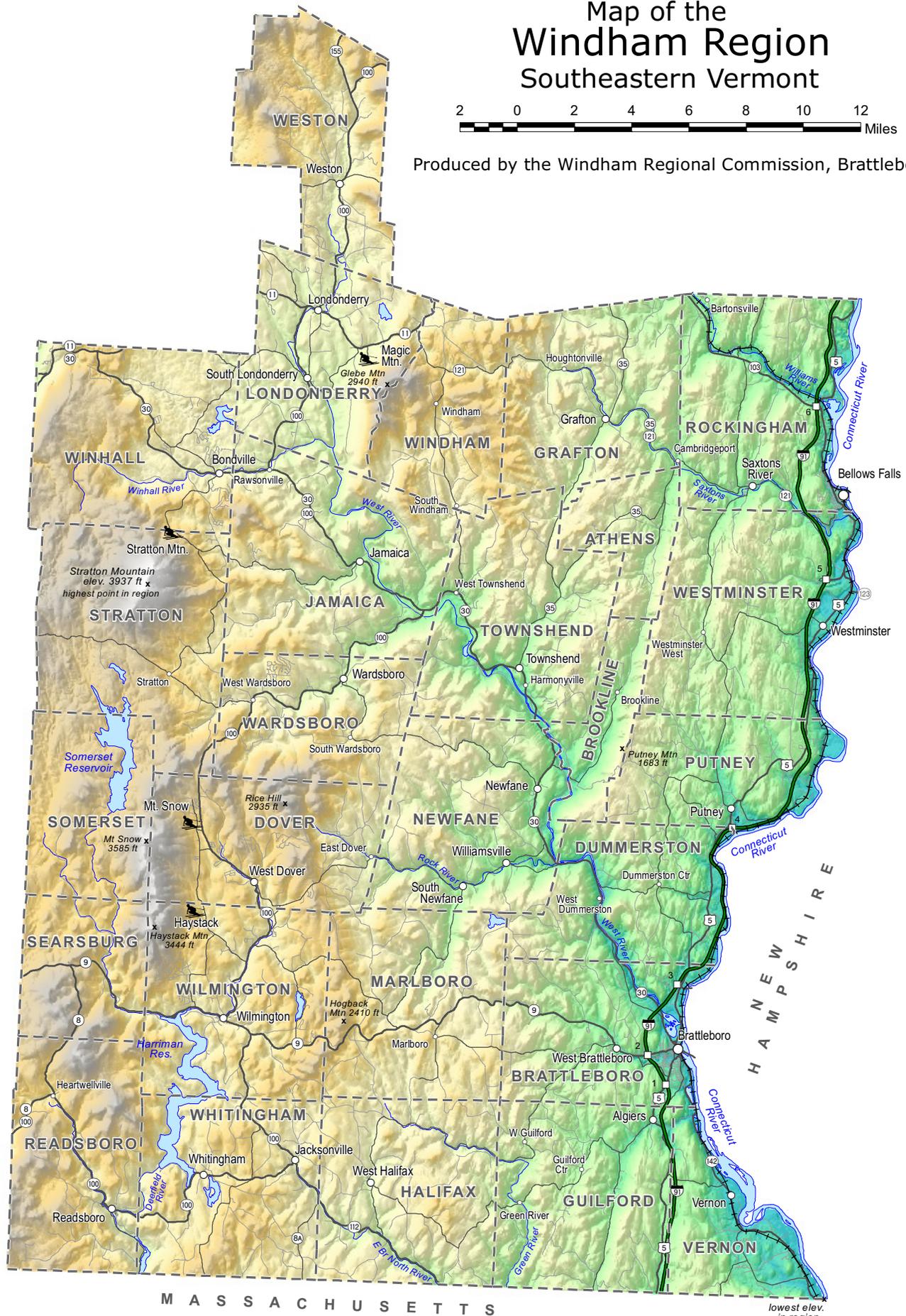
Celebrating 50 Years
1965-2015

Greg Brown

Map of the Windham Region Southeastern Vermont



Produced by the Windham Regional Commission, Brattleboro, Vt.



M A S S A C H U S E T T S

lowest elev.
in region
approx. 190 ft

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Preface..... | iii |
| Chapter 1 Beginnings: 1965-1968..... | iii |
| Chapter 2 Coming of Age: 1968-1980 | 5 |
| Chapter 3 Maturity and Stability: 1981-1988..... | 15 |
| Chapter 4 New Rules, Hard Times: 1988-2002 | 21 |
| Chapter 5 More Responsibility: 2003-2014..... | 31 |
| Chapter 6 The Future | 41 |

ILLUSTRATIONS & PHOTOGRAPHS

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: An Excerpt from WRC’s Original Bylaws. | iv |
| Figure 2: The Opening Ceremony for Interstate-91, held in Brattleboro (1965)..... | 3 |
| Figure 3: Land Use in and around the Ski Areas Changed Dramatically after 1960. These Aerial Photos show: West Dover in 1962 (top left), West Dover in 2010 (top right), Stratton Mountain in 1962 (bottom left), and Stratton Mountain in 2010 (bottom right)..... | 6 |
| Figure 4: Mount Snow Base Lodge in 1960. Ski Areas Spurred Rapid Growth and Development in the Green Mountains during the 1960s and 70s. | 8 |
| Figure 5: An Aerial Photo Taken in Dover. The Cleared Strip is thought to be a Runway for Airplanes with a Development and Golf Course in the Distance (1972). | 11 |
| Figure 6: Ball Mountain Dam. | 18 |
| Figure 7: Vermont’s Act 200, Enacted in 1988, is also Known as the Growth Management Act..... | 22 |
| Figure 8: WRC Committee Members and Staff. Shown from Left to Right, Kurt Voight, Woody Bernhard, Jim Matteau, Lew Sorenson and George Weir. | 24 |
| Figure 9: The WRC Assisted the State with Growing Transportation Needs. | 25 |
| Figure 10: Funding was Cut Severely for Regional and Muncipal Planning in the early 1990s. | 26 |

Figure 11: GIS Technology Revolutionized Cartography through Digitalization of Data with Georeferencing. 28

Figure 12: The Council’s Jacksonville Congregate Meal Site. 29

Figure 13: Over 60 Buildings were Destroyed beyond Repair in the Windham Region during Tropical Storm Irene on August 28, 2011. 33

Figure 14: WRC Developed E-911 Address Maps to Assist with Emergency Response..... 35

Figure 15: Main Street Arts in Saxtons River Completed a New Addition after Remediating a Brownfield Site through WRC’s Brownfield Program..... 36

Figure 16: Commuting Links between the Major Employment Centers in and around the Windham Region, 2010. 42

Figure 17: Regional Leaders. From Left to Right: Brian Kelsey, Economic Development Consultant, National Association of Development Organizations, Linda Dunlavy, Executive Director, Franklin Regional Council of Governments (MA), Chris Campany, Executive Director, Windham Regional Commission (VT), Tim Murphy, Executive Director, Southwest Regional Planning Commission (NH), Adam Grinold, Executive Director, Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation. 43

Front cover photo credits:

Left: Sap buckets during sugaring season, photo by Roger Turner
Center: Windham County Superior Courthouse, photo by Chris Campany
Right: Cross country skiers, photo by Jeff Nugent

Inside front cover:
WRC GIS Department

PREFACE

The information that is the foundation of this history comes primarily from two sources; the memory of the Windham Regional Commission's executive directors and from archival material in the WRC's files. The author was extremely fortunate to have three past executive directors helping him with detailed accounts of the Commission's activity during their tenure. This project created an opportunity for them to step back from the detail of their time with the Commission to reflect on how all the parts fit together in the WRC's evolution as an organization. The author also benefitted from input from one of the WRC's longest serving commissioners, and from long-term staff members. Each provided a special perspective on the how the WRC made decisions and did its work, and brought a keen editorial eye to help ensure the accuracy of this account. Any errors that slipped through their scrutiny are mine.

My sincere personal thanks therefore to Bill Schmidt, Lew Sorenson, Jim Matteau, Chris Campany, Piet van Loon, Susan McMahon, Jeff Nugent and Kim Smith.

In the interest of full disclosure, please note that the author served on the WRC staff from 1979 to 1985, and from 1990 to 2002 worked for the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs where, among other things, he was responsible for administration of the state funding program for regional planning commissions.

Greg Brown
Dummerston, Vermont



Special thanks to the Windham Foundation for underwriting this document.

WINDHAM REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
May, 1965 - February, 1966

"The purposes of the Windham Regional Planning Commission (hereafter WRPC) ...shall be to prepare a coordinated plan for the development of the Windham Region, and to promote the coordination of and cooperation in planning among member towns, taking into account present and future needs, with a view toward encouraging the most appropriate use of land and water, such as for agriculture, commerce, forestry, housing, and industry; the facilities of transportation and communications; the proper and economic location of public utilities and services; the development of adequate recreational areas, the promotion of good civic design; the wise and efficient expenditure of public funds; the encouragement of sound educational facilities and the encouragement of efficiency in government. The aforesaid plan shall be made in order to promote the health, safety, morals and general welfare of the Windham Region." So read the By-Laws of the WRPC, adopted June 29, 1965.

The WRPC presently comprises 17 Windham County towns. Each town is represented by a Commissioner and an Alternate Commissioner. Officers are: Chairman, Alden Horton, Jr. (Wilmington); Vice-Chairman, John North (Bristol); Secretary, William Schmidt (Putney); Treasurer, Bertil Wickberg (Athens). Serving with the officers on the Executive Committee are: John Veller (Dover) Richard E. Brown (Rockingham), Jeremy Freeman (Halifax). Regular meetings of the Commission, all of which are open to the public, are held on last Tuesday of month at various meeting places throughout the county.

FIGURE 1: AN EXCERPT FROM WRC'S ORIGINAL BYLAWS.

Source: WRC

Chapter 1

BEGINNINGS: 1965-1968

During the early 1960s Vermont was a low key place in terms of land use planning and regulation. The state hired its first full-time planning director in 1960 and gave him a budget of \$5,839 to cover all state planning activity. He did not spend it all. Although interest in zoning had increased in Vermont's larger local governments, only about 40 of Vermont's 247 municipalities had adopted such bylaws by 1963. Comprehensive planning was only a vague concept expressed in government documents. Regional planning commissions did not exist.

The 1960s brought dramatic change to this picture. By 1970 a majority of the state's municipalities had both town plans and some sort of implementing bylaw in place. The state budget supporting planning had grown dramatically. Moreover, most Vermont municipalities were members of one of the fourteen regional planning commissions that then covered the state.

Through the 1960s there were several groups interested in planning and in the potential usefulness of regional planning commissions. They included state and local government, economic development and business groups and environmental organizations. The establishment of regional planning programs began with the election of Governor Phil Hoff in 1962. Hoff, who was a strong advocate for planning at all levels of government, directed his administration to carry out a vigorous public information and education program to inform Vermonters about the value of planning.

Early in his tenure, Hoff's Central Planning Office worked with faculty from the University of Vermont to refine the focus of the Administration's planning initiative, zeroing in on four goals:

1. Promote economic development, increase jobs and income.
2. Preserve Vermont's natural beauty.
3. Obtain and maintain efficiency in government expenditures.
4. Safeguard and extend local autonomy in planning and development decisions.

The governmental apparatus available to work on these goals was modest at best. In the early 1960s Vermont's political structure was appropriate for a very small (population 408,500 in 1965) rural state

that had experienced little change. In general State government was small and relatively weak, the bureaucracy thin. The two-house legislature was elected every two years. It had no staff of its own and had to depend on Executive Branch agencies for data and policy analysis. Local government on the other hand was strong, continuing a 200-year history. It was a very personal form of local government, still based on laypeople, often volunteers or part-time elected officials, who filled the roles of selectmen, town clerks, road foremen, or listers. People knew who made decisions and could talk with them, or argue with them, face to face. In the early 1960's local government still had control over everything from welfare to education, landfills to roads. Despite their traditional conservatism however, town leaders were increasingly aware that their communities faced issues best dealt with through increased cooperation and coordination with neighboring towns and in some instances more support from the state.

Acknowledging the strength of municipal autonomy traditional in Vermont political culture, the Hoff Administration did not try to impose any geographic pattern on what were to become regional planning areas. Rather it consciously chose to encourage the voluntary formation of regional planning commissions along county lines, or based on existing multi-town activities. This also made sense to Hoff because many of the existing regional activities were focused on economic development, one of the four key goals of his administration. In 1964 the Hoff Administration persuaded the Legislature to appropriate funds to meet the match required for a grant from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to be used to finance creation of regional planning commissions.

These initiatives first took root around the Town of Brattleboro. In December 1964 community leaders including John Hooper, editor of the *Brattleboro Reformer*; Dick Sykes, a realtor; Corky Elwell, the Brattleboro town manager; and Ray Pestle from the Windham County office of the UVM Extension Service, along with members of the Brattleboro Chamber of Commerce, met with the State's Development Commissioner Al Moulton and his staff to discuss the potential for a regional planning program in Windham County. Encouraged by a strong positive response from the state officials, these local volunteers visited boards of selectmen in Windham County towns to discuss the benefits of forming a regional planning commission. Their education campaign was successful because at the March 1965 town meeting voters in seventeen Windham County towns approved membership, officially enabling creation of Vermont's first regional planning commission.

By May 1965 selectmen in each of the seventeen towns appointed two representatives to the new Windham Regional Planning Commission (WRC) board. These commissioners, reflecting the interests and traditions of their towns, determined the WRC's purpose, set its goals and established its mode of operation. This first generation of commissioners was typical of the representatives that selectboards have appointed to represent them on the WRC board throughout the Commission's history; business people, lawyers, farmers, restaurateurs, insurance agents, realtors, carpenters and inn-keepers among them. They adopted the WRC's first bylaws on June 29, 1965, stating that the Commission's purpose was to:

...prepare a coordinated plan for the development of the Windham Region, and to promote the coordination of and cooperation in planning among member towns, taking into account present and future needs, with a view toward encouraging the most appropriate use of land and water, such as for agriculture, commerce, forestry, housing and industry; the facilities of transportation and communications; the proper and economic location of public utilities and services; the development of adequate recreational areas, the promotion of good civic design; the wise and efficient expenditure of public funds; the encouragement of sound educational facilities; and the encouragement of efficiency in government. The aforesaid plan shall be made in order to promote the health, safety, morals, and general welfare of the Windham Region.

The Commission's first work plan focused primarily on preparation of a comprehensive regional plan and on town plans. This program was to be based on a budget of \$44,700, one-sixth of which was to come from member towns, one-sixth from the state, and two-thirds from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In February 1966, the WRC received formal notice from HUD that their grant application had been approved. With funding firm, the Commission signed a contract with the Planners Collaborative, a Syracuse New York consulting firm, to begin work on the regional and town plans. It's worth noting here that at this time only Brattleboro had a town plan and only Brattleboro, Marlboro and Bellows Falls village had zoning bylaws.

It is important to recognize the importance of the close collaborative relationship Windham County towns had with the state in conceiving and birthing the WRC. A WRC conference on regional planning and development issues held in late 1965, where Governor Hoff and Lester Eisner, HUD's regional director, were the main speakers, further emphasized the strength of the working relationship. This mutual respect continued at a high level into the early 1970s. From 1966 to 1968 the WRC focused on this technical assistance to its member towns in the form of updated base maps and reports on population trends, the housing stock and on the region's economic base as foundations for effective local plans. The WRC's regional program began to branch out from local technical assistance to take on regional issues such as possible locations for a new regional airport or a conference held in Dover on stream pollution and water resources. The Commissions also devoted



FIGURE 2: THE OPENING CEREMONY FOR INTERSTATE-91, HELD IN BRATTLEBORO (1965).

Source: Vermont State Archive and Record Administration, photo by C.D. Davis

time to educating itself about the details of effective regional planning and on conducting a region-wide survey of the population asking what Windham County residents viewed as the community's most pressing needs. The three strongest concerns distilled from the 1,058 responses included stream pollution, poor paying jobs and inadequate public transportation.

During this period the Commission's membership grew as other towns in Windham County slowly signed up as members. For some towns, however, the WRC just looked too much like another layer of government that would interfere in town affairs and increase local property taxes. Fortunately, after the Commission had time to demonstrate its effectiveness, almost all did eventually join. In fact, four towns from outside Windham County also signed up; Searsburg, Winhall and Readsboro in Bennington County, and Weston in Windsor County all became WRC members, largely due to the physical reality of Vermont topography and traditional transportation and communications routes.

This positive start and early record of accomplishment set a tone of optimism that has characterized the Commission's work for the past fifty years. This tone would be an important asset as the Commission became involved in increasingly complex, and sometimes controversial, issues.

Chapter 2

COMING OF AGE: 1968-1980

Between 1968 and 1980 Vermont's regional planning commissions (RPCs) established themselves as significant assets to their member municipalities, to regional non-profits, to state government and to local community interest groups. While Vermont's RPCs demonstrated clearly that they could step up and provide technical and staff assistance for local and regional projects, they also began to establish a reputation among legislators and state agency staff as productive partners who could provide effective aid when state agency capacity proved inadequate to implement important projects and programs. While the WRC participated actively in important state-wide initiatives, such as the creation and implementation of Act 250, the Commission really established its credibility among member towns, local non-profits and businesses as an organization that could provide useful technical and other assistance to help get things done in the Windham Region. It's worth noting in this regard that in 1968 state planning law was amended to allow RPCs to become "regional planning and development commissions" (RPDC) so that they could have a role in implementing regional and town plans as well as in preparing them. The legislature also made money available for RPDCs to employ their own staff, thereby increasing their ability to serve towns and the region.

Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, the WRC continued a major focus on the preparation and update of member towns' land use plans and implementing bylaws. By 1970 nine towns had adopted a plan, twenty-one had some form of zoning and Marlboro had a subdivision bylaw, a remarkable increase in just four years through the technical assistance provided by Planners Collaborative as the WRC's consultant. In addition the first regional plan was adopted in 1970. The commission had an office now, first located in Bellows Falls and then moved to Brattleboro in 1968.

By the late 1960s, it became apparent that population growth and development activity were significantly increasing in the Windham Region. Accelerated by easy access to the region from southern New England and metro New York via the completion of I-91, the region experienced a growing demand for land for new housing and business. This growth pressure was strongest in the region's western towns in the Green Mountains as ski areas and their related services steadily expanded in popularity. Some towns such as Wilmington, Dover and Whitingham became the target of developers who focused

on packing as many second homes and ski chalets as possible on their land at extremely high densities and on very steep slopes, while not providing for adequate public services such as sewage disposal or for erosion protection.

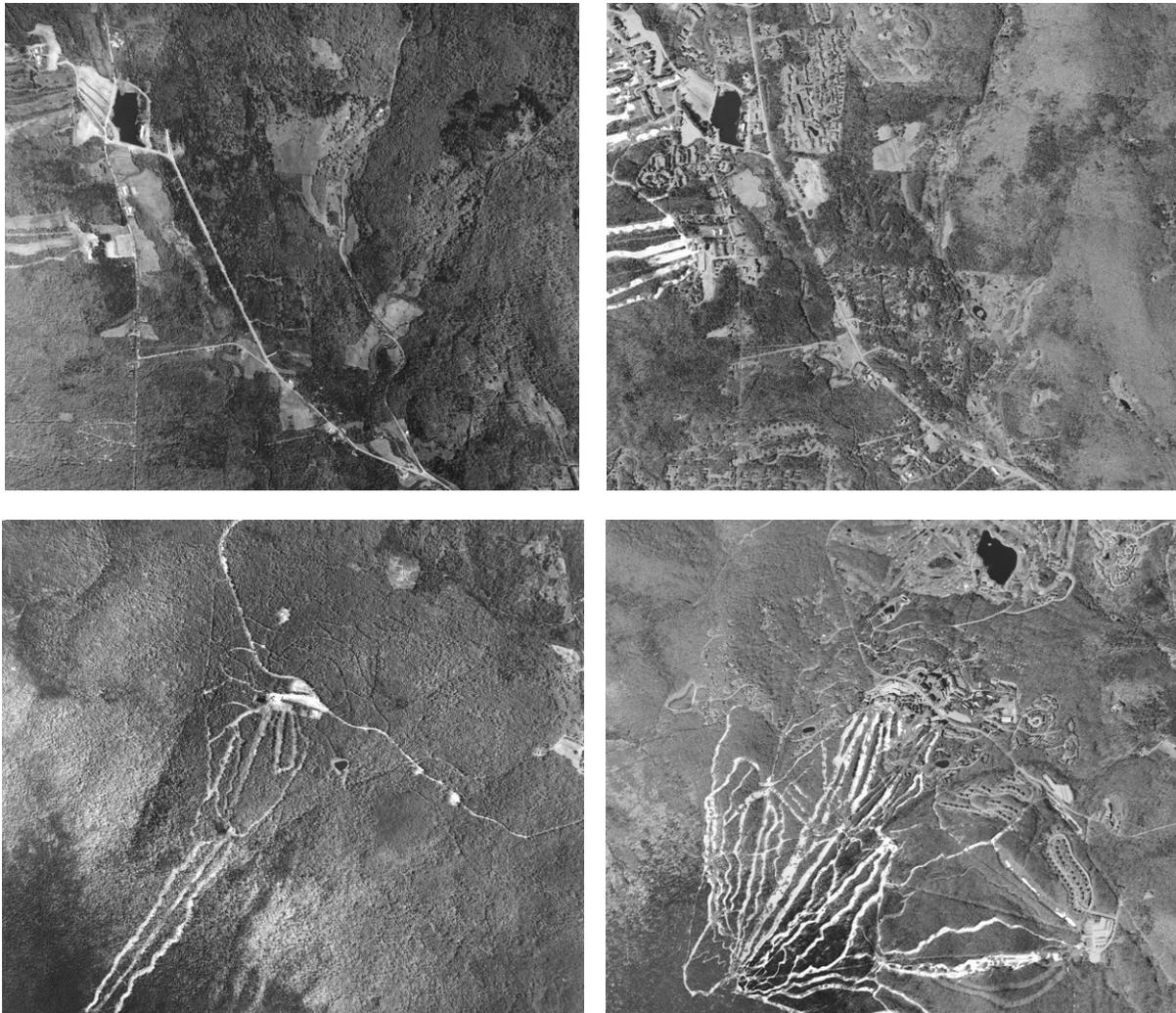


FIGURE 3: LAND USE IN AND AROUND THE SKI AREAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY AFTER 1960. THESE AERIAL PHOTOS SHOW: WEST DOVER IN 1962 (TOP LEFT), WEST DOVER IN 2010 (TOP RIGHT), STRATTON MOUNTAIN IN 1962 (BOTTOM LEFT), AND STRATTON MOUNTAIN IN 2010 (BOTTOM RIGHT).

Source: State of Vermont

By 1969 it was clear that towns were outmatched by the technical and legal resources of developers, and that it was therefore necessary for state government to step up and play a stronger role in land use regulation. Fortunately, Vermont had a governor who was quite willing to do just that. Newly-elected Republican Governor Deane Davis, former president of the National Life Insurance Company based in Montpelier, accepted an invitation from the WRC to tour locations in Windham County, especially in the

towns of Dover and Wilmington, where land development was clearly doing increasing damage to Vermont's environment. Joining WRC Executive Director Bill Schmidt and several commissioners, Davis saw for himself the nature and extent of the problem.

Bill's following description of the Governor's visit spells out clearly the critical roll the WRC played in the birth of the keystone to Vermont's environmental protection strategy.

Act 250 was conceived 40 years ago on May 28 in Brattleboro and after an active pregnancy was birthed nine-plus months later by the legislature and signed into law by Governor Deane Davis.

Before commenting on the conception let me note that the scene for it was set on May 14, 1969 at the Second Annual Governor's Conference on Natural Resources held at the Statehouse in Montpelier. The Conference theme was; "Maintaining Environmental Quality In Vermont". Some 500 attended. In the opening panel that had the task of identifying Vermont's environmental problems, land development issues were only generally alluded to. Water pollution, air pollution and other environmental issues received the most attention. It was at this conference that Governor Davis established his Commission on Environmental Control, chaired by Art Gibb, "to develop a comprehensive program of proposed legislation for presentation to the 1970 session of the General Assembly" to protect and preserve our environment.

Two weeks after this conference Governor Davis and some of his cabinet heads and staff came to Brattleboro for the Chamber of Commerce's first annual Governor's Day. The day began with a breakfast meeting with the Executive Board of the Windham Regional Commission. The Commission invited the Governor to breakfast to talk with him about the second home development taking place in western Windham County, development that stretched from Whitingham and Halifax in the south through the Deerfield Valley towns of Wilmington and Dover to Stratton and Winhall in the north. Wilmington and Dover were the towns focused on in this meeting.

The breakfast was fascinating. Jack Veller, the Commission's chair and also the chair of the Dover Planning Commission and a realtor, described the second home development then occurring in Wilmington and Dover, development stimulated by the three ski areas in these towns (there were nine ski areas in the county at this time). In Wilmington there were some 36 active subdivisions, in Dover 25. Some like the 1,100-acre Chimney Hill development in Wilmington were virtually sold out. Others like the 4,000-acre Dover Hills in Dover were in process. Still others like Haystack in Wilmington were in the planning stage. The Dover Hills land was 1/6th of Dover's land base. Land speculation and sale was occurring at an order of magnitude never before seen in Vermont.

Governor Davis learned that some subdivision lots were a quarter to half acre in size on 10-15 degree slopes, that water was promised to lot buyers in some subdivisions but no water source was identified, that on-site septic was resulting in sewage overflow on steep slopes, that some subdivision roads could not accommodate fire trucks or school buses, that development on high



FIGURE 4: MOUNT SNOW BASE LODGE IN 1960. SKI AREAS SPURRED RAPID GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GREEN MOUNTAINS DURING THE 1960S AND 70S.

Source: Vermont State Archives and Records Administration

elevation sites had significant ecological impacts, that town services and officials were overwhelmed by developers' demands on them, and much more. It's clear that the Vermont Development Department's 1960s "Beckoning Country" slogan had over beckoned here.

This was all new to the Governor. He was amazed by what he heard and asked many questions, stretching a breakfast that was to last an hour or so to almost two hours. When it ended he said he wanted to come back soon to spend a day touring some of the developments we described to him, and also to talk with some of the local officials, realtors, bankers and others involved in the land development business.

He returned two weeks later. We spent the morning touring some developments in Wilmington, including Chimney Hill, and had lunch with the Wilmington selectboard and listers. The afternoon was spent in Dover where we drove some of the 12-15 miles of road in Dover Hills seeing one acre lots, one after another. Dinner

was at the Red Mill in Wilmington with over 100 developers, town officials, bankers, realtors, and others present. There was lots of back and forth with the Governor asking many questions.

The day's tour and gatherings made it abundantly evident that the towns did not have the manpower or expertise to guide and regulate the second home development that was taking place. Local plans and bylaws like zoning were only then being written. State standards and controls were needed to fill the gap.

At June's end Governor Davis came to Windham County once again, this time to address the annual meeting of the Windham Commission. He told the Commission that he was directing the Gibb Commission to make a land development control bill a top priority for the 1970 legislative session. He also said that he was forming a technical advisory team, headed by Walter Blucher, to look into the proposed new 2,000-acre Haystack Development in Wilmington.

Conception had more than occurred. What came to be Act 250 was off and running. The next eight months were a busy time in Windham County and Montpelier. Many of the Gibb Commission members, legislators and others came to see what was happening in the Deerfield Valley and Windham County. The Governor's technical advisory team reviewed several large developments and Governor Davis himself personally intervened to stop two undesirable major second home development projects, one in Stratton and the other in the unorganized town of Somerset. The Health Department enacted interim health subdivision regulations in September to deal with some immediate sewage disposal health issues. Jack Veller served on the Governor's Environmental Control Commission and Arthur Westing and Bill Schmidt of the Windham Regional Commission were on the Environmental Control Commission's Advisory Committee.

In March 1970 House Bill 417 on Environmental Control, which came to be known as Act 250, became law.

With the passage of Act 250 a conference looking forward to the law's implementation in the state and region—and the implementation of the other new environmental laws—was held with the WRC and Southeastern Vermont Board of Realtors as co-sponsors. The conference, entitled "Vermont's Environmental: Talk and Action" took place on May 28, 1970 at Windham College in Putney and was attended by WRC commissioners, realtors, town selectboard, planning commission and zoning board members, town clerks, area legislators, attorneys, land developers, members of the press and others.

Governor Davis was the keynote speaker. He concluded his remarks with these words: "...in closing let me express my appreciation to the WRC for work done on behalf of the State of Vermont. There is no organization in the state that has cooperated more closely or more effectively with my office in the past year than the WRC. Through your efforts we realized that the land development problem in Vermont, tried out temporary solutions such as the Governor's Development Advisory Team and had a thorough debate and discussion on the environmental package."

Act 250 called for the creation of district environmental commissions and a development review process backed up by a state land use plan to guide the location of larger developments. This plan would also provide guidance to state agencies in preparing plans for capital programs and importantly, would coordinate the state's plans under Act 250 with duly adopted local and regional plans.

A draft state land use plan was prepared. It was the last of the three plans called for in Act 250. The first plan, the Interim Land Capability Plan, was adopted in 1972. The second plan, the Land capability and Development Plan, was adopted by the General Assembly in 1973. The third and final plan, the state land use plan, was presented for public hearings throughout the state in

1973, but was not approved by the General Assembly until 1974. The failure of the General Assembly to enact a state land use plan was Governor Davis' greatest regret on leaving office.

The WRC for its part coordinated with state planners and others in the early 1970s in drafting the various state plans and, following the failure of the proposed state land use plan to become law, drafted the Commission's second regional plan and a model town plan and zoning bylaw based on the state Capability and Development Plan. The Commission also undertook a related ecological planning study in 1970-72 in Dover and Wilmington under the direction of nationally-known landscape architect Ian McHarg.

(Bill Schmidt, 03/15)

The WRC's involvement with Act 250 did not end with the passage of the legislation. The Act included a profound change in the nature of local and regional planning in Vermont that set it apart from such planning in the rest of the country. Whereas before passage of the Act, town and regional plans were only advisory, Act 250 transformed them into enforceable documents. Now developers had to prove that their projects were consistent with the goals and policies stated in town and regional plans. This change in turn led to a significant growth in the time and effort towns were willing to invest in their planning process. During the early 1970s the WRC responded to this spike in interest by focusing staff resources on updating town plans, zoning bylaws and on related environmental issues.

A further, very powerful impact of Act 250's passage was the new role set forth for regional planning commissions as active players in the review of Act 250 permit applications. Commission staff (there was no Project Review Committee in the early 1970s, the Commission created it in the mid-1980s) examined materials that permit applicants submitted, analyzed them for consistency with the Act 250 criteria and with the Windham Regional Plan for impact on the region and its towns. The Commission then reported its findings as formal testimony to the District Two Environmental Commission. For most project proposals, the WRC did not oppose granting a permit, but from time to time recommended conditions on a permit to mitigate potentially negative impacts.

As Bill Schmidt indicated above, the implementation of Act 250 was compromised by the absence of the state land use plan. Adoption of such a plan was much more difficult than adoption of the state's Capability and Development Plan. Intended as a formal statement of Vermont's intentions about land development, the land use plan ran into serious challenges from the very beginning of its preparation. While the first years of Act 250 implementation were relatively smooth, by 1973 controversy grew as denial or conditioning of permits for large complex projects became more frequent throughout the state, and as some progressed to appeals in state courts. The business community became more skeptical about the impact the tough environmental regulation was having on the economy. Property owners were growing restive about the limitations the Act imposed on their land development options and costs. This growing state-wide discontent with the new land use and environmental regulations

took place during a period when the national economy was also increasingly fragile; in 1973 OPEC imposed the first oil embargo resulting in dramatically increased oil prices, while in 1973 and 1974 there was a major fall in the US stock market that also hurt the nation's economy and employment. This fragility slowed development in the region, but it also made whatever development did occur much more desirable.

During spring 1973 the WRC's Legislative Committee worked hard on many drafts of a state land use plan, while staff prepared technical position papers and processed public input on proposed plan elements. The Commission completed work on a model state land use plan in June 1973 and presented it to Governor Tom Salmon and other state officials for their study and consideration.

Unfortunately the subsequent 1974 legislative debate on the land use plan was plagued by growing opposition that focused on what was perceived as the lack of precision in land use designations. For example, if the state land use plan was to be used as a tool in the Act 250 regulatory process, the maps illustrating the plan had to be accurate enough to define what land-use district any given parcel of land fit in. This demand for precision on a state-wide scale gave opponents ample opportunity for nit picking. In the end, the Legislature was unable to muster enough votes to adopt the proposed plan. The lack of this critical piece of the Act 250 triad would force the state's permit review process to rely on town and regional plans for definition of specific land use districts.



FIGURE 5: AN AERIAL PHOTO TAKEN IN DOVER. THE CLEARED STRIP IS THOUGHT TO BE A RUNWAY FOR AIRPLANES WITH A DEVELOPMENT AND GOLF COURSE IN THE DISTANCE (1972).

Source: Vermont State Archives and Records Administration

Through the 1970s the WRC continued its active participation in Act 250 permit application reviews as staff worked to determine a project's consistency with the regional plan and to measure the project's compliance with Act 250's criteria. During the early 1970s applications for large projects continued to appear, such as a 170-unit condominium project in Londonderry, an 89-unit development in Winhall and a 42-lot subdivision in Jamaica. The WRC also continued its efforts to inform town officials, realtors, landowners and developers and others about the intricacies of Act 250, for example through a four-week workshop held in the Fall of 1972 attended by 125 people.

A regulatory role was not the only one the WRC played in the region. As noted earlier, the WRC became the Windham Regional Planning *and Development* Commission under new state statutes in 1968. With

this added responsibility, the WRC was able to assist member towns interested in economic development projects.

Involvement in this kind of work was not new to the Commission. In 1967 it had assembled a special committee to review the favorable and potentially unfavorable aspects of the proposed Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant, which received its initial construction permit from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission that year. The special committee's report, approved by the WRC in 1968 concluded with the statement:

We feel that the proposed nuclear power plant at Vernon will not represent a hazard to the region, radiological or otherwise, if supervised and monitored in accordance with AEC and proposed Vermont Department of Health regulations.

One of the prime economic problems expressed in response to the WRC's 1966 community survey was concern over a tight labor market. The Commission began to address that issue with a pilot vocational or work training program for students at Leland & Gray High School in Townshend that explored new ways in which students could be given the specific training they need to work in Vermont's businesses.

Other examples of the Commission's economic development work in the late 1960s included an "intensive crops study" to help local farmers consider expansion of production of new products including vegetables, sweet corn and berries.

In 1972 the Commission assisted seven towns in the northern part of the region with preparation of an application to the federal Economic Development Administration for designation as an "Economic Development District". Though unsuccessful, the project did generate useful information on the economy of this sub-region. Other WRC development work included 1978 industrial park studies for the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and for the Bellows Falls Area Development Corporation that included evaluation of potential parcel suitability and marketing packages describing likely industrial sites the two groups could use when soliciting prospective tenants.

During the 1970s the WRC continued a pattern of working closely with state agencies, especially the Vermont Agency of Transportation, the Agency of Natural Resources and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. A classic example of such work, and the Commission's role as a bridge between state and local interests, was evaluation of a proposal by the New England Regional Commission to create a new, major east-west highway from Maine to New York, one of the proposed corridors of which was in southern Windham County. While the Commission and its towns did not favor the proposed corridor in Windham County, the proposal did encourage the towns of Brattleboro, Marlboro and Wilmington to take a close look at the existing Route 9 Corridor in terms of what was needed to accomplish much-needed reconstruction and repaving of the roadway.

In early 1979, the WRC provided a direct service to Governor Richard Snelling in his effort to create a state-wide economic development plan. This was an ambitious undertaking, especially because Snelling was committed to basing the plan on substantial public input. To accomplish that, Snelling contracted with the state's thirteen regional planning commissions to carry out a process for disseminating information about the purpose of the plan and its contents, and for gathering public response to a draft plan crafted by the staff at the State Planning Office led by policy analyst, Frank Sadowski. Over a two month period WRC staff provided newspaper op/ed pieces on the plan, did print and radio interviews, and met with diverse business groups to gather their views on the Governor's draft. The WRC duly filed its report with Governor Snelling in April 1979.

One characteristic that set the WRC apart from other regional planning commissions was its activity in human services. Early in its history, the Commission provided important support for projects focused on specific human service needs in the region. An excellent example is the role the WRC played in what would become the Windham County Youth Services Commission. In 1969, the WRC sponsored a federally funded crime prevention project working with a number of community volunteers on ways to address a perceived increase in crime levels, especially in Brattleboro and especially involving young people. One lasting outcome of this project was creation of the Youth Services Commission that eventually became a fully independent program serving young people throughout the region with counseling, drug prevention and a Big Brother/Big Sister Program.

Another outcome of the Crime Prevention Project was planning for establishment of the Community House in Brattleboro during 1971 and 1972. The new facility, located on Elliot Terrace in Brattleboro, opened its doors in April 1973 as a short-term residential treatment facility for young people who had problems with area law enforcement agencies.

With the passage of the federal Older Americans Act in 1965, the WRC secured grant funding to expand an existing senior meals program in Brattleboro. Formally established in 1973, Council on Aging for Southeastern Vermont (COA) functioned as a program of the WRC until 1996, offering a senior meals program, supporting senior centers in Brattleboro and Bellows Falls and sponsoring an advocacy program to ensure seniors' rights. In 1974, the COA expanded its program into southern Windsor County. The COA shared office space with the WRC in Brattleboro until it became completely independent of the Commission.

In the early 1970s The WRC was involved in the creation of the Brattleboro Area Farmers Market, specifically through an Intensive Crops Study mentioned earlier, and through organizational assistance. This involvement in the Windham Region's agriculture would continue and grow in the 1980s.

Clearly, during the 1970s the WRC demonstrated its value and the value of regional planning in general, as a public sector entity serving as a bridge and communications link between the traditional state and local units of government. The Commission illustrated the major contributions it could make by

identifying regional and local needs, organizing the players who could make things happen, and then moving them toward project completion or program implementation.

Despite this record of success, the WRC and Vermont's other regional planning commissions began to experience the fragility and unpredictability of its sources of revenue when the state amended its FY1976 grant agreement with the WRC to reduce its funding by \$2,450. That does not sound like much in 2015, but it was significant in 1976 and was a harbinger of things to come. As we will see, this anxiety-producing possibility was to continue through the 1980s and beyond.

Chapter 3

MATURITY AND STABILITY 1981-1988

During the 1980s the WRC emerged as a significant player in the Region and the state's public sector. While much of the Commission's time was dedicated to its core work of helping member towns with crafting plans and updating zoning bylaws or reviewing a growing number of Act 250 applications, the 80s brought major changes in personnel, the Commission's funding patterns and the technical assistance needs of member towns.

One of the Commission's real strengths has been its consistent, highly capable leadership. From its beginnings in 1965, Bill Schmidt played an active role in shaping and leading the WRC. First as a commissioner from Putney, then as a part-time staffer, and finally as executive director, Schmidt's vision and his ability to see what needed doing in the Windham Region firmly established the Commission as an organization that could get things done, both locally and at the state level. As with many intense, high energy jobs however, even the most capable of leaders reach a point where their career path calls for a change. Schmidt's departure in 1983 created a major challenge for the Commission, but happily the pool of applicants for the executive director position was deep. After a thorough interview process, the Executive Committee offered the position to Steve Holmes, a highly experienced professional planner who had served many years with the Mid-State Regional Planning Commission in Connecticut. Holmes took up the role as director at a very interesting phase of the WRC's evolution. Steve led the Commission for four years, leaving in 1987 to become executive director of the Upper Valley/Lake Sunapee Council, a bi-state regional planning commission serving four towns in Vermont and twenty-some in New Hampshire in the upper Connecticut Valley. The WRC's third executive director (and future commissioner from Dummerston) was Lew Sorenson who joined the Commission in 1987. With extensive planning experience gained in Washington State, Lew joined the Commission just in time to lead it through the political and financial storm created by the passage of Vermont's growth management program, Act 200.

The first major challenge was a change in the WRC's base funding. Starting in 1968 and through the 1970's, the State passed funds from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to Vermont's regional planning commissions to support the RPC's housing planning and its basic technical assistance to member towns. In 1983 however, Ronald Reagan's Administration eliminated HUD funding for planning. Happily, the Vermont Legislature and Governor Richard Snelling recognized

the significant role that the state's twelve regional planning commissions played in so many aspects of Vermont's public sector work. Snelling proposed, and the Legislature agreed, to an appropriation of \$150,000 to replace a portion of the lost HUD grant. Nevertheless, the WRC core budget shrank by 16%, from \$88,817 in FY1981 to \$74,629 in FY1982. The Commission made up the cut by leaving a senior planner position vacant when the incumbent left to go to law school and by reduction of the director and remaining staff planner to four-day weeks. Though the state's appropriation saved Vermont's regional planning program from an immediate financial disaster, as we shall see, it also continued the fragility in state funding that first emerged in the early 70s and changed significantly the relationship between RPCs and state government. These issues would come to a head in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

During the early 1980s Bill Schmidt continued a long-standing practice of visiting the selectboard of every member town just prior to the annual March town meeting. In this way, the Commission polled town leaders about the prime interests and concerns they wanted the WRC to address. The January 1981 WRC newsletter reported the following top local priorities:

- Town plan and bylaw updates
- Economic development and job creation
- Solid waste disposal
- Tax mapping
- Energy

The Reagan Administration also brought a major shift in the way federal funds were awarded to states, with a new focus on "block grants", through which a chunk of federal money was given to a state to accomplish a broad public policy goal. One such new program was the Community Development Block Grant, or CDBG for short, administered by the Vermont Agency of Development & Community Affairs. The purpose of the CDBG program was to bring benefit to low and moderate income households through assistance with job creation and the availability of safe and affordable housing. Only municipalities were eligible to apply for these grant funds. As with most federal programs, the application process was complex and time consuming. Even though the State simplified the process as much as federal rules would allow, towns were hard-pressed to deal with its many requirements. Fortunately the WRC was in an ideal position to both aid town governments with preparation of applications and help state government get the federal dollars out into the field where they could do some good. For the first round of CDBG applications, the WRC wrote proposals for Readsboro and Putney, with the former winning a grant to help create jobs by resuscitating the Readsboro Chair Factory.

The WRC went on to prepare many such applications for member towns, a service that continues in 2015. During the mid to late 1980s, several towns had won CDBG grants to rehabilitate housing for low and moderate income households. The housing rehab program became a new program of the WRC that was staffed to assist numerous municipalities with managing the contractors that brought plumbing, wiring, septic and water systems up to code, fixed roofs and added insulation in homes throughout the region. By the early 2000s, the program became expensive to administer and was transitioned to the Windham and Windsor Housing Trust.

During the 1980s the WRC's assistance to its member towns became more diverse and technically complex. In 1983 and 1984 the Commission worked closely with the Town of Brattleboro, the Brattleboro Museum and Arts Center and consultants from the University of Massachusetts on a long-range plan for revitalization of downtown Brattleboro. In a similar project, the Commission helped the Town of Rockingham and the Village of Bellows Falls to develop technical assistance for economic revitalization of the mills and transportation facilities on the Island. Through the early 1980s, the Commission supported the Town of Putney (including a young selectman named Peter Shumlin) in its search for a suitable use for the Windham College campus after the college closed its doors in 1979. Some of this work included screening various proposals to determine potential impact on the rest of the region. Some of these ideas were inappropriate and met with stiff resistance from Putney residents, such as a proposal to use the campus as a center for Haitian refugees or its renovation for use as a minimum security federal prison. Hard work by the Putney leadership and volunteer community members led to the eventual location of the new Landmark College on the campus in 1985.

As we have seen from the list of issues stemming from Bill's Schmidt's town visits in 1980, two other activities that emerged during this period were energy and solid waste disposal. In each case the issue grew to occupy significant amounts of the WRC's time as the Commission worked closely with interested towns and state offices to identify and define the impact on local governments and their residents.

Though prosaic, the issue of solid waste disposal is one that every municipality has to address. Traditionally, each town dealt with the issue in its own way. Some maintained town "dumps" where residents could drop their garbage. Other towns that did not have their own dump contracted with neighboring communities that did for the right to deposit trash. Still other towns basically left it to residents to pay a fee-for-service to private for-profit trash haulers for collection services. None of these were really acceptable solutions. Old town "dumps" often did not meet state landfill standards and were ordered to close, as Londonderry's was in 1980. Other dumps were filling up, leading their owners to limit access to host town residents. To address this situation, in May 1980, the WRC joined with the Vermont Law School to co-sponsor a workshop for officials of the five towns using the Londonderry landfill.

During the mid-1980s the WRC explored the potential for creating a formal multi-town solid waste district. While this strategy was long in development, the State had also been busy searching for viable solutions, eventually bringing a bill to the Legislature that resulted in passage of Act 78 in 1987. Act 78 stipulated that each municipality had to offer a solid waste disposal option to its residents, including the

opportunity for municipalities to band together voluntarily to create solid waste management districts. As district members paying an annual fee, towns enabled their residents to dispose of garbage, and recyclable materials, either by having it picked up by a private for-profit hauling company, or by taking their garbage to the landfill or transfer station themselves. The district was required to provide an environmentally safe place to dispose of the waste. The WRC helped municipalities and the State implement the Act 78 program in a way designed to preclude bureaucratic red tape. Nevertheless, implementation of the solid waste program was characterized by difficult management and financial issues for the nascent districts, and by the emergence of significant controversy and mistrust among the players, especially in the bi-state solid waste district serving the region's northern towns like Grafton and Rockingham.

While solid waste management was a fairly common interest of Vermont towns and their regional planning commissions in the 1980's, energy was not. Nevertheless the WRC had to respond to growing local interest in energy conservation and cost control. The State began by enabling towns to appoint "town energy coordinators" who were to advise their selectboards about local measures that could address a national priority for energy conservation, while also helping towns consider steps like insulating town buildings or making greater use of alternate fuels like wood to heat buildings. The WRC



FIGURE 6: BALL MOUNTAIN DAM.

*Source: US Army Corp of Engineers
Digital Visual Library*

developed some very preliminary projects to support town energy coordinators and local non-profit organizations.

One renewable energy project that occupied a great deal of the WRC's focus was the West River Basin Energy Committee's (WRBEC) proposal to install hydroelectric facilities at the US Army Corps of Engineers Ball Mountain Dam flood control facility in the Town of Jamaica. WRBEC consisted of people appointed by the selectboards of thirteen towns in the West River Basin; Brattleboro, Dummerston, Newfane, Townshend, Jamaica, Wardsboro, Londonderry, Landgrove, Peru, Weston and Winhall, interested in developing the power production potential of the Ball Mountain and other flood control dams along the West River. While on its surface this idea was attractive, the proposal became very controversial because of:

1) skepticism among some selectboards about the potential financial impact on the member towns, 2) concern over the business model proposed by the private sector firm that would actually do the project, and 3) most controversial of all, the need to drill a tunnel through Ball Mountain to serve as a penstock leading water out of the lake behind the dam to the generating facility. The problem is that the granite in Ball Mountain contains uranium. In fact some years prior to the WRBEC proposal, a German firm had evaluated the site to determine the potential for a uranium mine (this proposal died an early death at the hands of powerful local opposition and legislative concern). The presence of the uranium bearing rock caused major concern, and a serious

controversy, about the environmental impact of airborne dust from drilling the penstock and disposal of the tailings removed from the Mountain. The WRC worked very hard for more than a year to maintain a strictly neutral position on the WRBEC project by sponsoring public information meetings for WRBEC, for the private firm that would build and manage the project, and for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) that would have to issue a license for the project. The controversy deepened as some of the WRBEC towns decided not to participate further in the project, while some supporters of the project came to mistrust the WRC's neutrality. In the end the project died of its own weight.

During the 1980s the WRC carried out a number of projects that impacted the whole region. One project that would have long-term regional impact was the WRC's study of the need for post-secondary education programs in Windham and southern Windsor counties. Funded by a grant from the national Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), and with support from the University of Vermont and the State College System, WRC staff completed an analysis of the post-secondary courses and programs then available in the two counties, discussed with business leaders the skill sets needed for their employees, and completed a large survey of residents testing their interest in education programs beyond high school. The outcome of the project was a better understanding of the significant demand for non-traditional college programs, especially for courses beyond the 2-year Associate Degree offered by the Community College of Vermont, and for specialized technical training and professional growth that would enhance job creation and career development. The project uncovered a need deep enough to encourage the University of Vermont to locate a program in Brattleboro offering upper division courses.

During this period the WRC continued its active participation in Act 250. In its role as a "statutory party" the Commission had the responsibility for reviewing applications for Act 250 permits to measure the project's consistency with Windham Regional Plan goals and policies, and for the impact of the proposed project on each of the ten Act 250 criteria. During the early 1980s an improving national economy led to significant expansion of development in the Windham Region's recreation industry, especially in towns like Dover, Stratton and Wilmington (and their neighboring communities) hosting the region's ski industry and its workers. The number of Act 250 applications grew to be a consistent influx of proposals for new condominiums, ski trails and lifts, snow-making capacity and base lodge expansions, creating conditions for far reaching impact on other towns throughout the region in terms of traffic congestion, the need for worker housing and the potential degradation of water quality. Because the Commission had not yet created a Development Review Committee, all the work on analyzing the applications and providing testimony to the District Environmental Commission fell to staff. Despite efforts to coordinate testimony with towns hosting such projects, there were times when WRC staff findings on a project proved to be inconsistent with the views of the town. Fortunately the links between towns and the Commission were strong enough to survive these differences.

It should be noted that in 1985 the WRC entered the digital age, buying its first computer, an IBM desk-top that for some reason sat unused (and in fact unpacked) for several years.

As the 1980s wound down, increased development activity throughout the state, especially in the form of suburban sprawl, caused some environmental groups, planners and law-makers to call for new tools to do the extensive planning needed to identify appropriate locations for development and lands where growth should be carefully managed or even avoided. This theme, made tangible through new legislation commonly referred to as “Act 200” dominated regional planning and the WRC’s activity in the 1990s.

Chapter 4

NEW RULES, HARD TIMES: 1988-2002

The years between 1988 and 2002 were marked by substantial changes in the state laws that assigned responsibility and authority to regional planning commissions. These changes also had a serious impact on RPCs' relations to their member towns and to the way towns themselves prepared and adopted plans and bylaws. A further, very contentious problem emerged as the state budget again became increasingly fragile and RPCs experienced deep cuts in their state funding. In 1990 the WRC had an opportunity to reflect on how it had changed over time when it celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1990. To say the least, it was an interesting time.

All was not gloom however, as new leadership at the state Agency of Transportation (VTRANS) shifted broader planning responsibility and resources to regional planning commissions. The WRC worked its way through these challenging years under new leadership. Lew Sorenson served as the WRC's third Executive Director from 1987 until he retired 1999, when Jim Matteau moved up from deputy director to become Lew's successor.

In response to the rapid pace of growth and land development that characterized the 1980s, in 1987 Governor Madelein Kunin initiated a public process, led by The Governor's Commission on the Future of Vermont, to consider how the state might prepare for and mitigate such rapid growth through stronger local and regional planning and decision making. Act 250 was already deeply embedded in Vermont's development and regulatory culture, but many state and local officials, as well as private sector developers, argued that a more consistent and predictable land use planning process would make Act 250 much more effective and more user-friendly for permit applicants by establishing clearly defined land use goals and desired outcomes. The Growth Commission's extensive public comment gathering, coupled with an examination of action by other states that were confronting similar growth pressure, led to a legislative package that became Act 200, creating what was known as a "growth management" program. Following the examples of such programs in states like Florida, Maryland and Washington, Vermont's Act 200 was a planning program, not a regulatory one. It was not intended to stop development. Rather it was to enable planners to identify where growth and development should occur, and where it should not, and to prepare measures to mitigate the impact of development, for

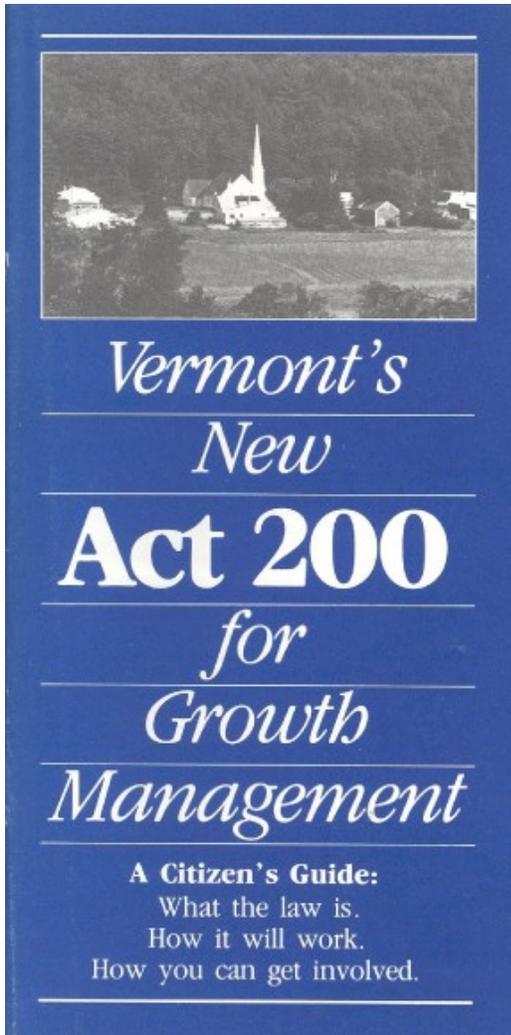


FIGURE 7: VERMONT'S ACT 200, ENACTED IN 1988, IS ALSO KNOWN AS THE GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACT.

Source: Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development

Vermont was to avoid what was perceived as a mounting threat from unmanaged growth. While the details of this extensive controversy are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that during the years between 1989 and 1995 the WRC had to walk a very delicate political line between the pressure from member towns opposing Act 200 and the pressure from the Kunin Administration to serve as a public advocate for vigorous implementation of the new law.

The WRC began to carry out its new responsibilities under Act 200 in 1988 by meeting with each of its member towns to explain the intricacies of the Act and to answer questions from selectboard and planning commission members about the new law. In addition, the WRC restarted publication of its newsletter, sending copies to around 400 people, as part of the effort to distribute information about

example urging development to take place where infrastructure such as public water and wastewater were already in place.

Between its passage in 1988, and its effective date of July 1, 1989, this legislation generated a bitter controversy in Vermont about the role of public sector land use planning and regulation, as well as the degree to which the state could control local and regional planning. The basic conflict revolved around a contest of strength between defenders of the principle of local government control of decision-making and advocates of greater state influence in land use planning and regulation.

Governor Kunin entered the debate directly in 1989 with a state-wide series of meetings with town officials and residents to explain the goals of the Act and to dispel the substantial amount of misinformation circulating about its impact on local control and property rights. Governor Kunin visited Windham County on August 30, 1989, starting with visits that day to Wilmington and Wardsboro, returning on September 11 to visit Brattleboro and Vernon, and again on October 23rd in Westminster. On these visits she was joined by Steve Holmes, former WRC Executive Director, who was serving as the Commissioner of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA) in Kunin's Administration.

At these meetings, the Governor argued that a more sophisticated, closely coordinated program of land use planning, based on active participation by towns, regional planning commissions and state agencies, was necessary if

Act 200 and other Commission activities. Most important, the Commission developed the details of the process it would to help member towns prepare plans and bylaws consistent with Act 200's requirements.

While fulfilling the State's expectations about Act 200 implementation, the WRC's Legislative Committee and staff joined the state's other RPCs in opposition to the much closer oversight of the local planning process by regional planning commissions and a state agency, the DHCA. From its founding, the WRC had always helped towns craft plans that expressed the individual municipalities' vision, and with implementing tools and bylaws that helped them achieve their long term goals. Now, under Act 200, regional planning commissions were expected to continue providing such technical assistance, but also to measure town plans for consistency with a list of 32 state land use goals. This "approval" process put the WRC in the untenable position of helping towns draft plans, and then reviewing and approving or disapproving the plan if it wasn't consistent with state goals. The authority to review and approve or disapprove town plans fundamentally changed the WRC's relationship with its member towns. Suddenly RPCs were becoming "them" in what towns perceived as a "them or us" conflict. The WRC waked the line carefully, but inevitably being pulled in two directions led to tension.

Act 200 also brought changes to the way the state provided financial support to regional planning commissions. Under the Act regional planning was to benefit from higher funding supported by an increase in the Property Transfer Tax. That tax increase was to be deposited in a new "Municipal & Regional Planning Fund". The state DHCA distributed the \$1.5 million 1989 appropriation to the regions using a formula based on the number of towns and the population of the region. For the first time, local planning programs were also to receive state funding. DHCA disbursed the initial \$1.5 million appropriation to towns in July 1989 as an entitlement, each town's share determined by a formula based on population.

This all sounded very promising in 1988 and 1989, but a steep decrease in state revenues in the early 1990s quickly led Governor Richard Snelling (elected in 1990) to call for a cut in state spending, including the fund for local and regional planning commissions. When Snelling suddenly passed away in the summer of 1991, Lieutenant Governor Howard Dean assumed the office. Because Governor Dean did not believe that local or regional land use planning or regulation was effective, he cut their funding even more deeply than Governor Snelling. In fact it got so bad that in 1994 the Dean Administration required regional planning commissions to return a portion of the yearly funding they had already received. The Legislature agreed with Dean, and in its search for savings to balance the state budget, it reversed its creation of a dedicated funding source for planning. Revenue from the Property Transfer Tax increase that Act 200 had directed to a dedicated planning fund was now sent to the General Fund to operate state government. Dollars for regional planning commissions instead came as a routine appropriation from the General Fund. Appropriations for regional planning went from a high of \$1.5 million in 1988 to less than \$1 million in 1994.

These actions in Montpelier had a devastating impact on the WRC and other regional commissions during the early and mid-1990s. The WRC's budget began to show serious red ink. The number of staff was reduced to five; in addition to Lew. The Commission's financial woes became so bad that the



FIGURE 8: WRC COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND STAFF. SHOWN FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, KURT VOIGHT, WOODY BERNHARD, JIM MATTEAU, LEW SORENSON AND GEORGE WEIR.

Source: Windham Regional Commission: The Work and the People

WRC's Board Chair and executive director each made personal loans to the commission to make ends meet.

The one bright spot amidst all this red ink was the Commission's transportation planning program. In 1991 Congress enacted the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) that structured a new framework for transportation planning, including a much stronger role for regional planning commissions. In addition, the Act provided significant funding to RPCs to support the intensive new work load. Adding a new transportation planner to the staff, the WRC assumed responsibility for technical

transportation planning assistance to member towns, gathering regional feedback for VTRANS on proposed projects, and providing analysis of the impact of state transportation policy on the region. This partnership between the Commission, VTRANS and member towns has continued to 2015 as one the WRC's strongest connections to a state agency.

The WRC's service to its member towns changed and intensified during the 1990s. A prime example of this trend is the nature of the technical planning assistance that towns sought from the WRC. Act 200 required much more structure in town plans and a greater degree of technical sophistication than most small towns were prepared to provide. To cope with the impact of growth, the Legislature required that both town and regional plans include ten (thirteen in 2015) "elements" that describe a desired path to be followed for activities such as housing, environmental protection, public facilities, education, economic development and land use. Towns were expected to define each "path" through specific goals, policies and implementation steps spelled out in their plans. Act 200 also set forth a long list of values or objectives that town and regional plans had to incorporate. This level of complexity and technical sophistication called for in the new town plan framework was beyond the ability of many small town volunteer planning commissions.

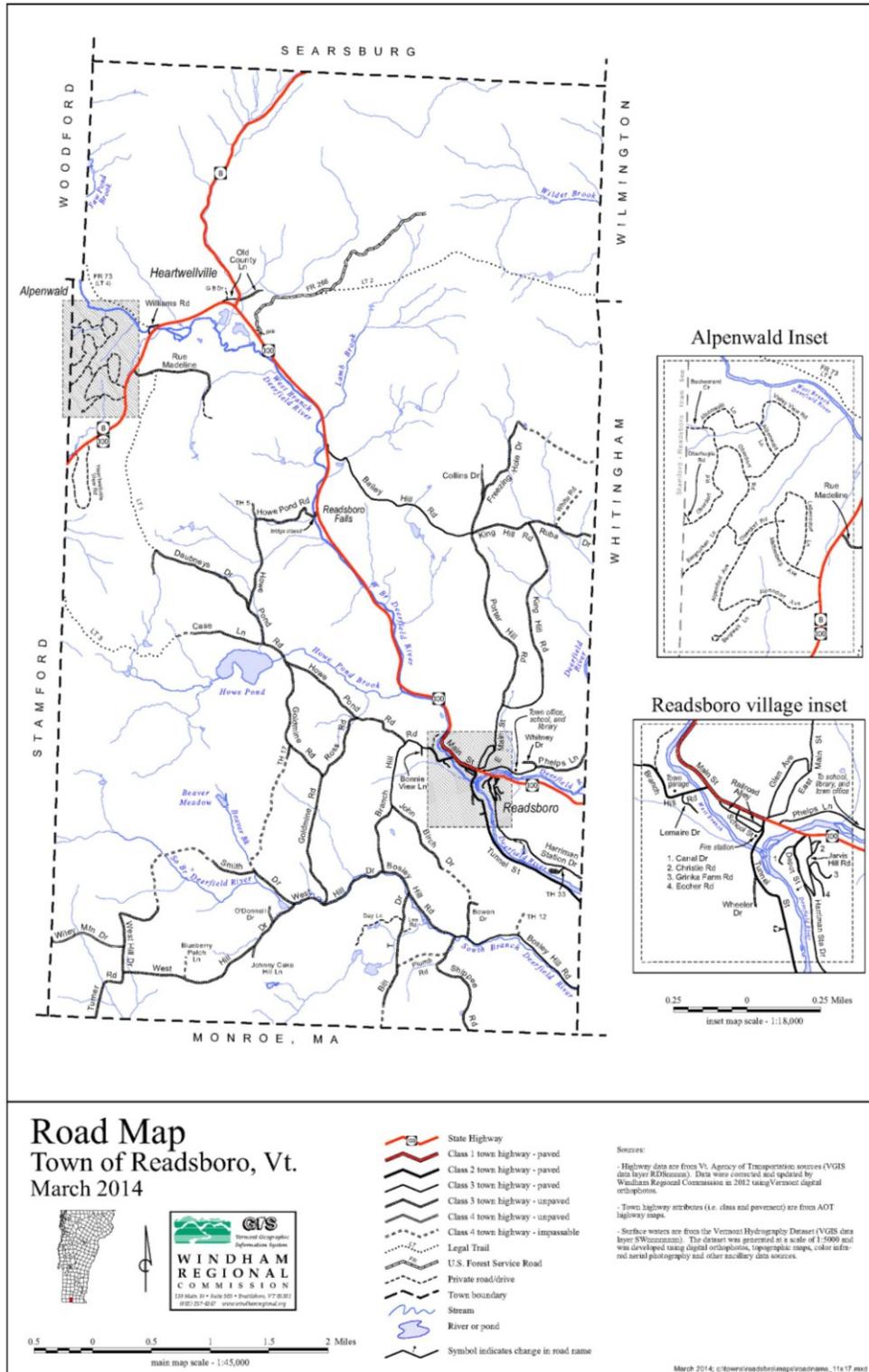


FIGURE 9: THE WRC ASSISTED THE STATE WITH GROWING TRANSPORTATION NEEDS.

Source: WRC GIS Department

While the Legislature foresaw this problem and tried to mitigate its impact by providing towns with grant funds to hire professional planning assistance from regional planning commissions or from private sector for-profit consultants, the State's 1990s budget problems made such resources very unpredictable at best. Despite the expectation that town plans would be more detailed and

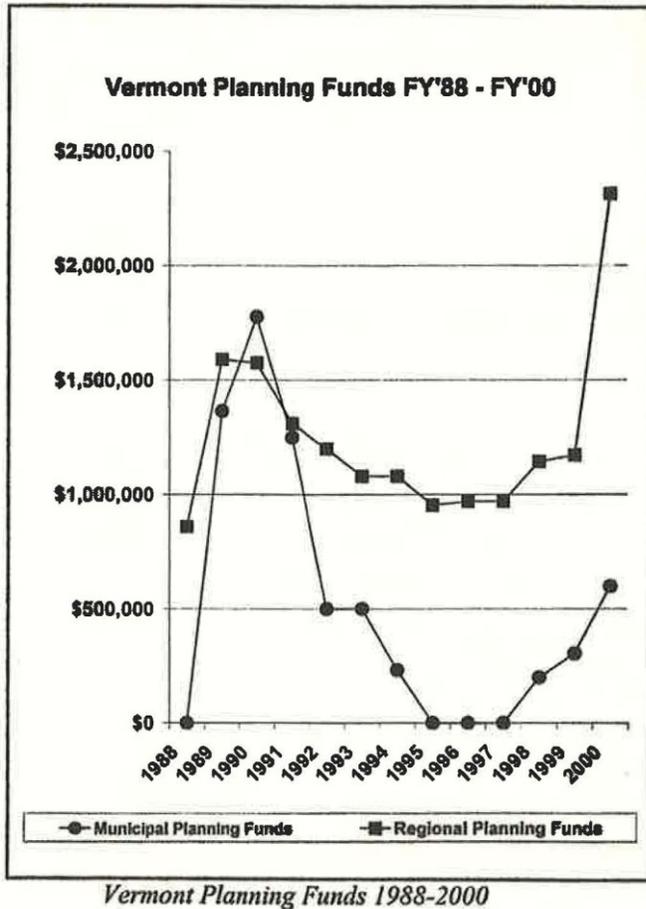


FIGURE 10: FUNDING WAS CUT SEVERELY FOR REGIONAL AND MUNICIPAL PLANNING IN THE EARLY 1990S.

Source: Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs, *History of Planning in Vermont, 1999*

\$750,000) the process was also intensely competitive. The smaller number of towns participating from the Windham Region meant the WRC did not have the same volume of requests for assistance. Nevertheless the CDBG applications were long, complex and bureaucratic, requiring significant WRC staff time to prepare.

One way the State of Vermont responded to development pressure in the 1990s was to implement a new set of policies designed to minimize the environmental impact of new development by funneling growth into existing downtowns and villages, or into new, carefully planned "growth centers" that

comprehensive, from 1995 to 1997 the Legislature appropriated no money at all for local planning grants. When the Legislature did restore funding for local planning in the late 1990s, it made the program competitive rather than an entitlement. That meant that each year towns had to apply for state planning grants to support an update of a town plan or bylaw. This change brought more sensitive work to the WRC as towns sought Commission assistance with both preparation of a grant application, and if successful, with the actual work writing the plan or bylaw update. The sensitivity stemmed from the fact that the amount of money sought by Windham Region towns almost always exceeded the amount available in a given fiscal year. The WRC had to walk a careful line while preparing grant applications to ensure fairness for each town.

During the 1990s the WRC continued to assist towns prepare applications for federal community development block grants (CDBG) to help pay for rehabilitation of affordable housing, job creation projects or public infrastructure improvements. While the CDBG program could bring substantial levels of funding for a municipal project (up to

would replicate Vermont's typical settlement density, mix of uses and streetscape design. In 1998 the Legislature enacted the Vermont Downtown Program and the Growth Center Program to maintain this traditional land use pattern. The programs required interested towns to apply for "designation" of their downtown or village center, or their planned growth center, by a panel of state agency staff using criteria set forth by the Legislature. To encourage towns to engage in downtown planning, the state offered important financial incentives including priority access to CDBG funds, and for individual downtown property owners, priority access to Historic Preservation Tax Credits that could finance building rehabilitation and remodeling.

The WRC worked closely with Brattleboro and Bellows Falls and other towns as they prepared applications to the new Downtown Program. Both Brattleboro and Bellows Falls were successful. Since then the Commission provided assistance to numerous towns as they applied for formal state "designation" of their downtowns or, through an extension of the state program, to their village centers as well. In the Windham Region three downtowns and nineteen villages had achieved this state recognition by 2014.

A very promising new technology that appeared in Vermont in the late 1980s was digital mapping. Called "geographic information systems" or GIS for short, this new tool was based on the creation of digital computer files containing information that could be used to create maps. Maps have always been one of the most important foundations for land use planning, displaying visually important geographic information. Until 1989 they were painstakingly created essentially by hand. Even the best maps were subject to human error or to the margin of error inherent in the way geographic information was gathered by people in the field. When it was desirable to add new information to a map, or to correct an old one, that often meant creating a whole new map, again by hand. This was incredibly time consuming and expensive. GIS made mapping much more accurate, much more efficient and much cheaper. Geographic information became much more precise when gathered with the aid of satellite positioning systems. Once a digital map file was created, containing for example town boundaries and roads, it was the task of a few minutes to overlay another digital file with geographic information, say rivers, on top of the original. This opened very important new possibilities for analysis of geographic features. Like so many other technical advances however, GIS mapping has not been readily available to small towns in Vermont, but it has been a perfect opportunity for the WRC to offer a significant new service.

Starting small, the Commission began acquiring the hardware and the skilled staff to implement a GIS program in 1989. As demonstrated by many of the illustrations to this narrative, today's WRC GIS program produces maps and other digital data that enhances the accuracy and accessibility of information critical to successful completion of a town plan or a zoning bylaw, or an analysis of flood damage to a stream, or the size and location of a deeryard without a GIS map.

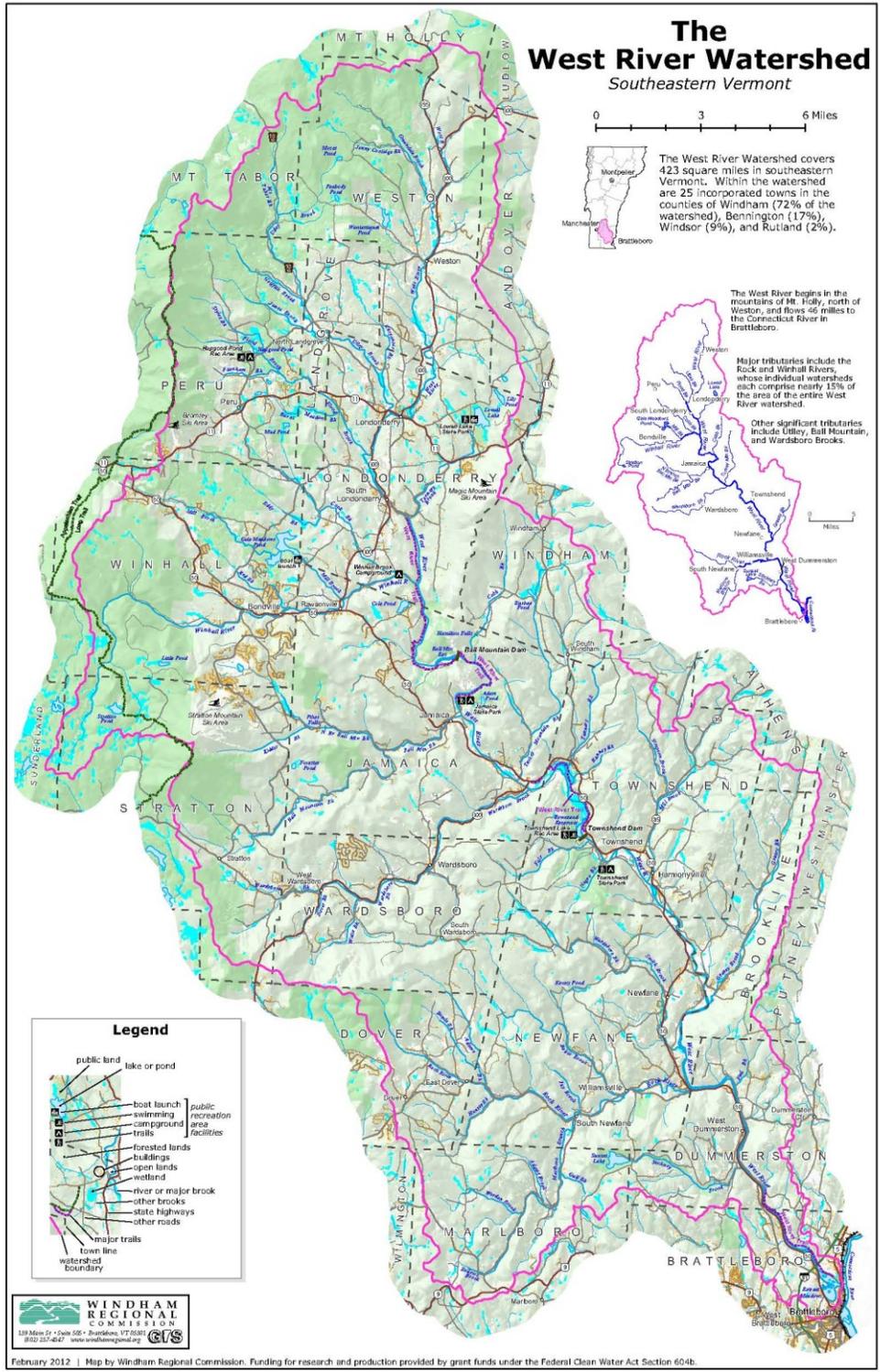


FIGURE 11: GIS TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTIONIZED CARTOGRAPHY THROUGH DIGITALIZATION OF DATA WITH GEOREFERENCING.

Source: WRC GIS Department

A major change to the WRC's long-standing involvement in regional human services took place in 1996. The Council on Aging for Southeastern Vermont had functioned as a program of the WRC since its creation in 1973. Over that long period the two organizations functioned well together, but by the early 1990s it was clear to both that the Council would benefit from being truly independent. In 1996 there was an amicable parting of the ways, when the Council reorganized as an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit.

While the departure of the Council on Aging from the WRC program was timely for both organizations, three new topics of regional scope emerged during the late 1990s that would continue to be significant additions to the WRC's program into the new millennium. New work on energy issues ranged from energy audits of town buildings to regulatory review of new sources, such as the creation of a highly controversial ridgetop wind farm on Glebe Mountain in Londonderry. A second topic that grew in technical and political complexity was emergency management, especially in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene. A far less contentious addition to the WRC work program in 2000, yet one that has been very productive, is the Windham Region Brownfields Reuse Initiative.



FIGURE 12: THE COUNCIL'S JACKSONVILLE CONGREGATE MEAL SITE.

Source: Windham Regional Commission: The Work and the People

In 2002 Howard Dean stepped down as Vermont's Governor to run for President of the United States. When Republican Jim Douglas won the 2002 election, there was to be yet another significant change in the political world of Vermont's regional planning commissions. The economy had been improving, state funding was at least a bit more bountiful, the expanded transportation planning program had stabilized and the RPC's difficult education about how to relate to the Legislature as an important source of support began finally to bear fruit, but the new administration demanded that RPCs be more accountable for the use of state funds.

Chapter 5

MORE RESPONSIBILITY: 2003-2014

The WRC's work program through the first decade of the new millennium showed clear consistency of focus on its four primary constituencies; towns, the state, the region and its people, all characterized by the continuing growth of the Commission's political and technical sophistication. The election of a moderate Republican governor in 2002 brought a significant change in the WRC's relationship with state government and a demand for more detailed accountability for the use of state funds. Digital technology became an ever more significant tool in land use and environmental planning, as new analytical and modeling tools entered the market. In the Windham Region, as elsewhere, new alternative energy projects grew in number, and in controversy, while the state's only nuclear power plant became a major focus of unfavorable attention. Water quality, brownfield redevelopment and emergency management/resilience planning occupied a growing share of WRC resources. The WRC also experienced another leadership change when Jim Matteau stepped down as Executive Director in 2010. The Commission hired Chris Company as its fifth executive director. Chris brought to the WRC extensive experience, including work in regional planning and land use regulation in Maryland and New York, directing a landscape architecture graduate program at Mississippi State University, and extensive work on sustainable agriculture at the local, regional and federal levels.

Almost inevitably, the WRC's interaction with the State of Vermont revolved around money as the perennial uncertainty about funding reared its head anew in 2003 when the Douglas Administration moved to increase the efficiency and accountability of state government.

While Governor Howard Dean had not been a friend of planning, the tension that existed between the Vermont planning community and he had subsided largely into a generally peaceful *modus vivendi*, in which the Legislature provided the necessary support, both political and financial, to regional planning commissions. The Douglas Administration came into office in 2003 promising a new accountability from state agencies, requiring them to publicly demonstrate benefit from the use of state funds. The Administration did not require this level of accountability of regional planning commissions until 2010 when a cooperative Legislature enacted "Challenges for Change". This new relationship between the state and RPCs required detailed justification of their collective request for an appropriation of state funds and a specific reporting of the impact of their expenditures. In addition, the new Administration

and the Legislature considered what savings and improved performance might be achieved by reducing the number of regional planning commissions from eleven to nine and merging them with regional development corporations. While this new approach might have been popular among more conservative legislators and government agency heads, it created a true “challenge” for regional planning commissions as they sought new and credible metrics to define the impact of their work. The fundamental problem is that planning, by definition, focuses on future outcomes, sometimes in a really long-term future that cannot be measured precisely in the near-term. Nevertheless, after much negotiation the state and regional planning commissions agreed on accountability measures that would be written into the RPC’s annual contracts and assessed periodically. Additionally, future funding was to be evaluated partly in light of measured past performance. The Legislature and the Administration dropped the proposal for reducing the number of RPCs and their merger with regional development corporations.

There is no question that when Tropical Storm Irene slammed into Vermont on August 28th and 29th 2011, it altered the WRC’s focus. The storm’s track moved from southwest to northeast through the Windham Region along the eastern slopes of the Green Mountains where six to seven inches of rain fell during the two-day period. The eastern portion of the region, roughly along the Connecticut River Valley, received three to five inches. Storm damage to homes, businesses and public infrastructure was catastrophic in most areas with the exception of Dummerston and Putney, where damage was significant but not as severe. This was the first storm in recent memory to cause significant displacement of people from their homes—in many cases homes and the ground beneath them were literally swept away. Some authorities likened the damage to public infrastructure and to private homes and businesses to the benchmark 1927 flood. The bare numbers describing the damage are daunting: 113 major town bridges and culverts damaged or destroyed, 40 major stream crossings on town roads closed, 100 miles of town roads damaged and more than 1,000 culverts affected (see Figure 11).

In this crisis situation, the WRC stepped up to serve as a critical bridge between state and federal agencies and Windham’s towns and human service organizations as they struggled to respond to the disaster. Former WRC director Jim Matteau, at that time retired and working part-time for FEMA, was part of the FEMA response team based in Burlington. He noted that many FEMA staff from around the country, who were unfamiliar with the work of RPCs as we have in Vermont, were greatly impressed by the role that RPCs played both on the ground and in terms of data support.

The Commission provided state agencies with real-time, comprehensive information, laid out on GIS maps, about the location and extent of the damage to roads and bridges, damage to homes and other buildings, and importantly, residential areas isolated by flood damage.

Buildings Destroyed or Substantially Damaged due to Tropical Storm Irene in the Windham Region of Vermont



| town | address | lddg_type |
|-------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Brattleboro | 56 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 62 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 66 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 59 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 63 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 67 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 71 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 75 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 79 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 81 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 1 Village Dr | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 36 Brookwood Dr | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 46 Village Dr | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 30 Brookwood Dr | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 10 Winding Hill Rd | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 127 Glen St | mobile home |
| Brattleboro | 805 Western Av | town garage |
| Grafton | 778 Route 121 E | house |
| Grafton | 516 Route 121 E | house |
| Grafton | 862 Rte 121 E | house |
| Grafton | 55 Kelder Hill Rd | storage building |
| Grafton | 121 Parker Hill Rd | storage building |
| Grafton | 153 Parker Hill Rd | mobile home |
| Grafton | 175 Parker Hill Rd | mobile home |
| Grafton | 201 Parker Hill Rd | business |
| Jamaica | 275 Wilder St | house |
| Jamaica | 289 Wilder St | house |
| Jamaica | 317 Wilder St | house |
| Jamaica | 303 Wilder St | house |
| Jamaica | 1950 Phis Falls Rd | house |
| Jamaica | 2965 W Jamaica Rd | house |
| Jamaica | 1881 Route 100 S | mobile home |
| Londonderry | 2528 Route 11 | house |
| Londonderry | 2306 N Main St | business |
| Londonderry | 2321 N Main St | business |
| Londonderry | 2550 Route 11 | house |
| Londonderry | 434 Main St | house |
| Newfane | 28 Stratton Hill Rd | apartment building |
| Newfane | 279 Dover Rd | house |
| Newfane | 236 Dover Rd | house |
| Newfane | 5 Hickey Rd | house |
| Newfane | 246 Dover Rd | house |
| Newfane | 275 Dover Rd | house |
| Newfane | rte, old mill | house |
| Readsboro | 62 School St | house |
| Readsboro | 40 School St | house |
| Readsboro | 42 School St | house |
| Rockingham | 408 Sadsons River Rd | house |
| Rockingham | 429 Sadsons River Rd | mobile home |
| Rockingham | 448 Sadsons River Rd | mobile home |
| Rockingham | 37 Westminster West Rd, Lot 1 | mobile home |
| Wardsboro | 2085 Route 100 | house |
| Wardsboro | 244 S Wardsboro Rd | house |
| Wardsboro | 108 S Wardsboro Rd | house |
| Wardsboro | 222 S Wardsboro Rd | house |
| Westminster | 36 Town Garage Rd | house |
| Westminster | 3 Shaffer St | house |
| Wilmington | 180 Route 100 N | business |
| Wilmington | 5 W Main St | business |
| Wilmington | 36 W Main St | business |
| Wilmington | 23 W Main St | business |
| Wilmington | rte, storage building | storage building |

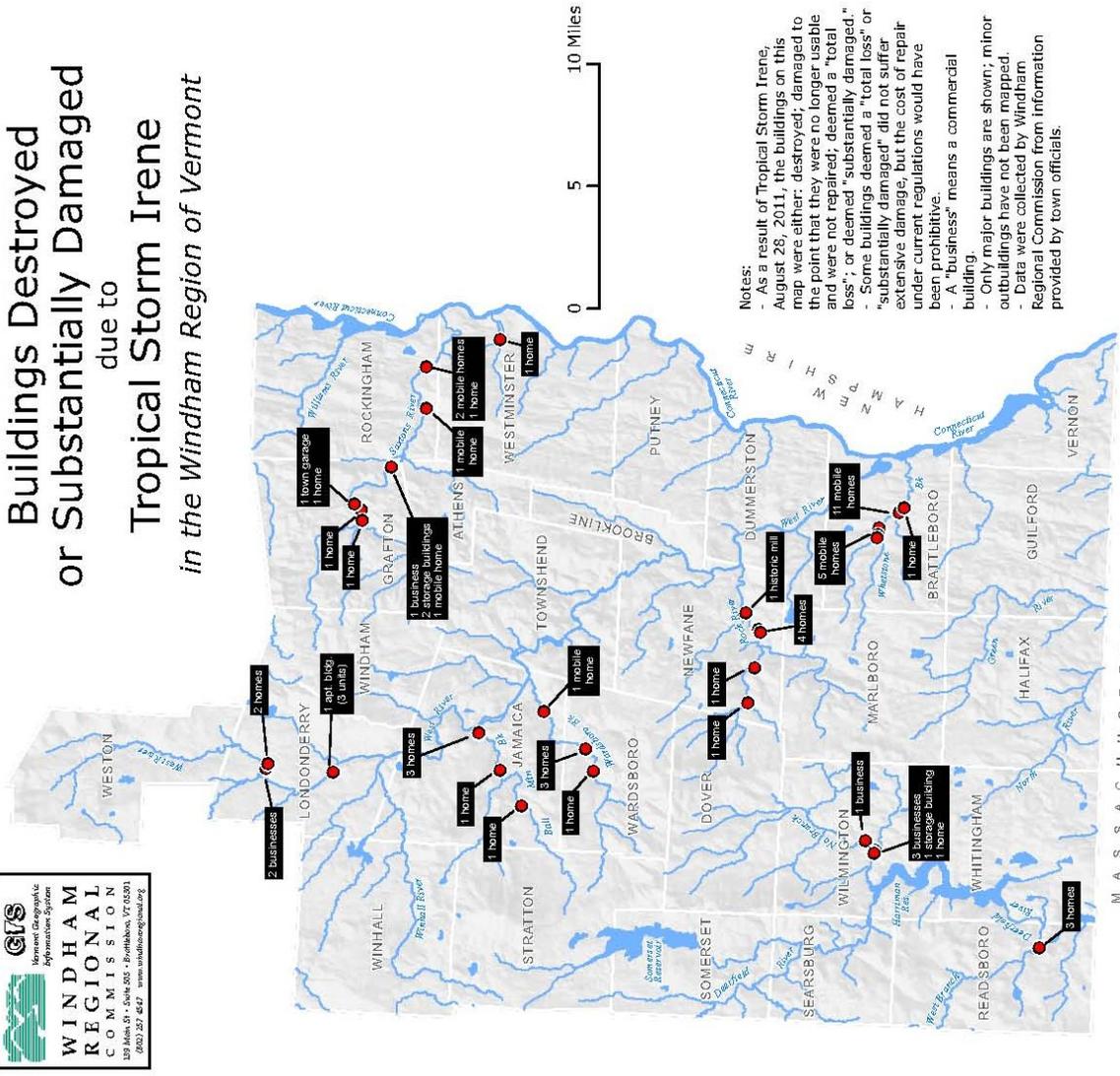


FIGURE 13: OVER 60 BUILDINGS WERE DESTROYED BEYOND REPAIR IN THE WINDHAM REGION DURING TROPICAL STORM IRENE ON AUGUST 28, 2011.

Source: WRC GIS Department

Also within days of the storm VTrans asked the RPCs to facilitate local road recovery as the state was overwhelmed with repairing its own infrastructure. This primarily involved connecting towns with resources through Vermont Associated General Contractors which made solicitation of bids for materials and engineering and contractor services more efficient. The importance of this role was the recognition by the state that the RPCs had the ability and capacity to act quickly in times of crisis and assume a new set of responsibilities rapidly and effectively.

The WRC also attempted to bring order to the chaos of communications coming from the state to the towns. State agencies understandably needed to understand the full scope of the damage done and unmet needs. This resulted in multiple and sometimes redundant or conflicting requests for information from already stressed town officials and volunteers. The WRC began to manage the multiple requests or information from federal and state agencies by compiling state information needs into one email—generally sent daily—which also included information about the type of support towns should expect from federal and state agencies. This is now a formal role for regional planning commissions. RPCs have entered into a memorandum of understanding that defines the local liaison role of regional commissions in the event of a disaster, as well as our support roles in the state emergency operations center when it is operational. In the post-Irene world, the RPCs provide the backup staffing for the Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

WRC assistance to towns and to people went well beyond the period of immediate crisis. As state and federal agencies allocated resources to begin recovery from the disaster, the WRC staff helped towns with damage inventories, proposed mitigation measures and other actions required to qualify for recovery assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On December 12, 2012 the federal Economic Development Administration awarded a \$472,000 disaster recovery grant to a consortium of the WRC, the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and the Bennington County Regional Commission to support southern Vermont's long-term recovery from Irene. The project had a three pronged approach: one-on-one business resilience planning assistance, village revitalization assistance, and the creation of a Southern Vermont Sustainable Marketing campaign to recruit people to move to and invest in southern Vermont.

During the first decade of the millennium, the Commission's work connecting the interests of state agencies and member towns, especially after Irene, illustrates the growing technical sophistication of its program. For example, in 2004 the WRC's transportation planner helped towns deal with access management projects as well as roadway and traffic analysis, traffic safety programs, regional prioritization of VTrans projects, an increased public transit role, and represented the WRC in a cooperative project with the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut on an I-91 "Knowledge Corridor", and a north/south passenger rail project in the three states. The Commission even helped towns with prosaic work such as creating an inventory detailing the characteristics of town culverts and their exact

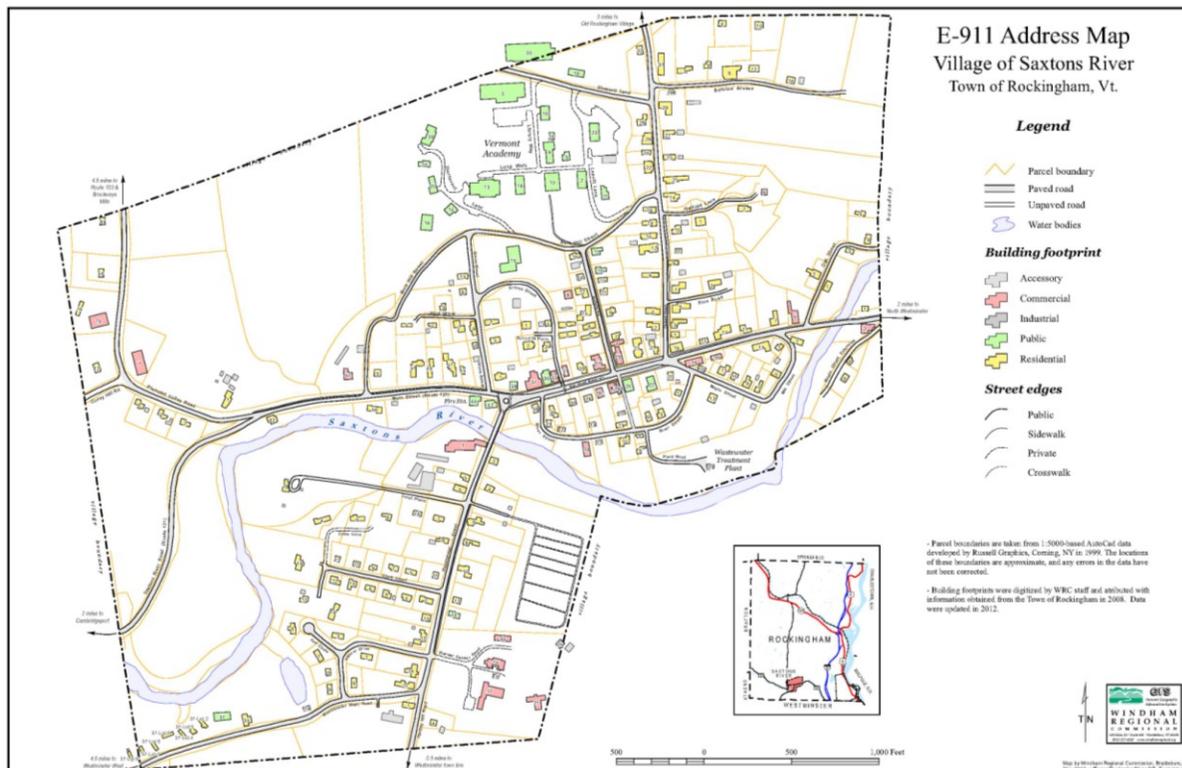


FIGURE 14: WRC DEVELOPED E-911 ADDRESS MAPS TO ASSIST WITH EMERGENCY RESPONSE.

Source: WRC GIS Department

location on a GIS map; not very dramatic, but really important if they wash out in a flood. Bridge and culvert inventories continue to be one of the more popular transportation-related services provided by the WRC.

In June 2013 the Commission adopted an updated Transportation Plan for the region. This major policy document set forth six goals for the region’s transportation system. Many of these goals echo ideas and policies first set forth as part of Act 200 between 1988 and 1990. Compatibility, consistency and decision-making at the most local level appropriate are directly related to the basic planning policies that served as the backbone of the state’s growth management program. The Transportation Plan was incorporated by reference into the Windham Regional Plan, adopted September 2014, and serves as the transportation element required by state law.

The Plan emphasizes the need to provide adequate support to all modes of transportation, not just motor vehicles, but also bicycles, pedestrians and public transit. It points out the need to provide infrastructure to support alternate fuel vehicles and the region’s railroads, the latter as a potentially critical contributor to the health of the region’s economy. While acknowledging that all transportation planning and construction is powerfully influenced by federal transportation policies and priorities, the Plan emphasizes the importance of addressing locally perceived transportation needs.

One of the most significant regional and local problems facing states like Vermont, with a long history of economic activity that pre-dates all current hazardous materials handling and disposal regulations, is the existence of land and buildings that cannot comply with modern environmental rules and that are therefore essentially useless and unmarketable.

In 2000, the WRC became one of the first Vermont RPCs to establish a “brownfields” program. Funded by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the brownfields program provides critical services to private, municipal and non-profit property owners and to the region’s collective economy by identifying and rehabilitating for future use properties contaminated by hazardous and petroleum substances. While directly helpful to property owners by making available technical assistance, low interest loans or grants to pay for site assessment and clean-up, it is also very beneficial to the WRC’s member towns by



FIGURE 15: MAIN STREET ARTS IN SAXTONS RIVER COMPLETED A NEW ADDITION AFTER REMEDIATING A BROWNFIELD SITE THROUGH WRC’S BROWNFIELD PROGRAM.

Source: Susan McMahon

transforming relatively useless properties from hazards to renovated additions to the grand list and to the inventory of properties that can contribute to the community’s economic health. The success of the WRC’s program has become a model for similar activity at other Vermont regional planning commissions and in New England.

The brownfields program is voluntary; property owners chose to participate. Once the clean-up is complete and verified by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, the owner can use the property, perhaps following the redevelopment plan or the owner could sell the property with an assurance to a new owner that the contamination has been removed. An additional feature of the brownfields program is that when property owners complete their projects and repay any loans they may have received to pay for the cleanup work, the loan repayment goes back into the WRC’s revolving loan fund to support future brownfields projects.

By the end of 2014 the WRC Brownfields Program had completed assessments on 46 sites. Seventy-eight percent of these sites had completed redevelopment (27) or were about to be finished in the near future (9). By any measure, this has been a very successful program.

As the WRC's support for member towns and others became more technically sophisticated, so did its role in state and federal regulatory activity. The Commission's project review responsibility that began in 1970 with the relatively simple and straightforward role in Act 250 grew to include a daunting array of regulatory activity. State statute (24 V.S.A. Section 4345a), states that regional planning commissions have a responsibility to review regionally significant projects, that because of size, location, or type of development require an Act 250 (land use), Section 248 (energy generation), or Section 248a (communications facility) permit. WRC also has a role in the review of projects requiring federal permits (i.e., FERC (hydropower), NRC (nuclear), NEPA (environmental impact statements related to federal lands or federally-funded projects). Unfortunately, unlike state agencies, neither the WRC nor towns have the ability to bill back to applicants the costs of engaging in these state regulatory processes. This is not an issue for most applications, but larger ones, such as the Certificate of Public Good for Vermont Yankee's relicensing, or larger resorts, can consume substantial staff time and because of costs, we generally have to represent the WRC and its plan ourselves rather than hiring experienced legal counsel.

Given the scope and significance of these regulatory responsibilities, the Commission established a more formal policy statement and process for its Project Review Committee.

It is important to note that WRC neither supports nor opposes applications. The WRC is instead tasked with supporting the duly adopted Windham Regional Plan and its policies. The [Windham Regional Plan](#), Implementation Section—Development Review, sets the guidelines for review. To that end, WRC asks three questions when a permit application comes before us: 1) What does the plan say? 2) What will the project do, as proposed? 3) Is the answer to question 2 consistent with the answer to question 1?

Value judgment is reserved for the process through which we develop the Windham Regional Plan. It has long been the position of our town-appointed commissioners that the WRC's role in state and federal permitting processes is to represent the Windham Regional Plan and its policies. This is also the role given us by statute. To that end, the commissioners who serve on our Project Review Committee first determine if a project is of regional significance in terms of the resources being impacted. This is defined by the Windham Regional Plan. The Committee then evaluates the development proposal and its constituent parts on the basis of the extent to which it is consistent with the duly adopted plan for the region. Having evaluated the proposal against the plan, the committee provides comments to all parties about whether the region's policies are supported by the project and to what extent.

This process underscores why the development of a plan—whether a regional plan or a town plan—is so important. It is through the planning process that community needs and values, related goals, objectives and policies are established. When a plan is approved the decision by the region or town as to what can and should be developed has, for all intents and purposes, been decided.

The emergence of energy as a major focus for development and permit application review meant that the WRC implemented this policy intensively in the realm of Section 248 and federal FERC and NRC procedures.

The WRC's work on energy issues after 2000 is another strong example of the Commission's responsiveness and resourcefulness. The politics of energy were very contentious, requiring the WRC to strengthen its traditional role of bridge between state and local government. This role became even more complex with the addition of federal agency involvement. The Commission had a primary responsibility to help member towns understand the impact of proposed energy projects and to have a say in those projects that had significant local impact. WRC support most often involved helping towns work their way through the arcane complexity of state and especially federal regulatory procedures. At the same time, the Commission also had (and still has) a duty to help its towns and the state work together to plan for long-term energy supplies.

To anchor its energy work, especially energy policy and regulation, the WRC created an Energy Committee in 2006 that would be responsible for direct help to town governments and to serve as the spearhead of Commission activity in the Section 248 state energy regulatory procedure as well as the federal processes the NRC and FERC.

Some of the Committee's projects focused directly on service to member towns. Supported by state and federal Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants (EECBG), from 2010 to 2012 the Commission's Energy Committee distributed funding to complete successfully fourteen energy audits and nine weatherization retrofits for municipal and county buildings. Almost all of the weatherization retrofits included a combination of insulation improvements and air sealing. Some projects included additional work such as removing excess attic hatches, replacing dial thermostats with programmable thermostats, and upgrading electrical fixtures to more efficient bulbs. As of February of 2013, the towns that had completed weatherization improvement projects in 2012 had seen a combined total of \$8,770 savings. This equated to an average of about \$1,250 per project, with a 10.6% return on investment and an average payback period of about 9.5 years.

While this kind of work directly to benefit member towns was important, the WRC, often through its Energy Committee, also engaged in more sensitive activity in which the Commission's project review policies became a critical underpinning for credibility and legitimacy.

For most of its life, the WRC did not have much interaction with the owners or operation of the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Station, Vermont's only nuclear power plant, though there were consistent, vocal public calls for the plant's shutdown beginning after the Three Mile Island accident in Pennsylvania in 1979. The Commission's involvement really deepened in 2007 when Entergy, the New Orleans-based company that owned Vermont Yankee, initiated an application to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for permission to upgrade the amount of power the station would generate, a so-called "uprating" of the plant's output, and for a 20-year extension of the plant's operating license. First coming on-line in 1972, Yankee had a federal operating license that ran to 2012. Entergy wanted a new license to operate the plant until 2032.

The time consuming complexity of the work related to Vermont Yankee led the WRC to create a new "Vermont Yankee Study Committee" that assumed the responsibility within the WRC for the exploration

of issues related to Vermont Yankee. This enabled the WRC's Energy Committee to focus on other energy issues, while also enabling members of the new committee to grow their expertise in matters related to Yankee's operations and permit applications.

One of the triggers that intensified public concern over uprating Yankee's output or extending its license to operate was Entergy's revelation in 2010 that radioactive materials had leaked from buried pipes at the plant. The possibility that these materials could get into groundwater, and perhaps find their way out of the plant's boundaries and into the Connecticut River, raised immediate concern by state environmental officials, local governments and the WRC. Their concern was greatly enhanced by a further revelation that Entergy officials had mislead state regulators about the severity of the leaks. The Commission participated actively in state and federal evaluation of the cause of the leaks, their impact on surrounding lands and waters, and on repairs to stop further escape of contaminated water. As the NRC and Section 248 reviews ground on, through its Yankee Study Committee the WRC submitted extensive filings on behalf of the region, pressing Entergy for more information on the need for and likely impact of uprating the plant and of extending its lifespan for an additional twenty years.

Ironically, after the NRC permitted both the uprating and the extension of the license to operate, Entergy announced in August 2013 that it would shut down Vermont Yankee in December 2014 because market conditions made it unprofitable to operate.

This in turn forced the WRC to refocus its activity related to Yankee. After the Entergy announcement, the Commission began detailed work, in cooperation with the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC) and the State of Vermont, to cushion the shock of the sudden loss of Yankee's high paying jobs on the region's economy. Because of its years of participation in Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) dockets related to Vermont Yankee, the WRC already had Entergy's own information in hand as to what it expected to do when it ceased operation and what that would mean for employment ramp down at the plant.

The WRC's Energy Committee was also involved in Vermont's Section 248 process, providing technical help to towns impacted by energy projects and testifying about consistency of such projects with policies set forth in the Windham Regional Plan. In February 2009 the PSB approved construction of a 345-kilovolt transmission line between Vernon and Vermont Electric Power Company's (VELCO) Coolidge Substation in Cavendish. The Board also approved a new substation in Vernon and an expansion of the Coolidge Substation. These components were known as "the Coolidge Connector." To address local reliability problems on Central Vermont Public Service's (CVPS) system, the Board also approved a new Newfane substation and an approximately one-mile 345-kV loop between Newfane and the planned 345-kV Vernon-to-Cavendish line. The combined projects are known as the "Southern Loop Project."

VELCO and CVPS had filed a petition with the PSB in 2007, outlining multiple strategies to support electric system reliability that were consistent with recommendations resulting from an extensive public outreach process in which CVPS officials had worked with affected towns and landowners as they

addressed the reliability concerns that the project was intended to solve. The PSB recognized that dialogue, and praised CVPS's efforts, noting that the company had engaged in both an extensive public outreach process and collaborative efforts with other parties, including local communities and the affected permitting agencies. After detailed review in the Section 248 process, the PSB found that the proposed project was the clearly superior option because it was the lowest-cost transmission alternative that effectively resolves the reliability concerns. The PSB appreciated the efforts undertaken by all of the parties to the 248 review, including the WRC, and noted that their cooperation was instrumental in producing an efficient process and positive result.

The WRC has been consistently involved in regional economic development activity. From the late 1960s when it became the Windham Regional Planning *and Development* Commission, the WRC has worked with local businesses and economic interests to further the health of the region's economy. Some of this work was straightforward, such as the updating of a "Commercial & Industrial Database" in cooperation with the BDCC in 2004. Other work was however, more demanding.

Responding to a series of economic problems, starting in 2007 with a serious lack of dependable broadband and cell phone service, a small group of people from the BDCC got together with participation from WRC to see if they could resolve the dilemma. They learned quickly that to have useful impact, they would need an identifiable, organization. This turned into the Southeastern Vermont Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (SeVEDS). To secure administrative support, the new organization established a legal connection with the BDCC, the region's long-standing development organization. SeVEDS always understood the need for a comprehensive development strategy setting economic goals and priorities for the region. This comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS) would also be the foundation for any grant applications the group might submit to state or federal agencies to support their work. From 2010 to the present the WRC has supported SeVEDS' work and assigned staff resources to contribute to their program.

The WRC also engaged in support of the region's farm and forest enterprises. Given that the forest products industry is a major component in the Windham Region's economy, the Commission has contributed to a better understanding of the scope of these industries and their importance. In 2013 the WRC commissioned the Conway School, a graduate landscape design school from Conway, Massachusetts to complete a report on the nature of the region's forest economy, its people and steps to be taken to preserve its health. This 36-page report describes through the stories of residents dedicate to forestry, clearly what it means to work in the forest industry, what role it plays in the region and what steps could be taken to ensure its continuing health. This work continues through the Commission's Forestry Working Group.

Chapter 6

THE FUTURE

If regional planning commissions were viewed as dispensable by some in positions of state leadership in 2010, the opposite is true in 2015. Having demonstrated their capacity to serve as the essential link between state, local and federal government in the response to, and long-term recovery from, Tropical Storm Irene, state agencies also came to realize that it is at the regional level where most state programs come together. It's at the regional level where programmatic "stove pipes"—the natural tendency of programs to be isolated from another—can be broken down. It's also where common municipal needs can be met.

In 2015 regional commissions—the omission of planning here is purposeful as we do much more than plan—are trying to strike the balance between being integral to the implementation of a wide array of state policies (especially land use, transportation, emergency, natural resource, energy, climate change and flood resilience, and most recently, water quality) and being relevant to our towns' specific and common needs. The distance between the state's perceived needs and the town's perceived needs is often quite great.

We strive to make state and federal programs work for our towns. A very practical reality is that we are reliant upon these programs to provide staff resources to provide a variety of services. We also pursue specific grant opportunities that we feel will be of benefit to the communities we serve. What we would like to do is be more responsive to our towns' own perceived needs. To that end, we have engaged in a discussion about shared municipal services with town officials. The goal is to more fully pursue our stated mission of assisting towns with effective local government.

We would like our towns to identify among themselves services where they'd like to collaborate. What type of services? Anything from shared purchasing programs to animal control to zoning administration to road maintenance services. In some cases towns might be able to enter into effective agreements with one another. In other cases they might want the regional commission to organize and administer the service for them. For now we are taking an organic approach—supporting the towns as they identify their priorities and then figuring out what implementation model makes the most sense. In any case the towns by their own decision would provide full financial support of the effort, but this means they would have total control. This may result in cost savings, but as importantly these arrangements

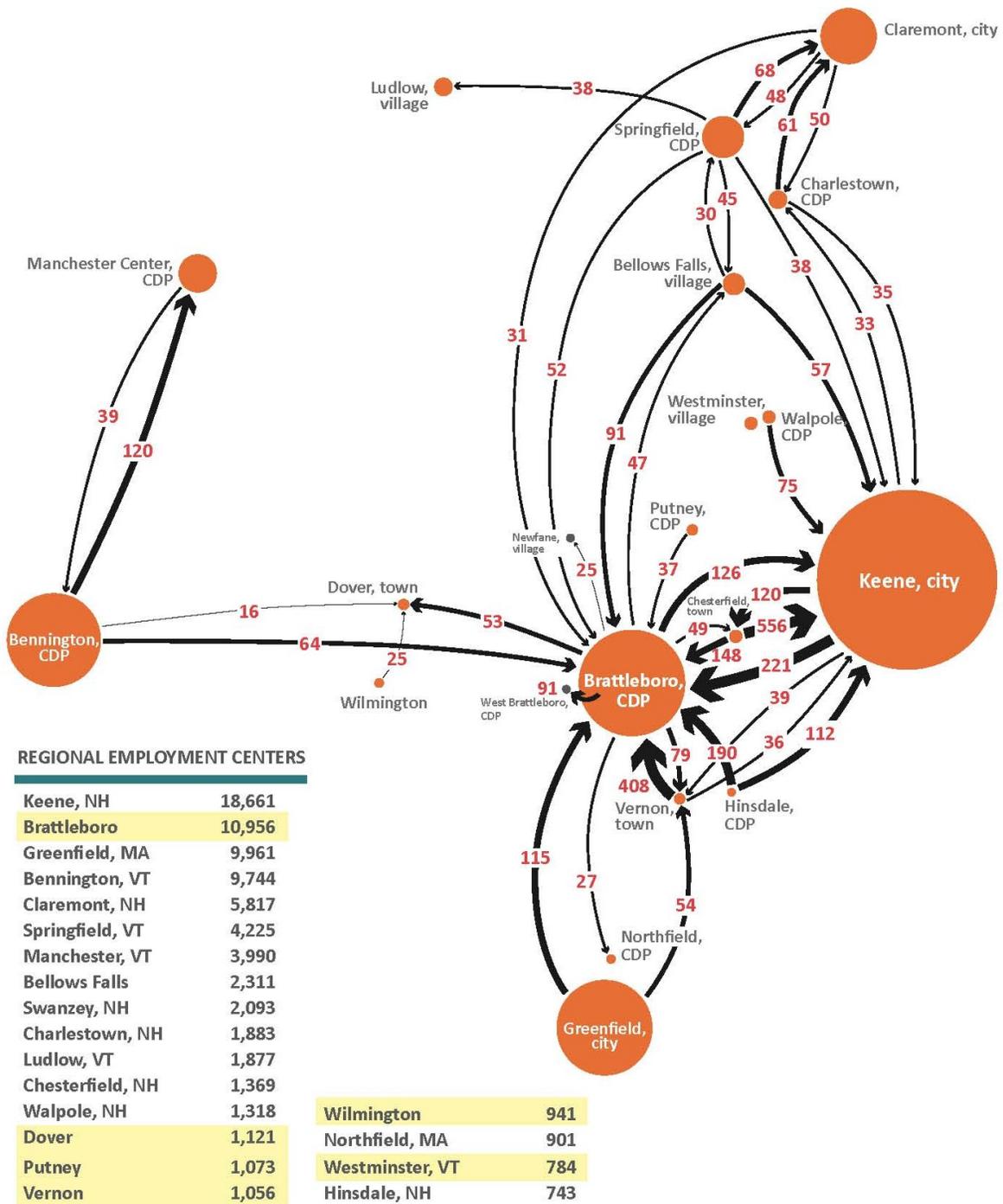


FIGURE 16: COMMUTING LINKS BETWEEN THE MAJOR EMPLOYMENT CENTERS IN AND AROUND THE WINDHAM REGION, 2010.

Source: WRC, using data from <http://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

should result in greater value for money spent with less administrative burden. Another benefit could very well be the sustainability of Vermont's form of local governance. Shared services will allow towns to exert local control while sharing the burden of increasingly complex government administration.

We are also recognizing the value of looking beyond our region's boundaries to effect meaningful economic development that provides household income security. The closure of Vermont Yankee has prompted us to look at our “commute to work” patterns in a new light. Each day, the Windham Region exchanges workers with our neighboring regions in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. To be sure, we will want to pursue economic development, job growth, and labor development in the Windham Region. But if you look at where people work that live in our region, it becomes apparent that the Windham Region has a stake in the well being of the economies of Cheshire County, New Hampshire and Franklin County, Massachusetts. To that end the WRC and BDCC are working with counterparts in New Hampshire and Massachusetts to identify what our economic development strategies have in common, and what common workforce development opportunities we can pursue together.

Looking into the future, the WRC will have a role in assisting state government in implementing—and shaping—statewide policy, and we will continue to seek federal resources in support of regional initiatives to benefit our towns. We will also work to shape federal policy where we have a useful perspective to share. These purposes harken back to our founding. We will also continue to assist towns with their planning and plan implementation needs. This has been and will always be a core function.



FIGURE 17: REGIONAL LEADERS. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: BRIAN KELSEY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS, LINDA DUNLAVY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRANKLIN REGIONAL COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS (MA), CHRIS CAMPANY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WINDHAM REGIONAL COMMISSION (VT), TIM MURPHY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SOUTHWEST REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION (NH), ADAM GRINOLD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRATTLEBORO DEVELOPMENT CREDIT CORPORATION.

Source: Chris Campany

The two new challenges before us, organizing our towns to share administrative functions in a way that preserves our valued form of governance, and working with BDCC and our counterparts in adjoining states and regions to shape our economic future, reflect the need for the WRC take the initiative to shape a future that turns around demographic trends. Our economy is stagnating, wages are declining, the working-age population is

leaving, our population is getting older, and an extraordinary percentage of those who live here derive their income from someplace else and are thus somewhat disconnected from the local economy. But we have so much to build upon. For a rural area we have a remarkably diverse economy with no single dominant industry. Our villages and downtowns are remarkably intact. There remains an energy and enthusiasm about this beautiful place. We are blessed with a wealth of human and natural resources. We are resilient.

The future of the region really is what we make it. So the role of the WRC for the next 50 years is to do what we have done for the last 50 years—to empower self-determination through collaboration. We should learn from the experience of other people and places to expand our knowledge and understanding and fertilize our imaginations, but do so knowing that future will be our own invention. There is no formula to follow. We may need to work together differently, owning new realities that could give us reason to change the way we have been doing things for the last 5, 10, 20, 50 or 200 years. Above all we have to recognize the amazing things about the people and place that comprise the Windham Region; things that time and familiarity may cause us to take for granted. People invest of themselves in a place out of hope and affection. We need to explore new ways to revisit the people and communities and places of this region to renew that affection, and to effectively see ourselves again with new eyes. From that vantage point we'll have a better understanding of what is wanted and needed, what steps need to be taken to meet those wants and needs, and—if we do it right—the enthusiasm and commitment to take those steps.



**WINDHAM
REGIONAL
COMMISSION**

