



MEMORANDUM

TO: VT House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
FROM: David Snedeker, Executive Director
Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA)
DATE: January 25, 2023
SUBJECT: FY2023 Budget Adjustment Act & Regional Planning Commissions

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Chairman Marcotte & Committee Members:

The Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA), a regional planning and development organization serving the 3-county Northeast Kingdom region of Vermont, thanks your committee for inviting me to speak on Sections 1, 7, and 16 of the Budget Adjustment Act.

NVDA is one of 11 regional planning commissions (RPCs) and one of 12 regional development corporations (RDCs) providing direct professional and technical assistance to municipalities and businesses statewide. All VT RPCs have direct and longstanding local connections with our respective municipalities, their legislative bodies, local planning commissions, municipal managers and administrators, energy and conservation committees, road departments, and others. We routinely work with multiple state agencies, including the Agencies of Commerce & Community Development, Transportation, Natural Resources, Emergency Management, and the Departments of Public Service, Buildings & General Services, and Health. The RPCs regularly work with our member communities on land use planning, energy planning, watershed basin planning, transportation planning, emergency planning, and on addressing current issues such as broadband, health equity, ARPA assistance. Most, if not all, of this work entails providing some level of grant writing assistance, and often grant administration and project management support. The RPCs are also experienced working at an inter-municipal level and this is helpful for communities willing to work together to address common issues.

Budget Adjustment Act comments:

Sec. 1 (24) \$3,000,000 to the Secretary of Administration to implement the Rural Infrastructure Assistance Program created in Sec. E.100.4 of this act.

The NVDA and the RPCs are supportive of this provision given that our understanding is that funds would be used to provide technical assistance to rural communities applying for and utilizing available ARPA funds.

Sec. 1 (28) \$30,000,000 to the Public Service Department to be used as state match for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) broadband grant (Middle Mile service).

The NVDA and RPCs support this provision given the understanding that if the application is successful and monies are received, expanded access to reliable, high-speed, and affordable broadband will be improved throughout the state. VT RPCs have each been supportive of the formation and implementation work of the CUDs and others across VT to better serve our communities.

Sec. 1 (29) \$350,000 to the State Refugee Resettlement Office to implement Employment Assistance Grants for New Americans created in Section E.300.2 of this act.

The NVDA supports this provision that will provide funding assistance to organizations engaged in developing community-based support systems for New Americans. When possible, NVDA would like to see some geographic diversity in resettlement efforts. We do have employers in some of our larger communities like Newport and St. Johnsbury that have expressed an interest in helping New Americans.

Sec. 1 (30) \$5,000,000 to the Dept. of Housing & Community Development as additional support for the Vermont Housing Improvement Program.

The NVDA and RPCs strongly support this initiative as it would provide grants to bring existing vacant or older housing units up to current codes and create sorely needed new housing units in communities across Vermont.

Sec. 7 (added - Sec. E.100.4 Rural Infrastructure Assistance Program)

- (a) *Rural Infrastructure Assistance Program.* NVDA is appreciative of the breadth of activities that this competitive program would support. The needs and priorities of rural communities vary from year to year, so this would allow a community to apply for funds to address the most pressing issue(s) facing them. NVDA would support adding Project-based TIF Districts to the list of infrastructure projects in this section. NVDA would also support making this program available on an “as needed” basis and not tied to a limited application cycle; having the flexibility to waive any match requirement; and, keeping the application and administration process as simple as possible.
- (b) *Eligible Communities.* NVDA does support limiting this program to only those communities that score 75% or higher on the VT Underserved Communities Index for at least the first year. In looking at the index, there were 22 communities from the NVDA region. Eight of these communities have state-designated village centers, with 2-3 more likely eligible if they

chose to apply. We do suspect that there would likely be 6-7 of the most rural towns that would not apply to the program without direct outreach, so that would be something NVDA would focus on at the outset.

- (c) *Agency of Administration support services.* NVDA is appreciative of the Agency's willingness to help communities evaluate their municipal needs across several priority areas that affect all VT municipalities. Again, NVDA would support the inclusion of Project-based TIFs as a category to be evaluated under a Community Needs Assessment. Similarly, the willingness of the Agency to assist communities with an opportunity assessment to identify other state and federal funding resources, application and permitting support, and project management and implementation support will be extremely helpful to our rural communities. Because of our direct connections with local communities, NVDA and the RPCs would encourage the Agency to utilize and leverage our local knowledge when working in any region. There are differences in available funding resources across the state and permitting requirements also vary by municipality.

Sec. 16 (amended – Sec. G.300(c)(2) – Dept. of Economic Development and Brownfields)

The NVDA and the RPCs strongly support the provision of additional funding to regional planning commissions for brownfield assessment activities. All VT RPCs have active brownfield assessment and/or loan programs and have successfully worked with the EPA and state agencies to implement these programs for many years. Currently, most of the RPCs have exhausted EPA brownfield funds that they applied for and utilized for assessment activities in their respective regions. NVDA, the recipient of a \$600,000 EPA assessment award in 2020, just expended the remaining funds from our grant within a 2-year period (EPA grants are normally 3-years in duration). We still receive requests for brownfield assistance for redevelopments across our region, but now need to direct requests to either VT DEC or ACCD-DED. Having these additional assessment funds will allow the RPCs to continue facilitating redevelopments and cleanups across VT over the near term.

The RPCs appreciate the efforts of your Committee and the Legislature going forward. On behalf of NVDA and all RPCs, I want to relay our willingness to partner with state agencies to find solutions that work for all of our communities, especially rural communities, going forward. Thank you for your consideration, and please contact me if you have any questions: dsnedeker@nvda.net or (802)748-8303.

Sincerely,

David Snedeker
Executive Director, NVDA