

Vermont House Natural Resources and Energy Committee

Cover sheet for testimony on H. 367

Re: Changing the requirement for adoption of municipal plans from 5 to 10 years

Submitted by: Dana Hanley, Community Development Director, Essex, VT

Date: March 16, 2015

Why will the result of H. 367 be better local planning in Vermont?

- Professional and citizen planners like to get things done. We like to see the results of our efforts in our downtowns, on our roads, in our landscapes, and in our housing stock sooner rather than later. Under current law, we don't always get that opportunity.
- I have been working for the Town of Essex for 9 years. I have been updating town plans for six years and implementing for 3. Not only is this professionally unsatisfying, but it's not good for the town's committees and boards, or its residents.
- This situation has caused one Essex planning commissioner to repeatedly lament: "we never plan". What he means is: "we never implement". It seems that every time we really want to get things accomplished on the ground, its time to update the student-teacher ratio in our schools, and document the after-school programs the library offers; record the purchase of a new fire department ladder truck; note how the Public Works Department seems to always run out of salt these days; report on the number of users on the senior bus; and remark on many people do the mall walking program offered by Parks and Recreation.
- While these updates are ok, we are tired of data. We are way more interested in "action items" accomplished. The Essex Town Plan is now 200 pages long and it gives us over 500 things to do. It isn't usually looked at much until someone has a particular bone to pick. The Essex Planning Commission has a 5 Year Work Plan that represents its priorities from the Town Plan. How, or if, other Town entities are implementing the Town Plan is usually out of our hands and minds for another 5 years.
- The last time a "comprehensive" town plan was done in Essex was 1991. The vision resulting from that Town Plan was very good for almost 25 years. It will soon be time to engage in big community re-visioning in light of a host of changes, including the cancellation of the Circumferential Highway; climate

change; the need for hazard mitigation planning; housing for the influx of the refugee population moving from Burlington to Winooski to Essex along the CCTA bus line; economic development opportunities sufficient to keep young families in our town; siting for renewable energy sources; the increasing demand for trail networks; and development pressures that are nipping at the borders of our long-standing sewer service core area.

- A big re-visioning effort in Essex the next time may very well include the Village of Essex Junction for the first time in decades. In the meantime, for 2016, we are cutting the size of the document by at least one half. Departments, Commissions and Boards are being asked to submit 5-10 priority action items that are achievable and fundable in 5-10 years - not redundant or pie-in-the-sky wish lists. This effort will result in about 50 things to do, not 500.

Why should passage of H.367 be tied to the proposed 5 Year Interim Review element?

- The 5 Year Interim Review element will make the town plans living, dynamic guides to which all parties are accountable. It will result in more doing, rather than thinking about doing. Implementing the Town Plan should always be in the back of our minds. The requirement that the Planning Commission report to the Legislative Body, which then reports to the Regional Planning Commission, will ensure that the Plan is always fresh, always something that we need to orient our thinking around.
- It is easy to get distracted from Town Plans. New planning issues and initiatives, budgetary restrictions, staffing shortfalls - many things keep us away from our Town Plans. This legislation will keep them upfront in our thinking.