

Members of the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee,

I am writing to express my support for the revisions to H.367 being recommended by Sharon Murray on behalf of the Vermont Planners Association that would extend the life of municipal plans to eight years, consistent with regional plans, and eliminate the mid-way update requirement included in the original bill.

The current five-year municipal plan cycle is an impediment to effective implementation of municipal plans. Once a municipality adopts a plan, the Planning Commission realistically only has about three years to work on implementation projects before they have to stop and turn their attention back to the municipal plan. This is not enough time to tackle major projects such as comprehensive bylaw revisions. Often an implementation project is underway when the Planning Commission has to set it aside to review and update the town plan. Once an implementation project is put on hold, the likelihood of its successful resumption and completion following the municipal plan re-adoption is diminished – community energy and interest in the project may be lost or diluted, funding may no longer be available, etc.

The five-year planning cycle also discourages long-range thinking and meaningful community engagement. Plans would be more likely to address the municipality's long-term goals and needs if they were not widely viewed as having a five-year life span. Many people question how a plan that is “only good for five years” can include recommendations and policies that may take 20 years or more to achieve. It is difficult to create the positive energy around the planning process necessary to engage a cross-section of the municipality when that process occurs every five years. Many people view the planning process as repetitive – just a lot of talk that does not lead to any concrete results.

Very few Vermont municipalities are facing a rate of growth that would necessitate major revisions to their plans every five years. It is always an option for a municipality that does experience a rapid or unexpected change in circumstance to amend or readopt their plan in response before it would have otherwise expired.

One of the concerns raised about increasing the life of plans is that some municipalities will disengage from their planning efforts in between plan updates. If the only planning effort that is occurring in a municipality is updating the plan on a five-year cycle, I think we have to ask what such a municipality is achieving. The act of writing a plan, while important, is not the goal of municipal planning. Plans only have value if they are implemented.

Based on my experience working with municipalities around Vermont first as a planner with a regional planning commission and then as private consultant for 16 years, I believe this proposed revision to H.367 will be beneficial to municipal planning and implementation efforts and I encourage you to vote for it.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue to Vermont's planning community,

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