



Bennington County Regional Commission

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To: House and Senate Committees on Appropriations

From: Jim Sullivan, Executive Director – Bennington County Regional Commission

Date: February 25, 2019

RE: Municipal and Regional Planning Fund Appropriations

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Governor's Recommended FY 2020 State Budget. My comments deal specifically with appropriations to the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund that was established in 1988 and which is linked to a formula based allocation from property transfer tax revenues. The purpose of the Fund is to support work at Vermont's eleven regional planning commissions and to provide resources for municipal planning grants. The Fund has not received a full formula-based appropriation since FY 2001 and received its largest appropriation, in actual dollars, in FY 2008. Regional planning commissions have been level-funded since FY 2015 and municipal planning grant funding has declined during this period, despite a substantial increase in property transfer tax revenues. Last year, funding for regional planning was at 56% of the formula-based appropriation level and at 31% for municipal planning.

Our ability to effectively serve our region's communities is directly tied to support from the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund. The Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC) has taken on a significantly expanded range of responsibilities in recent years, now providing direct assistance to towns and villages in areas such as economic development, water quality, municipal infrastructure, and energy planning. While many of those new roles have come with some level of dedicated funding, most do not cover the full cost of the services provided, which has resulted in diversion of resources from some of the essential land use and community development work that we have traditionally provided for our communities.

The BCRC and other regional planning commissions also are seen as key players on emerging issues that will require significant local action to meet state objectives. New roles in planning for water quality improvement projects through watershed planning, project identification, prioritization, and management is one such area. Another is the ongoing effort to meet state energy and climate goals. We have developed a regional energy plan, which has been certified as complying with Act 174 by the Public Service Department, and have been actively working with many municipalities to develop goal and strategy based energy plans at the local level. The BCRC recently held a forum for towns interested in finding ways to move those local plans toward implementation, with over 55 people representing twelve towns attending. Because regional planning commissions are in the last year of funding for energy plan development, our ability to help those towns do more than establish local energy committees is limited. Truly effective energy plan implementation will require professional regional coordination, something that only is possible with additional funding – funding that could be available if the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund were allowed to function as originally intended.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to discuss these issues with you further.

