

Sunset Advisory Commission

Board and Commission Review of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board



December 10, 2020

Submitted by Jen Hollar, VHCB Director of Policy and Special Projects

The Commission reviews every State board and commission and takes testimony regarding whether each board or commission should continue to operate or be eliminated and whether the powers and duties of any board or commission should be revised. Each board and commission has the burden of justifying its continued operation.

The Commission also reviews whether members of a board or commission should be entitled to a per diem and, if so, the amount of that per diem.

In testifying before the Commission, you should be able to provide the following information:

1. In general, how often does the board and commission meet? Provide specific information on how often the board or commission has met in the past two fiscal years. Provide information on where agendas and minutes of meetings can be found.

The Vermont Housing & Conservation Board was established in 1987 as a public instrumentality of the state under [10 V.S.A. § 15](#). It oversees an executive director and staff of 37 FTEs. With an annual budget of \$31 million (approximately 50% state and 50% federal funds), the Board manages 13 programs in support of its statutory mission.

The board typically meets eight times a year with additional committee and special meetings as needed. In FY19 and FY20, the full board met 16 times. [Agendas and meetings minutes](#) are posted on the VHCB website.

2. Provide the names of members of the board or commission, their term length and expiration, their appointing authority, and the amount of any per diem they receive.

VHCB's eleven-member Board comprises the Secretaries of the state agencies of Agriculture, Human Services, and Natural Resources (or their designees), the Executive Director of the Vermont Housing Finance Agency; three public members to be appointed by the Governor, to include an advocate for low-income Vermonters and a farmer; one public member to be appointed by the Speaker of the House; one public member to be chosen by the Senate Committee on Committees, and two public members to be chosen jointly by the Speaker of the House and the Senate President Pro

Tem to represent Vermont's non-profit housing and conservation organizations. All but the ex-officio members receive a per diem of \$50 as authorized under 32 V.S.A. § 1010.

Members	Appointing Authority	End of Current Term
Neil Mickenberg	Legislature: Senate Committee on Committees	January 31, 2021
Emily Wadhams	Governor	January 31, 2020
Vacant	Governor	January 31, 2020
Marie Audet	Governor	January 31, 2022
Kate McCarthy	Legislature: House Speaker	January 31, 2021
David Marvin	Legislature: House Speaker and President Pro Tem	January 31, 2022
Tom Yahn	Legislature: House Speaker and President Pro Tem	January 31, 2022
Maura Collins	Vermont Housing Finance Agency	Ex-Officio
Anson Tebbets	Agency of Ag, Food and Markets	Ex-Officio
Julie Moore	Agency of Natural Resources	Ex-Officio
Mike Smith	Agency of Human Services	Ex-Officio

3. Provide an overview of the board or commission’s purpose.

VHCB’s statutory purpose is for *“the dual goals of creating affordable housing for Vermonters, and conserving and protecting Vermont’s agricultural land, forestland, historic properties, important natural areas, and recreational lands of primary importance to the economic vitality and quality of life of the State.”* 10 V.S.A. § 311

4. Is that purpose still needed? What would happen if the board or commission no longer fulfilled that purpose?

Yes. The state’s investments through VHCB address some of Vermont’s most pressing needs – providing permanently affordable housing including for the most vulnerable; ensuring the permanent protection of its agricultural soils, forestland and natural areas; enhancing water quality; preserving historic community buildings; revitalizing downtowns and community centers, enhancing outdoor recreation and supporting rural economic development. If VHCB ceased to exist, another entity would need to take on these activities. The organizational capacity, programs and the federal funds VHCB brings to the state would be at risk.

5. How well is the board or commission performing in executing that purpose? What evidence can you provide to substantiate that performance?

Since its inception, VHCB has produced the following results:

- Created or preserved 13,773 affordable homes and apartments
- Conserved 758 farms; 166,175 acres
- Conserved 370 natural areas; forests; parks and trails: 269,423 acres
- Preserved 72 historic community buildings

- Provided business planning and technical assistance to over 900 farm and forest enterprises through its Farm & Forest Viability Program.

VHCB's believes its effectiveness is further evidenced by the fact that the Legislature has entrusted it to take on several special initiatives in recent years. These include:

- ✓ Administering a \$37 million Housing for All Revenue bond which created and rehabilitated 843 new homes and apartments
- ✓ Creating a Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) to provide grant writing assistance to small, rural towns
- ✓ Implementing a \$34.25 million CRF-funded housing program that is creating 243 homes for those experiencing homelessness and improving 12 emergency shelters
- ✓ Providing rapid-response business coaching and technical assistance with CRF funding to farm, food and forest enterprises impacted by the public health emergency and economic fallout. 500 businesses have been helped to date.

6. If the purpose is still needed, can State government be more effective and efficient if the purpose was executed in a different manner?

VHCB has been recognized nationally for its results, programs and projects. It has also been engaged in a number of programmatic reviews by state and national experts over the year and adjusted accordingly. It seeks continuous improvement. For example, VHCB led a Lean Process Review of its agricultural conservation program which resulted in a number of changes improving efficiency.

7. If the purpose is still needed, do any of your board or commission's functions overlap or duplicate those of another State board or commission or federal or State agency? If so, is your board or commission still the best entity to fulfill the purpose?

VHCB coordinates extensively with state and federal agencies to avoid overlap, but more significantly to provide organizational capacity and expertise when needed to meet the state's goals related to its statutory mission. State agency representation on the board facilitates this collaboration. As an example, the Agency of Natural Resources encouraged VHCB to become a Clean Water Service Provider in the Lake Memphremagog Watershed as necessary to implement Act 76 of 2019 – The Clean Water Service Delivery Act.

8. Does the board or commission's enabling law continue to correctly reflect the purpose and activities of the board or commission?

Yes. VHCB's authorizing statute was updated by the Legislature as recently as the 2020 session. It accurately reflects its mission and current responsibilities and activities.

9. Provide a list of the board and commission's last fiscal year expenditures including staffing costs. How are these funded?

The best way to answer this question is to provide VHCB's most recent audit which is submitted with this questionnaire.

10. Is the board or commission required by law to prepare any reports or studies for the Legislature, the Governor, or any State agency or officer? If so, have those reports or studies been produced? Does the board or commission have ongoing reporting obligations?

By statute, VHCB is required to submit an annual report to the Legislature which provides an overview of its work, expenditures and a detailed listing of grants. VHCB also prepares and submits a report annually on its Farm & Forest Viability Program. This year, additional reports were submitted to the Legislature as required by Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriations. The most recent versions of each of these can be accessed below.

[2019 VHCB Annual Report to the Vermont General Assembly](#)

[VHCB Farm & Forest Viability Program 2019 Annual Report to the General Assembly](#)

[Report to the Vermont General Assembly on CRF Funds for Housing](#)

[Report to the Vermont General Assembly on CRF Funds for Rapid-Response Coaching for Farm and Forest Businesses](#)

11. How would you measure the performance of the board or commission?

The Board's performance could be measured by the number homes created, acres conserved, homeless housed, businesses assisted, etc. Or it could be measured by the support and engagement of state and federal agency and partner organizations. Or by its ability to deliver housing and conservation projects throughout the state. Or by the amount of federal resources it secures for Vermont each year. But, the truest measure may be that the Administration and General Assembly support continued investment in Vermont communities through VHCB with annual appropriations.