

To: The House and Senate Appropriations Committees

From: Steve Lembke, Local Guilford Resident and Flood Plain Administrator, Town of Guilford Vermont and Guilford Town Representative to the Windham Regional Commission

Subject: Regional Planning Commissions and the Governor's proposed FY2023 budget

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to ask that you use increases in the Property Transfer Tax formula to substantially increase the core funding for the State's 11 Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs). In a state with no formal county government or designated county services, Vermont's RPCs are constantly called upon by towns within their regions to fill the information and service gap between local towns and the state on a variety of topics. The state's RPCs provide information and guidance to selectboards, town officials and committee volunteers on a wide array of complex planning opportunities, challenges, rules, and regulations. Transition of personnel within towns makes this especially challenging. Each year, a town's collective knowledge of how to recognize and deal with planning issues and opportunities is diminished by turnover on selectboards and town commissions and the result is always the same ----the departing members inevitably take years of experience and knowledge with them as they exit and the learning curve for dealing with planning projects and issues begins again with a cast of new players. The one true constant that helps prevent local governing and planning chaos during these times of change or during an unexpected crisis, is the local RPC. The RPCs are rock solid repositories of information and guidance gathered from years of staff planning experience and the sharing of knowledge and information with other RPCs. Whether they are tutoring a novice town administrator, group training a town planning commission, helping a town complete a local hazard mitigation plan or expanding the planning knowledge of the local selectboard, year after year, RPCs create confidence through their consistency – consistency of staffing, consistency of knowledge and the consistency of making apolitical planning and leadership services available to their towns. As evidenced at annual town meetings around the State, residents appreciate and love their RPCs for the help and services they provide. Please don't let them financially wither as they are called upon to provide services that are not available through the state.

RPCs have been level funded since 2001. While they have continually and valiantly tried to make do with the funds they have received, 20 years of level funding has meant a slow but continual erosion of services provided by the RPCs. RPCs are now so fiscally stressed that it is negatively impacting their ability to hire qualified staff, pay their bills, and meet the needs of individual communities and their residents.

Here is just a sampling of the major planning services the Windham Regional Commission (our local RPC) has provided to the Town of Guilford; (many of these services are recurring and continue as you read this document)

- Assisted the Town with navigating our way through TS Irene,
- Assisted in the creation of multiple Town Plans,
- Trained our new Town Planning Commission on process and procedures,
- Assisted in the creation of multiple Hazard Mitigation Plans,
- Assisted with the development of a local river corridor bylaw
- Conducted a Brownfields assessment of a vital floodplain parcel
- Provided maps and graphics for studies, plans and brochures
- Attended innumerable public meetings to help explain complicated rules and procedures
- Reviewed and officially commented on regional projects that could impact the Town

- Aided in preparing for the impacts of climate migration on the town
- Addressed energy/climate issues
- Helped reduce the health and economic impacts from the shutdown of Vermont Yankee
- Worked to increase affordable cluster housing and the required infrastructure
- Worked to upgrade and provide reliable internet service

The list goes on and on

In closing, I plead for you to help Vermont residents and yourselves by sufficiently funding the Regional Planning Commissions to do their work per the funding formula provided by statute that allocates a percentage of the property transfer tax. Planning leads to the prevention of problems and that is the mission of the RPCs.