

House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, & Wildlife
Comments on S.148

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Thank you for this opportunity to comment and share my professional observations about the funding of municipalities and equitable distribution of funds. I've been asked to speak about funding for municipalities and the equitable distribution thereof. This is important for many reasons, including a just transition towards a Vermont that produces fewer greenhouse gases and that is more climate resilient and adaptive.

Vermont's diffuse system of local government and decision-making cuts two ways: on the one hand decision-making is hyper-local relative to most states, meaning that in theory, the opportunity exists for everyone in the community who wants to engage to have the chance to do so. On the other hand, deep engagement, especially with marginalized populations, requires both the motivation and capacity to do so.

Much depends upon a town's political and operational capacity. By political capacity I am referring to the will of the community, especially its elected legislative body, to make the decision to launch and sustain a process to identify and define needs and pursue those needs, including funding. By operational capacity I am referring to the ability to support a process to define issues and needs and pursue solutions, including funding sources. This would include the capacity and ability to write a competitive proposal, and to administer and manage a grant once received. Grant webinars are helpful to understand the particulars of a given grant, but the challenge for many towns is the lack of experience with effective grant writing at its most basic level.

Adding a layer of engagement with BIPOC and low-income households as envisioned by the bill is necessary and desirable regardless of statute, but it is not an automatic skillset or capacity that most municipalities have. This is further complicated by frequent turnover among town elected officials and volunteers, which translates into difficulty in retaining experienced/trained volunteer capacity. Doing this work and getting it right will require more than a workshop or webinar. This is where the proposed structural processes contained within the bill have the potential to create long-run change, but it will also require ongoing outreach, education, and facilitation so municipalities do not simply quit making use of programs because they either don't want to meet new requirements or don't have the capacity to meet new requirements. As the bill notes, "It requires that communities are enabled and administratively assisted to participate fully through education and training." This will need to be factored into programmatic budgets and timeframes. It will cost more and take longer but is a critical investment. And as we've learned from the work of the Climate Council, meaningful engagement with environmental justice populations takes time, and this must be factored in to all stages of program delivery.

Matching funds can be a non-starter for some communities. If a match percentage is necessary, consider tying it to median household income for the municipality and/or the census block where the project is to be implemented. The state may also want to consider a fund to subsidize the non-federal match for federal grants for environmental justice populations and communities.

There is the issue of the state – legislature, administration, agencies – setting priorities for communities by defining what resources are available for specific outcomes. This can make sense from a state policy priority perspective as I've testified before regarding the efficacy of the implementation of the Climate Action Plan, but those priorities may not align with the needs identified through engagement with the environmental justice population as defined by this bill, especially at the local level. It's my belief that municipalities, regions, and the state would benefit from knowing what environmental justice populations at the local level are saying about their needs, and how those needs comport with state policy directives and assumptions.

There is very little general-purpose planning funding to address locally-identified needs. Much funding is tied to designation programs, which in many instances can make sense from a statewide policy perspective. But locally, the most impactful project may be quite discrete – planning for a community center, wayfinding on town forest trails, organizing a community service or resilience group, protecting a historic building or preserving land – as opposed to higher-level policy objectives.

Federally-funded programs can be difficult to access as their application requirements may be more complex. In many instances, communities are competing against each other at not only the state level, but the New England regional level and national level. Most federal programs are not designed with Vermont's small municipalities in mind. As a state we need to be mindful of how to make local applications competitive within the context of the federal programs local governments need to access. This may mean investing in capacity to help towns pull together intermunicipal proposals. Once awarded, administering grants of federal origin, and managing projects funded by the grant are often beyond the capacity of municipalities, including some of our larger ones. Many municipalities look to regional planning commissions (RPCs) to serve the function of municipal project manager. We can do so relatively inexpensively, but our challenge is maintaining that capacity over time. There may be benefit to the state and municipalities of funding within RPCs a local access and project management position. We've considered creating such a position at the WRC that would focus on helping municipalities develop applications and manage projects, the assumption being that by knowing the programs on both the application and administration ends will create holistic knowledge that will help us help towns develop robust and successful applications.

The state's 11 regional planning commissions are designed to assist communities with these issues. However, we are grant-dependent. We use our annual contract with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development to support all of our statutory responsibilities, which

includes assisting towns with planning needs as well as the region's own priorities. This effort is spread across our towns, however, and means our level of support for any one town is not open-ended. Specific state initiatives need to consider the technical assistance needed by the towns to develop successful applications and manage their projects successfully, and budget and establish timelines accordingly. The Transportation Planning Initiative is an example of a program that works well. Through that program the RPCs as a group define our annual work program in collaboration with VTrans to meet local, regional and state transportation planning needs. Assisting communities with project development and grant applications is an eligible activity, and the funding level reflects this task. VTrans grant programs provide funds for municipal project management, and as I noted before municipalities often look to us to serve that role. On the other hand, for whatever reason the funding we receive through the Agency of Natural Resources to assist with tactical basin planning does not support project scoping and development, which is necessary for towns to develop projects for implementation. Getting funding to do this work, especially beyond but also including the Champlain and Memphremagog basins, has been like pulling teeth. In our region we frequently collaborate with local conservation district, non-governmental organizations such as the Connecticut River Conservancy or Trout Unlimited, and the ANR Watershed Coordinator, to develop and implement projects. But these projects tend to be opportunistic where willing property owners, organizational capacity, and grant availability align. We have a Clean Water Advisory Committee that prioritizes projects informed by the tactical basin plans, but we are not funded to go to municipalities to work with them to scope and develop projects. As for land preservation and conservation efforts, we receive no funding apart from what we can piece together out of our annual contract with ACCD. This results in heavy reliance upon local, state and federal land conservation programs, as well as outdoor recreation organizations. We have been fortunate to have support from the High Meadows Fund to support our regional habitat connectivity collaborative, but that funding source is no longer available. Having a funded natural resource planner position at each RPC could make an immense difference in addressing state, regional, and local natural resource priorities. We could prioritize engagement with environmental justice populations, and supporting selectboards, planning commissions, conservation commissions, energy committees, recreation groups, and others to do the same. This would pair well with our land use planning, transportation planning, and emergency planning work.

Thank you for this opportunity to engage with you, and for taking on the issue of environmental justice and the needs of environmental justice populations.

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