

Regional Planning Commissions: Senate Transportation Committee Update

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Chair

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- Beginning in the early 1990's, the Transportation Planning Initiative (TPI) is the means by which VTrans works to fulfill its federal obligation to consult with local governments on transportation planning. It does this by contracting with 10 of the state's Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) to work with the agency and the municipalities of our respective regions to:
 - develop and implement regional transportation plans;
 - share expertise that local governments may not already have;
 - assist planning commissions with the development of transportation elements of their plans as well as planning for special transportation projects;
 - help municipalities make the connection between transportation, economic and community development, land use, and overall quality of life;
 - engage municipalities in the state's project prioritization process – which is a major function of each RPC's transportation advisory committee – as well as major projects on the state transportation network;
 - perform tasks such as culvert and bridge, sign, and road erosion inventories, traffic studies including vehicle and speed counts, and bicycle and pedestrian counts;
 - assist with technical training, including convening of the region's road foremen – our role in helping local governments understand and comply with the Municipal Roads General Permit requirements has been particularly substantial;
 - help with transit planning, including elderly and disabled service, and public outreach related to service and route planning;
 - assistance with municipal reports to VTrans, including complete streets actions;
 - generally helping municipalities use VTrans programs, including assistance with grant applications;
 - communicate back to VTrans and other agencies about what's working and what's not at the local level;
 - connect local government to VTrans staff, including those in the district;
 - and while not a TPI-funded role, we serve as local liaison between local government and the state during disasters, which are often flood events that damage local transportation infrastructure.
 - Municipalities with limited project management capacity will also often contract with RPCs to serve as the municipality's project manager on transportation projects.
- The Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization has a different funding stream and structure, but the function is similar to that of the TPI agreements with the other RPCs.
- We have a strong collaborative relationship with VTrans, and often hold up our annual agreement with the agency as a model for other agencies to follow.

- The RPCs work as a group with the agency to develop the tasks and performance standards included in our annual contractual agreement. I've attached this current fiscal year's TPI work program guidance as an example.
- Because each region is different, we have the flexibility to perform work in ways that work best for our respective Commissions and the towns that we serve.
- The agency has a history of reaching out to us to develop initiatives in which they'd like us or municipalities to have a part. This early and frequent results in successful outcomes statewide.
- The agency reaches out to the RPCs to seek input on their legislative proposals, which allows the agency to modify proposals to meet on-the-ground needs and garners RPC partnerships to implement the initiatives.
- An issue of concern the RPCs identified is the extensive amount of time it takes to develop and build bicycle and pedestrian projects when federal funding is used. Architectural and historic review take a considerable percentage of project budgets and take a considerable amount of time to execute. While we are fully supportive of the need and outcomes, we would encourage the state to examine this process elsewhere in the country to determine if there are efficiencies and time and cost savings to be had. We'd be happy to assist in this effort by reaching out to our professional network, the National Association of Development Organizations.
- A second issue of concern is the unsustainability of public transit funding. The current structure relies on the Transportation Fund and local donations and property taxes. It results in transit services being provided where communities *are able and willing* to pay for services via local match, not where services are most needed. Public transportation is a statewide service that should be funded as such. A recent transit financing study is attached for reference.
- We also anticipate the need for RPCs to play a significant role in executing the initial Climate Action Plan, and helping the public to engage in its future iterations. Transportation is Vermont's largest greenhouse gas emitting sector, and we can play a role in supporting local efforts to plan for and develop electric vehicle infrastructure, improve bicycle and pedestrian mobility, and use transit and other strategies to reduce single-occupant vehicle trips. Most municipalities will also likely rely on us to help them connect land use planning to transportation to reduce dependence on single-occupant vehicles for mobility as Vermont develops in the future, and to reduce the exposure of transportation infrastructure to damage by flooding and erosion. We believe we will also have a role in helping the public engage with the Climate Council and Climate Action Plan. The changes coming to transportation, mobility, and energy are dramatic. A truly just transition, as is envisioned by the Global Warming Solutions Act and the Climate Action Plan, requires meeting people where they are, literally, to both assist with change and to inform the evolution of state climate policy.