

## Forest Partnership FY 24 Budget Letter

Dear Chair Durfee and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry,

On behalf of the Forest Partnership, we would like to show our support of key budget items in the Governor's budget that would promote forestland conservation and our forest economy. The Forest Partnership is comprised of Audubon Vermont, The Nature Conservancy in Vermont, Trust for Public Land, Vermont Land Trust, and Vermont Natural Resources Council.

These are detailed below, but briefly:

- Full funding for Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, \$27.8M
- Full funding for Regional Planning Commissions, \$10.5M
- Support \$4M for the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Program
- Support \$1M one-time Small Communities Outdoor Recreation Grant Program
- Additional Department of Forest, Parks, and Recreation staff positions

Additionally, we support two other items not in the Governor's budget:

- Funding for the Serve Learn Earn workforce program and
- Funding for Development of Statewide Conservation Plan, H.126, Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act

Regarding VHCB, we did want to take a moment to address the additional dollars it has received over the last two years. They and their partners have been important players in our response to the urgent community needs of homelessness and affordable housing. These huge investments are critical, and we support them.

**However, these dollars do not fund the full breadth of VHCB's work, including its work on conservation and farm and forest viability.** If VHCB were to receive \$15.5M as the Governor recommended in his budget, conservation would receive roughly \$6M. We expect that real estate costs will continue to rise as more people move to Vermont attracted to the quality of life that VHCB has worked hard to protect. This is the moment VHCB was meant for—to prevent the irrevocable loss of natural and working lands. Given the long-term trends, it's important to reset VHCB to its statutory imperative now.

We also want to note that the property transfer tax – how VHCB is funded - is still running hot. **And if VHCB was funded at \$27.8M, the amount established in statute, these dollars could be spent on the larger VHCB mission which includes much more than housing, including core Vermont values that this committee cares deeply about.**

The VHCB Mission:

*(a) 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** are of primary importance to the economic vitality and quality of life of the State.*

*(b) In the best interests of all of its citizens and in order to improve the quality of life for Vermonters and to **maintain for the benefit of future generations the essential characteristics of the Vermont countryside, and to support farm, forest, and related enterprises**, Vermont should encourage and assist in creating affordable housing and in preserving the State's agricultural land, forestland, historic properties, important natural areas and recreational lands, and in keeping conserved agricultural land in production and affordable for future generations of farmers.*

Full funding for VHCB would support the following: Forestlands. Working Lands. Natural Areas. Ecosystem protection. Rivers and watersheds. Wetlands. Town forests. Mountain sides. Viewscapes. Access to hunting lands and fishing spots. Biodiversity. Waterfalls and water holes. Local ski and sled hills. Endangered species. The green hills that make Vermont and support the recreational economies in our small towns and villages.

And allowing VHCB to do its conservation work is necessary to implement the Climate Action Plan, conservation planning (as anticipated in H.126), and support resilient communities.

We hope the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Energy will include support of \$27.8M for the **entire mission** of VHCB.

Like VHCB, the Regional Planning Commissions have also been consistently “not withstood” for over a decade regarding their PTT funding. We hear the call that our small, rural towns need more capacity to leverage federal dollars, state grants, and other programming and planning, including valuable planning required under Act 171 to maintain intact forests and wildlife connectivity areas. These are core functions of the Regional Planning Commissions. **We believe now is the time to deliver for the Regional Planning Commissions at their full statutory share of \$10.5M.**

#### **DETAILED FOREST PARTNERSHIP BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS:**

In the Governor's Budget:

#### **VHCB and RPCS (House General memo)**

**Forest Partnership position: We support full statutory funding for VHCB base support (\$27.8M vs the \$15.2M proposed, this does not include the one-time housing appropriation) and the Regional Planning Commissions (\$10.5M vs the \$4.7 proposed).**

Sec. D100 APPROPRIATIONS; PROPERTY TRANSFER TAX

(a) This act contains the following amounts appropriated from special funds that receive revenue from the property transfer tax. Expenditures from these appropriations shall not exceed available revenues.

(1) . . .

(2) The sum of \$11,462,855 is appropriated from the **Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund** to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). Notwithstanding 10 V.S.A. § 312, amounts above \$11,462,855 from the property transfer tax and surcharge established by 32 V.S.A. § 9602a deposited into the Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund will be transferred into the General Fund.

. . .

(3) The sum of \$6,045,993 is appropriated from the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund. Notwithstanding 24 V.S.A. § 4306(a), amounts above \$6,045,993 from the property transfer tax that are deposited into the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund will be transferred into the General Fund. The \$6,045,993 will be allocated as follows:

(A) \$4,711,650 for disbursement to **regional planning commissions** in a manner consistent with 24 V.S.A. § 4306(b);

**Sec. B.1100 FISCAL YEAR 2024 ONE-TIME GENERAL FUND APPROPRIATIONS**

**WORKING LANDS (House EE and House Ag memo)**

**Forest Partnership position: We support an increase in the base funding of the program to \$4 million annually from the current \$1 million base allocation. This is a shift from the current allocation. The Governor put \$1M in for base support and \$3M for one-time.**

11) \$14,180,000 to the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets for the following:

(D) \$3,000,000 for the Working Lands Enterprise grant program

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**OUTDOOR RECREATION GRANT PROGRAM (House EE memo)**

**Forest Partnership position: We support the \$2M one-time in the Governor's budget.**

23) \$2,000,000 to the Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation (FPR) for the following:

(A) \*\*\*

(B) \$1,000,000 for Small Communities Outdoor Recreation Grant matching funds. Funds will be used to support low-income communities in Vermont by providing state match funds for federal recreation grants.

(C) \$500,000 for Emerald Ash Borer Mitigation/Low Income Heating Assistance.

Funds will be used to remove high-risk ash trees on FPR lands and provide free firewood to low-income households.

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**NEW FPR POSITIONS (House Ag memo)**

**Forest Partnership position: We support the FPR positions Forest Partnership position: We support the \$2M one-time in the Governor's budget.**

Sec. E.100 EXECUTIVE BRANCH POSITIONS

(2) Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation:

(A) one (1) Communications & Outreach Coordinator

(B) one (1) Climate Forester

(C) three (3) Forester IIs

**ADDITIONAL REQUESTED APPROPRIATIONS:**

SERVE LEARN EARN

The past two years, the Vermont Legislature has supported Serve Learn and Earn (SLE) with one-time funds. It is a program that fills the gap in the workforce landscape by providing paid service-learning opportunities to youth, young adults, and the disadvantaged by overcoming workforce barriers and giving sidelined people new skills.

SLE has met employer needs in critical industries including construction, weatherization, and other green jobs. Besides skill training and job placement, SLE delivers industry recognized credentials through paid service-learning projects. Their graduates have completed hundreds of important community projects including construction of affordable housing, weatherization, food production, and public infrastructure improvements.

We support bringing SLE into the state's base budget at \$2.5M. This grant is managed by the Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation.

Funding for Development of Statewide Conservation Plan, H.126, Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act

We also would like to recommend \$75,000 to support public education and outreach to inform the development of a statewide conservation plan as part of H.126. This funding would support VHCB's equitable outreach to stakeholders and community members, with a focus on historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, including costs for travel vouchers, food, and childcare where necessary to accommodate participation, as well as compensation for community members who might be asked to serve on more formal sub-committees and who would otherwise not be able to participate.

Thank you for your time, and we would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

Audubon Vermont

The Nature Conservancy in Vermont

The Vermont Land Trust

The Trust for Public Land

Vermont Natural Resources Council