

DESIGNATION 2050

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Evaluation and Reform
Recommendations
for Vermont's State
Designation Programs**

DECEMBER 2023

Housing crisis.
Aging infrastructure.

**New solutions and
funding sources.**

Workforce and capacity
challenges.

**Statewide
partnerships and
collaboration.**

Resilience, equity, and
livability needs.

**Creative
people and
communities.**

Vermont faces a host of
challenges and opportunities.
Communities hold the keys to
a stronger future.

**Strong Designation Programs
can open the doors.**

Acknowledgments

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Vermont is N'dakinna.

Vermont is the traditional, unceded homeland of the Abenaki people, who call this land N'dakinna. We acknowledge their history, their people, and their ancestors. We acknowledge that they have cared for this land for centuries—and still do.

HISTORY AND EQUITY ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Vermont is history and heritage.

Centuries of policies, actions, and people have shaped Vermont, its landscape, and each other. We acknowledge the rich history and culture of this place, the many people who treasure and steward it—and those who have been harmed by it. We acknowledge that racism and discrimination in land use and other policies have created barriers to equitable land ownership and opportunities for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), people with disabilities, and other groups.

CLIMATE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Vermont is warmer and wetter.

Vermont's climate is changing, and a changing climate is changing Vermont. We acknowledge the devastating floods in 2023, and the many people and communities who are still recovering. We acknowledge the many other impacts of climate change that threaten Vermont's land, people, built environment, economy, and culture.

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With Thanks

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Vermont General Assembly

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Vermont needs vibrant places.

Housing and affordability crises. Devastating floods and climate change. Racial and economic injustice. Aging infrastructure and historic buildings. Workforce shortage. Farm and forest loss.

Vermont's challenges aren't new, but there is new urgency to address them. The moment for solutions is now. Vibrant, thriving communities can offer them.

About 250 unique downtowns and village centers dot Vermont's landscape. These compact, special places are hubs for housing, business, services, learning, culture, and community building. They are also hubs of opportunity. Investing in these centers can impact many state goals at once: housing access, smart growth, racial equity, flood resilience, walkability and livability, economic development, healthy landscapes, energy efficiency, and more.

**Vibrant
places
need
action—
and
support.**

Grants for flood resilience and public spaces. Tax benefits to restore and beautify historic buildings. Faster approval for downtown and village housing. Support to design safer streets and sidewalks.

The Vermont Designation Programs launched in 1999 to revitalize and energize Vermont's downtowns and protect the historic settlement pattern of compact centers and rural landscapes. Since then, program benefits like tax credits and Act 250 relief have helped communities across Vermont plan, design, and implement improvements.

Today, 67% of communities participate in Vermont's five Designation Programs. And 65% say designations help support their local planning goals. But action isn't happening fast enough.

Vermont Designation Programs can deliver. Designation 2050 is a roadmap to their future.

Designation Programs have sparked some success stories and have helped participants leverage millions in funding for local community development work. But far more work is needed, in more places, and far more quickly. Designation Programs have the potential to dramatically scale up progress and investment in Vermont communities—with smart, strategic reform.

\$20.4M in tax credits and grants awarded to designated places from 2018-2022.

\$707.1M in other funds, leveraged through designation benefits.

Designation 2050 is a statewide project to evaluate and reform the designation programs. Smart Growth America and Community Workshop led a collaborative and robust process to evaluate how well the programs are working now and identify recommendations to make them simpler, more accessible, and far more impactful. The coordinated recommendations in this report can help reform designation programs and fuel a new wave of community-driven and place-based investment, revitalization, and smart growth.

THE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT

Vermont's 281 active designations show strong buy-in. But program users say change is needed.

- Current programs are complex, hard to understand, and hard for some places to access and use.
- Limited local and state capacity are barriers to action. Program requirements and admin are further drains.
- Communities have diverse needs and conditions. Current programs don't offer flexible options.

THE CASE FOR REFORM

There are many designation successes. But Vermont's most urgent local needs call for solutions to scale.


- Designations have potential to accelerate housing growth, climate action, equity, livability, and more.
- Community interest in smart growth and revitalization is high. Current resources can't meet the demand.
- Program reform can align and leverage resources and fast-track the projects that Vermont needs now.

Designation Today

<p>QUICK FACTS</p>	<p>281 Vermont designations as of Fall 2023 (and climbing)</p>	<p>67% of Vermont municipalities have at least one designation</p>	<p>69% of Vermonters live in census blocks with a designation, or 442,000 people</p>	<p>22,352 acres of designated land (5.7% of Vermont's developed land)</p>
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FIVE PROGRAMS. HUNDREDS OF PARTICIPATING PLACES.

Vermont's Designation Programs have evolved since they launched in 1999. Today, five distinct programs bring benefits to more than 2/3 of Vermont communities. The programs continue to grow, with new designations.

<p>24 Designated Downtowns Est. 1999</p>	<p>233 Designated Village Centers Est. 2002</p>	<p>3 New Town Centers Est. 2002</p>	<p>15 Neighborhood Development Areas Est. 2013</p>	<p>6 Growth Centers Est. 2006</p>
				
<p>Revitalization for medium and large-sized centers</p>	<p>Revitalization for small, existing centers</p>	<p>New mixed-use centers where none existed</p>	<p>Infill housing and new residential areas near centers</p>	<p>Larger growth areas within or near centers</p>

DOZENS OF BENEFITS

DHCD and other state agencies offer more than two dozen official benefits and incentives. Here's a glimpse.

historic preservation and facade
tax credits • flood mitigation credits
• sales tax reallocation • speed
control and traffic-calming support
• permit fee caps • brownfields
funding • priority grant consider-
ation or eligibility • signage support
• Act 250 relief • technical support
and planning programs • state
building siting priority • downtown
organization fund • downtown
transportation funding

WHO'S WHO IN VERMONT DESIGNATION PROGRAMS?

Vermont General Assembly

The Vermont legislature authorized the Designation Programs by statute. It will consider reform in 2024.

Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development

DHCD staff members set program direction and policies and work directly with participating communities.

Downtown Development Board

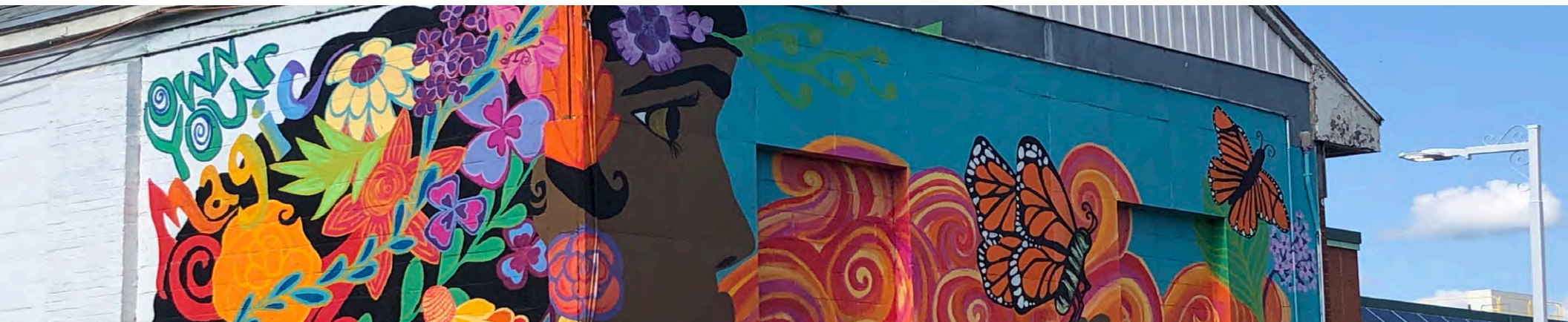
State leadership board administers the Downtown Development Act, including approving new designations.

Program and Funding Partners

State agencies offer benefits. Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) and nonprofit partners support local work.

Municipalities & Program Users

Local governments are the primary users of the program, with some benefits available to local businesses, developers, and others.



Designation 2050

Designation 2050 is a statewide project to evaluate, reimagine, and redesign Vermont’s Designation Programs for the next 25 years. The Vermont Legislature authorized the project in 2022. The consulting team (led by Smart Growth America and Community Workshop) combined technical research and deep stakeholder engagement to evaluate programs.



PROJECT APPROACH AND METHODS

25 YEARS OF DATA

on designation programs, state trends and more

14 VIRTUAL PROJECT EVENTS

and statewide Summit, with ~500 registrations in total

5 SURVEYS, PLUS LIVE POLLS

tailored to stakeholder groups, with 359 responses

25 + CHATS AND FORMAL INTERVIEWS

to hear from key stakeholders

Technical Evaluation	Stakeholder Engagement	Case Studies and Other Plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available program participation and benefits data • Demographic and socioeconomic trends in designation communities • Existing conditions in land use, housing, hazards, and more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six core stakeholder groups, including planning and local gov, agencies, funders, business, nonprofits, equity advocates • Representation from four states, 250+ organizations, 117 towns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of models and programs from five other states • Coordination with Act 250 and regional land use mapping studies • Links to other state plans (energy, hazard mitigation, climate action)

Vision and Priorities

Hundreds of stakeholders shared their visions for the future of Vermont communities and the Designation Programs. The consulting team analyzed and combined these unique visions into two new statements that guide reform.



REFORM PRIORITIES			
Sustain Vermont's Historic Settlement Pattern	Promote Vibrant Economic Activity and Livability	Invest in Strategic Action Areas	Build Capacity & Increase Coordination

Framework for Reform

The program evaluation and reform recommendations are organized into five key areas. Coordinated action in all five areas is essential to making the Designation Programs stronger and more impactful, creating more equitable access, and increasing alignment with state, regional, and local goals.

Simpler Designations

Maintain focus on community cores

Reduce number of Designation Programs

Offer flexibility in core areas

Align areas with state land use initiatives

Coordinated Admin & Governance

Create a simple, transparent process

Integrate process into local/regional planning

Reform the Downtown Board

Grow multi-agency investment & collaboration

Better Benefits & Support

Maintain and expand key benefits

Coordinate agency benefits and support

Connect and grow statewide TA

Scale up support for priority projects

Accessible Info & Promotion

Establish a new brand, messaging

Adopt accessibility standards and practices

Develop clear, cohesive resources

Expand proactive communication

Robust Monitoring & Sharing

Develop evaluation plan and process

Establish impact measures

Monitor program progress, impact

Expand sharing, listening, reporting

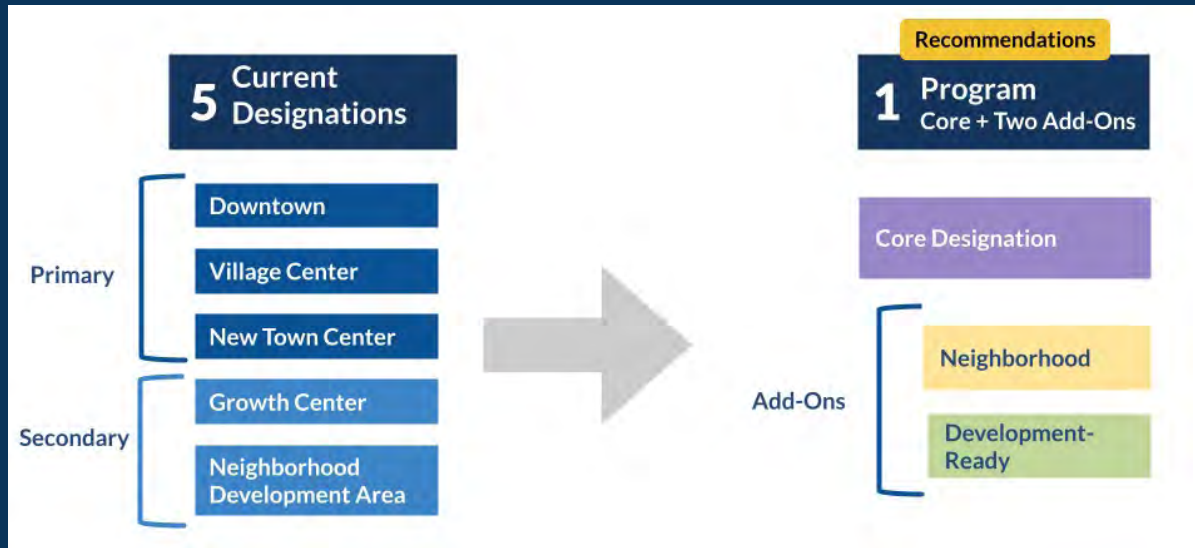
SIMPLER DESIGNATION STRUCTURE

The current number of programs and structure make it hard for communities to understand and navigate the programs. The complexity also makes it hard for DHCD staff and agency partners to manage applications and benefits.

	Key Findings	Recommendations
PROGRAM TYPES AND AREAS	<p>Five programs are too many. The current structure is rigid and communities struggle to meet requirements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A continued focus on investing in compact cores supports stakeholder visions and state priorities.• Housing, smart growth, and climate resilience needs may require expanded designation areas.	<p>Maintain a focus on community cores.</p> <p>Create primary “core” designation for all community sizes; expand benefits for core revitalization and growth; create pathways for smaller communities.</p> <p>Reduce the number of programs.</p> <p>Establish one primary Designation Program with clear priorities and one designation process.</p>
FLEXIBILITY AND OPTIONS	<p>Diverse communities need more flexibility and options for benefits and support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current programs and levels don’t fit all municipalities. Unique landscapes and local conditions create barriers to access.	<p>Offer flexibility in core areas.</p> <p>Allow flexibility in requirements and benefits for places with different needs. Offer optional add-ons for growth-ready places and benefits for places of all sizes. Further scope the potential for a continuum or other system to align benefits with capacity.</p>
LAND USE ALIGNMENT	<p>Current programs don’t align with local and regional land use maps or Act 250 areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of alignment can lead to missed opportunities for local growth or revitalization.	<p>Align with statewide land use initiatives.</p> <p>Design the Designation Program to work with new regional land use categories and reformed Act 250 relief areas.</p>

RECOMMENDED DESIGNATION STRUCTURE

The recommended structure for reform reduces complexity and increases flexibility. It shifts from five designations to one designation with two add-on options.



Transition Process

It may take up to five years to consider, refine, adopt, and transition to a new process. Communities have invested in current designations and rely on current benefits, so the transition process should:

- Share clear, frequent, and transparent updates and guidance
- Convert all current local designations to the new system
- Maintain and transfer existing benefits for current designations
- Minimize work and expectations of municipalities

Core Designation

Cores are vibrant, mixed-use centers. They serve as community social and economic hubs.

- One designation for centers of all size, from cities to rural villages
- Goals include housing, walkability, placemaking, revitalization, livability
- Benefits include grants, tax credits, and technical assistance

Neighborhood add-on

Neighborhood Areas are compact, walkable residential areas that are connected to cores.

- Existing neighborhoods, growth-ready areas, and infill sites
- Goals include increasing housing, infrastructure, and livable neighborhoods
- Benefits include advanced funding and grants, technical assistance and design

Development Ready add-on

Development Ready places are sites within Cores or Neighborhood Areas that are well suited for growth.

- Places with existing water, sewer, and utility access, and climate-resilient locations
- Goals include efficient housing and mixed-use development
- Benefits include Act 250 exemption and regulatory relief

COORDINATED ADMIN & GOVERNANCE

Program management today involves many players and complex processes: designation boundary decisions, application and renewal review, grant and benefit program management, and coordination with many partners. State agency staff and local leaders wish for simpler and more transparent processes, less paperwork, and more coordination and support.

	Key Findings	Recommendations
LOCAL & STATE PROCESS	<p>Current application and renewal processes feel burdensome, bureaucratic, and unhelpful.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boundary definition is complex and sometimes fraught. State and local leaders often disagree. Designation areas, local land use maps, regional plans, and Act 250 don't align. Designation and local planning processes happen separately, creating extra work. Maps don't align. 	<p>Create a streamlined, transparent, and simple designation process.</p> <p>Empower communities and RPCs to collaborate on designation design. Eliminate renewal. Develop fair and easy transition process.</p> <p>Integrate designation process and local planning.</p> <p>Integrate with existing planning efforts; align boundaries with regional land use maps.</p>
STAFFING AND OVERSIGHT	<p>High-level state leadership, buy-in, and direction can drive catalytic reforms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders want more transparent decision-making and a more inclusive, representative Downtown Development Board. 	<p>Reform the Downtown Development Board</p> <p>Rename Board and expand membership to reflect diversity in communities, goals, and expertise needed. Elevate and expand responsibilities for funding and coordination.</p>
AGENCY ROLES AND COORDINATION	<p>Robust state agency and private sector coordination can leverage resources and scale impacts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities value DHCD staff support, visits, and coaching. Administrative burdens limit time for TA. RPCs and other partners can expand roles. 	<p>Grow multiagency investment and coordination.</p> <p>Reduce DHCD administration burdens and increase staff availability; increase capacity and roles for RPCs and Natural Resources Board; create multiagency teams to support priorities.</p>

BETTER BENEFITS & SUPPORT

Agencies offer more than two dozen specific benefits and incentives to designated areas, from transportation grant funds to signage authority to Act 250 permit relief. Communities value many benefits but struggle to understand and access them. Faster action and implementation will require even more dollars, more relief, and more support to make projects happen.

Key Findings

Recommendations

AVAILABLE BENEFITS

Some program users value many current benefits. Others struggle to access any.

- Popular benefits include: tax credits, grant funding, permit relief, downtown organization support.
- Benefit offerings, requirements, and eligibility don't always align with local needs. Some agency benefits conflict with others.

Maintain and expand key benefits.

Expand impactful and popular benefits like tax credits and grant funds.

Review and coordinate agency offerings.

Assess gaps in benefits, potential new agency offerings, multi-agency coordination, and simpler application processes.

STRATEGIC PROGRAM PRIORITIES

Current benefits are insufficient to advance major state and local priorities.

- Priorities like housing, climate resilience, and multi-modal transportation need major support.
- Coordinated benefit packages and multiagency support can advance priority projects quickly.

Scale up support for strategic priorities.

Prioritize expanding benefits for priority needs, including housing, infrastructure, and climate resilience. Offer coordinated state benefits. Scope possibilities to bring multiagency staff support to priority projects.

SUPPORT AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)

Limited local capacity (staff, funding, knowledge, awareness) limits access to benefits and support.

- There is substantial technical support available, but it's hard for communities to find and access it.
- Rural, underserved areas miss out on resources.

Connect and expand statewide technical assistance.

Support a formal statewide technical assistance network. Explore potential to create a state TA or design center. Grow capacity in communities and offer dedicated support.

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION & PROMOTION

No matter how strong the Designation Programs and benefits, all communities and users must be able to access and understand the programs, benefits, and resources. Technical content and limited accessibility practices limit equity and reach.

Key Findings

Recommendations

PROGRAM BRAND AND AWARENESS

“Designation” name and brand are not widely known or understood.

- People use and connect with common words like “downtowns,” “villages,” and “communities.”
- There is widespread confusion about the full set of programs, goals, and processes.

Establish a new brand identity and messaging.

Create an engaging new program name and brand. Develop key messages and simple language to explain the program.

ACCESSIBLE PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Accessibility and information barriers limit equity.

- DHCD and many partners don’t yet offer full language access or accessibility services.
- Program complexity and technical language make resources hard for many to understand and use.
- Stakeholders want more resources, simple guides, and proactive communications.

Develop clear, cohesive resources.

Develop easy-to-use resources like checklists and simple reporting forms. Expand outreach materials and informational resources.

Adopt accessibility standards and practices.

Create language access and accessibility plans; offer services, plain language, universal design.

OUTREACH AND PROMOTION

Local leaders value outreach and site visits from staff and partners.

- Administration limits DHCD outreach capacity.
- Stakeholders say regular, proactive communications about opportunities, program details, and success stories would help support action.

Expand proactive communication and outreach.

Develop an outreach and communications strategy; expand staff capacity for direct outreach and work on the ground.

ROBUST MONITORING & SHARING

Program monitoring and evaluation is essential to successful Designation Program reform and implementation. Sharing findings, data, stories, and lessons learned can help scale impacts even more.

Key Findings

Recommendations

EVALUATION PLAN AND PROCESS

Current Designation Programs lack clearly defined goals, metrics, and success criteria.

- Data gaps, long timelines, complex issues, and many players make impacts hard to measure.
- The program lacks an established evaluation and monitoring plan.

Develop an evaluation plan and process.

Create a plan for capturing, evaluating, using and sharing available data and short-term metrics. Consider creating a performance monitoring program and team.

METRICS AND DATA

Future program equity and success rely on capturing and evaluating varied data:

- Demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and issue-based metrics
- Metrics and user feedback on program design, processes, program use, and admin
- Stakeholder experiences, lessons learned, community stories; local outcomes and impacts

Establish impact measures.

Identify indicators of impact and success; identify existing and needed data; explore partnerships for evaluation and monitoring.

Monitor program progress and effectiveness.

Establish short-term and long-term metrics for measuring reform success; prioritize quantitative data and qualitative input.

REPORTING AND SHARING

Intentional, two-way sharing will increase impact.

- State, regional, and local stakeholders want transparent info on program use, access, efficiency, impacts, and return on investment.
- Stakeholders want opportunities to share, hear and discuss experiences and lessons learned.

Expand sharing, listening, and reporting.

Establish reporting methods, roles, formats, and channels; post accessible and transparent info; create opportunities for stakeholder sharing and listening.

Reform Agenda

Vermont's most pressing needs call for bold investments and fast action. Success in all of these efforts requires higher-level collaboration, systems change, and strategic programs. Reform should prioritize these overarching needs and investments.

ADVANCE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

There's no time to lose in expanding housing, climate resilience, and strong infrastructure. Progress is possible with strategic state investments and coordinated statewide action.

Housing Growth and Equity

Vermont needs thousands of new high quality, affordable, and equitable housing units across the state.

STRATEGIES

- Reformed designation structure; increased benefits and regulatory relief to fuel housing
- Local outreach, education, dialogue, training, and TA to support housing projects
- Equitable housing investments (affordable home and land ownership, wealth-building, rental housing, accessible housing)

Climate Resilience

Vermont needs to adapt to climate change, increase resilience, and reduce emissions.

STRATEGIES

- Alignment of existing tax credits and funding sources
- Expanded technical assistance to support flood resilience
- Additional work to identify priority adaptation strategies that reformed Designation Programs could support

An upcoming companion report will offer more guidance on resilience.

Infrastructure Investment

Vermont needs strong water/sewer, utilities, bike and pedestrian access, and multimodal transportation infrastructure.

STRATEGIES

- Coordination to access major federal funding sources
- Regional transportation planning and projects
- More funding, TA, and dedicated agency support for complex projects and permits
- Interagency "strike" teams and staff commitment to collaborate and find solutions

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Three complex, interrelated conditions directly impact program success. Improving them will systemic change.

Local Capacity

Limited local capacity (staff, funding, expertise) is a top barrier to program access and impact. Many organizations offer TA, but needs are currently far greater than offerings.

STRATEGIES

- Reduce **program requirements** and administrative work
- Support new models to **build long-term local capacity** (revenue generation, shared services)
- Develop a statewide **TA network or center** to link and expand offerings

Equity, Diversity, Access

Systemic racism, accessibility barriers, small town capacity, and other factors limit equity program equity. Reform can help level the playing field, but Vermont must prioritize systemic solutions.

STRATEGIES

- **Diversify program leadership** and representation
- Develop and invest in **equity-serving projects** to address rural and racial wealth gaps
- Ensure **language access and accessibility** in all programs

Livability and Social Services

Housing and growth attract more people, who need more services—emergency response, walkability, mental health, public spaces. Municipalities can't meet needs alone, and unmet needs threaten designation goals and progress.

STRATEGIES

- **Fast-track housing critical infrastructure** to meet basic needs
- Support projects and actions that **build health and wealth**
- Strengthen **interdisciplinary partnerships** to scale up solutions and leverage resources

SCALE UP STATE LEADERSHIP & INVESTMENT

Leaders identified three overarching needs in state government—and beyond—to meet these overarching priorities.

High-Level Leadership

High-level directives to **focus resources on community development**, increase impact, and coordinate investments.

Coordination and Capacity

Dedicated **agency staff capacity** to closely **coordinate actions, policies, investments**, and related initiatives.

Funding and Support

Creative **funding models and increased resources** to support urgent housing, revitalization, climate and infrastructure work.

Moving Forward

This report is just the first step in designation reform. Next steps include review by the Vermont Legislature and work to continue refining ideas and a transition plan. But improvement doesn't have to wait. Here's what to expect next and how to engage.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Legislative Review

The Vermont General Assembly will consider recommendations and legislation for reform in 2024.

Concept Refinement

DHCD and core partners will refine details of a new designation structure, process, benefits, and more.

Transition Planning

DHCD, RPCs, and partners will develop a multiyear process to transition current designations and benefits.

Coordination

DHCD will work with public- and private-sector partners to coordinate resources, expand funding, and align programs and plans.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Legislators, Officials, and Agencies

Understand the full report and proposed changes

Advance or support policies that lay the groundwork for success

Planners, Partners, and Funders

Use evaluation findings and recommendations to inform your programs and offerings

Explore ways to partner, coordinate, fund, and support designation priorities

Local Officials and Program Users

Continue using current designations, benefits to improve your community

Promote designation benefits to business and property owners

Integrate designations in local/regional planning

All Interested Stakeholders

Share more input and ideas during the legislative process

Learn more about designations and what they offer in the full report or online



Vermont Designation 2050

accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs

vtdesignation2050.org