Designation 2050 | Vermont Designation Reform
Frequently Asked Questions

ABOUT DESIGNATIONS

What are the Vermont Designation Programs?

Vermont's five "designation programs" offer benefits and support for **growth, revitalization, and improvements** in **compact centers**.

There are three core programs: **Downtowns, Village Centers, and New Town Centers**. Communities with a core designation can add more: **Neighborhood Development Areas, Growth Centers**.

How many communities participate? Which ones?

There are **280+ designations** in Vermont (as of October 2023), with more added all the time. **More than 67%** of municipalities have at least one designation. Program participation is uneven, ranging from **230+ Village Centers** to only **3 New Town Cetners**.

What have they done for Vermont?

There are many success stories from downtown and village center**s**. Tax credits and grant funding help **renovate and save historic buildings and create multi-modal transportation**. Designations have a limited impact on increasing housing, climate resilience, and smart growth.

ABOUT DESIGNATION REFORM

Why evaluation and reform?

Vermont created five designations to address different goals over time, but they aren't yet meeting potential.

- **Vermont needs urgent action on housing, climate, and infrastructure.** Designation reform can help.
- **Complex programs create barriers.** Simpler programs can improve access, reach, and equity.

What's 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 and funded the study to increase program impact. The Agency of Natural Resources provided supplemental funding to make recommendations to make designated centers more resilient.

What did the evaluation entail?

A consulting team (led by Smart Growth America and Community Workshop) led a six-month process in 2023:

- **Technical evaluation** of current programs, including participation, impact, and policies. Review of case studies and alignment with related studies.
- **Robust stakeholder engagement** included 30+ events and conversations, five surveys, and participation from 117 communities and 250+ organizations.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

What are the program's strengths?

Evaluation and stakeholder input showed:

- **High statewide participation** and interest
- Downtown and village **revitalization successes**
- **Valued benefits** (funding and regulatory relief)

What are the program's weaknesses?

Evaluation and stakeholder input highlighted:

- **Complexity** (too many programs, confusing structure). This limits equitable access.
- High **administrative burdens** and requirements. This taxes local communities *and* state agency staff.
- **Limited awareness** of the complete set of programs and benefits; little understanding of the term "designation." Accessibility and information barriers limit participation and impact.

What are the opportunities and challenges?

Key opportunities include addressing the weaknesses in program design and expanding impacts.

- **Simpler programs, focused priorities**. Reducing the number of programs; clarifying goals and focus.
- **Strong coordination and strategic investment**. Increased coordination with agencies and partners to expand impact, row benefits, and advance strategic priorities like housing and climate resilience.

Challenges include limited **time, money, local capacity and resources, complex state systems and requirements, and diverse community needs**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What are the top program reform recommendations?

The recommendations framework includes five key areas:

1. Simpler designations
2. Coordinated administration and governance
3. Better benefits and support
4. Accessible info and promotion
5. Robust monitoring and sharing

What are the top priorities for statewide reform and investment?

Overarching state needs, priorities, and strategic actions are essential to ensure overall success in designation reform and community development.

- **Strategic actions** include targeted investments in housing growth and access, climate resilience, and infrastructure to address urgent needs.
- **Overarching statewide priorities** include building and supplementing local capacity, addressing equity and accessibility barriers, and strengthening livability and local services in community centers.
- **Overarching state needs** include high-level leadership and commitment, increased coordination and state capacity, and scaled-up investment and support.

What's next?

The General Assembly will consider ways to integrate the designation programs, Act 250, and regional mapping in 2024.