

Exploring Regional Governance Options in Vermont

A Capstone Project for the Windham Regional Commission

Submitted by: Annie Bentley, Alex Frantz, Gretchen Schissel, Hannah Tapyrik, Zane Zupan

Master of Public Administration

The University of Vermont

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Executive Summary

This report examines Vermont's current landscape and the potential for a Council of Governments (COG) model to address current and increasing capacity challenges faced by Vermont municipalities. Drawing on secondary research, stakeholder interviews, and survey data, this project highlights a central tension: the capacity allotted through deeply rooted traditions of local control is exceeded by the changing demands of operating small, rural towns among looming threats of climate disaster, housing and affordability crises, aging populations, and more. The report does not advocate for a specific governance model, but instead clarifies key challenges, provides a comparative analysis of existing models, establishes unifying definitions of regional governance terms, and outlines considerations for next steps.

We aimed to assess the COG model, specifically, due to its success in other states and its potential applicability to the Vermont context. The research found that Vermont's context presents opportunities and constraints for adopting the COG model, from both a legal and cultural standpoint. Vermont's culture of local control is a defining feature of its governance system, and while this supports autonomy and community identity, it can complicate regional collaboration and pose a threat to municipal authorities.

The final deliverables of this project include a comparative analysis of governance models and a definition guide for common terms used in the context of regional governance. These tools feature key insights to consider in designing a solution, such as governance structure, statutory authority, funding methods, and staffing options.

This project generated ideas for practicable next steps in advancing the conversation, which have been included in the report for consideration. Vermont's exploration of regional governance reflects a broader effort to reconcile increasing municipal demands with longstanding values. Existing models may not offer a complete solution, but the research highlights important principles of regional governance that can guide future discussions and will aid in developing a solution that is both effective and aligned with Vermont's unique identity.

Background and Current Landscape

Vermont's system for supporting municipalities is built around its 11 Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs), including the Windham Regional Commission (WRC), which serves 27 towns in southeastern Vermont (Windham Regional Commission, n.d.). RPCs play an important role in municipal support by providing planning, coordination, and technical assistance. Their work spans land use planning, transportation, emergency management, community development, and grant administration. In many cases, they act as a bridge between local governments and state or federal programs.

While RPCs are well established in these roles, they are not designed to provide ongoing operational or administrative support to municipalities. Much of their work is tied to grants, which tend to prioritize short-term, project-based outcomes rather than long-term service delivery. As a result, RPCs often lack the authority, staffing, and funding flexibility needed to support sustained shared services across towns.

At the same time, the demands placed on Vermont's municipalities have grown more complex. Unlike many other states, Vermont counties do not provide broad regional services for housing, infrastructure, public safety, or human services. Responsibility for these functions falls largely on individual towns, many of which are small, rural, and resource-constrained (Weiss-Tisman and Brown, 2026). This creates a system where communities are expected to manage increasingly complex responsibilities with limited staff and funding.

Recent events have highlighted these challenges. Following major flooding in 2023 and 2024, many municipalities struggled to navigate federal recovery processes, including accessing FEMA funding (Hirschfeld, 2024). Limited administrative capacity made it difficult for towns to complete applications, manage compliance requirements, and move projects forward. These challenges are not isolated to emergency response; they reflect broader capacity constraints that affect day-to-day municipal operations.

As a result, Vermont's current system can lead to inefficiencies, duplication of effort, and missed opportunities for coordination. Towns often pursue similar projects independently, even when regional collaboration could reduce costs and improve outcomes. While RPCs are well-positioned to support stronger intermunicipal coordination, their current structure limits their ability to do so at scale.

Why Council of Governments Are Being Discussed

What Is a Council of Governments (COG)?

A Council of Governments (COG) is a regional organization of municipalities that collaborate to address shared challenges, coordinate planning, and provide services that may be difficult for towns to manage alone (Wolf and Bryan, 2009). In most states, COGs are voluntary associations, meaning municipalities choose whether to participate and which services to use. COGs do not replace local governments: instead, they help towns pool resources, reduce administrative burden, and improve access to funding and technical expertise.

Key characteristics of a COG:

- Voluntary Participation – Towns decide whether to join and which services to opt into
- Local Representation – Governing boards are typically composed of municipal officials
- Shared Services – Such as financial management, procurement, inspections, grant administration, or emergency coordination

- Regional Planning and Coordination – Aligning local efforts on issues like housing, transportation, and infrastructure
- Support for Municipal Capacity – Especially for small or volunteer-run towns

While some states have regional councils created by statute, the models most applicable to Vermont, and most common in rural regions, are voluntary, locally-driven COGs designed to strengthen municipal capacity while preserving local control.

The limitations of Vermont's current system have led RPCs, including WRC, to explore whether a Council of Governments model could strengthen regional collaboration and municipal capacity. COGs are regional entities that support municipalities through shared services, program administration, and coordinated problem-solving. They are typically voluntary and designed to maintain local decision-making while creating opportunities for more efficient collaboration.

In practice, COGs help municipalities pool resources, reduce administrative burden, and deliver services more effectively (Wolf and Bryan, 2009). Common functions include managing state and federal funding, coordinating regional initiatives, and providing services such as financial management, inspections, or collective purchasing. Just as importantly, they create a structured space for local leaders to work together on shared challenges.

The potential benefits of a COG model include increased municipal capacity, cost savings, more coordinated problem-solving, improved access to funding, and greater long-term resilience, while still preserving local control.

Examples from other states highlight how these models operate at different scales. In New York, County Boards of Supervisors function as a form of regional governance that coordinates services across municipalities (Regional Economic Development Councils, n.d.). In Massachusetts, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) provides a full-service model, delivering shared municipal services to rural towns (Franklin Regional Council of Governments, n.d.). In Texas, the Alamo Area Council of Governments (AACOG) represents a larger regional model, coordinating planning and services across a broader, more complex region (Alamo Area Council of Governments, n.d.).

While these models vary in structure and scope, they demonstrate a common approach: helping local governments work together to manage limited resources and address regional challenges more effectively.

The Current Vermont Landscape

Vermont's strong tradition of local control shapes how any regional model must be considered. Municipal independence is a core value, and participation in shared services would need to remain voluntary. This cultural context is both a strength and a constraint, it supports local decision-making but can make regional coordination more complex.

There are also open questions about how a COG model would fit within Vermont's existing legal and institutional framework. Current statutes define the role of RPCs and enable intermunicipal agreements, but may not fully support a more formal shared services structure without modification. In addition, long-term funding, governance structure, and administrative capacity would need to be clearly defined.

Despite these uncertainties, there is growing recognition that the current system is stretched. Municipalities are being asked to do more with limited resources, and existing structures are not always equipped to meet those demands. This has created space for exploring new approaches that build on Vermont's strengths while addressing its gaps.

The exploration of a COG model is not about replacing RPCs or reducing local control. Instead, it is about understanding whether an additional layer of voluntary, regional collaboration could help municipalities work more efficiently, share capacity, and better respond to both everyday needs and large-scale challenges.

Stakeholder Perspectives

To better understand how these challenges are experienced in practice, this project engaged with stakeholders across Vermont, including state government, regional planning organizations, and rural technical assistance and economic development partners. Across these conversations, several consistent themes emerged. Stakeholders described a system marked by fragmentation and overlapping roles, alongside persistent capacity constraints in small municipalities. At the same time, there was strong emphasis on maintaining local control, with many noting that municipalities are often seeking practical administrative and technical support rather than entirely new governance structures (see Appendix D for interview summaries).

Methods

Secondary Research

This project employed a variety of methods to support its analysis and recommendations. As a foundation, reports from the Vermont Policy Institute (2025), the Center for Rural Studies (2025), and the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (2025) were reviewed as secondary research sources. This project went beyond consulting the generously provided sources and additionally engaged with other relevant resources. Academic databases, state and regional government websites, partner reference materials, partner referrals, and public news articles were among the additional research sources. To further extend this project, primary sources of information were collected to more specifically assist with contextual insight on governance structure.

Interviews

Gathering qualitative data is an important component of social science research, particularly in public service contexts. To support this project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in Vermont's governance and regional capacity ecosystem, including representatives from Regional Planning Commissions (through VAPDA), the Vermont Rural Economic Technical Assistance (VERTA) initiative, the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), and Vermont state government.

Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams by two members of the project team. Sessions were not recorded in order to encourage open and honest dialogue. Instead, detailed notes were taken during each session and securely stored and shared only within the project team, consistent with course data stewardship expectations.

A consistent set of open-ended, scripted questions was used across all interviews to support comparability, with limited flexibility for follow-up questions depending on the interviewee's role and expertise. Questions focused on implementation experience, municipal capacity, intergovernmental coordination, and statutory or structural constraints related to regional governance in Vermont (see Appendix C for the full interview protocol). In total, four stakeholder interviews were conducted over a one-month period.

Survey

Providing accessible and working definitions to commonly used local governance terms was a key deliverable for this project. When discussing the possibility of changing governance structures, it is necessary for stakeholders at all levels of government to be provided a clear set of definitions to ensure productive conversation. To produce relevant definitions, this project created and administered an online survey to gather input on terms to transform into working definitions. Appendix E provides a reproduction of the survey.

To ensure quality, this team followed social science research best-practices in the composition and administration of this survey. The survey was brief, with an estimated five-minute completion time, in order to avoid participant fatigue. The survey was administered via email to previously contacted stakeholders, a University of Vermont MPA LinkedIn post, and internal organization sharing. Responses were anonymous, unless voluntarily identified, to promote honest feedback.

First, respondents were asked to select their role. This question would later help reveal themes and comments of responses. For the next four questions, respondents were asked to define the following terms in their own words: governance, regionalization, municipal operation, and shared services. These questions were open-ended to allow for unique perspectives and deeper communication of concepts. Next, respondents were given the option to provide additional feedback to be considered during this research. Finally, the closing question allowed

respondents to share their name. A total of 47 responses were received within the timeframe of March 12th and March 31st, 2026. Thematic Summaries provided in Appendix G highlight the commonalities pulled to inform the definition guide.

Discussion

Vermont’s exploration of a COG model emerges from a combination of structural capacity challenges and longstanding cultural norms that shape how municipalities collaborate. The findings from our interviews, comparative analysis, and review of Vermont’s governance landscape suggest that the central issue is not whether a particular model should be adopted, but how Vermont can understand the range of regional governance options available and assess their alignment with municipal needs, statutory frameworks, and local values. This section interprets the implications of our research, focusing on the themes that surfaced across models and stakeholders, without recommending any specific course of action.

Vermont’s Core Governance Challenge: A Structural and Cultural Mismatch

Interviews and secondary research reveal a dual challenge. Structurally, Vermont’s municipalities face increasing administrative and technical demands, such as grant management, compliance, emergency response, and infrastructure planning, that exceed the capacity of volunteer-based governance. RPCs provide essential planning and coordination, but their statutory authority and funding structure limit their ability to deliver ongoing operational services. This mismatch between municipal needs and RPC capacity has become more pronounced as towns navigate increasingly complex responsibilities.

Culturally, Vermont’s strong tradition of local control shapes how municipalities perceive regional collaboration. Town identity, representation, and autonomy are central to decision-making, and stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining these values. While many towns recognize the benefits of shared services, they remain cautious about any model that could be perceived as diminishing local authority or creating a new layer of government. Recent events, including the 2023-2024 floods, have intensified these pressures by highlighting the challenges municipalities face when responding to large-scale events with limited administrative capacity. These converging structural and cultural dynamics help explain why regional governance is being discussed now.

Cross Model Insights: What the Comparative Analysis Reveals

The comparative matrix highlights several themes across governance models that help frame Vermont’s considerations. First, governance structure emerged as the central differentiator across all the models reviewed. RPCs function primarily as advisory bodies, whereas COGs and county-based models rely on governing boards of elected municipal officials with clearer authority, which directly shapes the types of services they can deliver. Across the models

examined, the degree of statutory authority consistently influenced whether an entity could provide planning, coordination, or direct service delivery.

Second, the models demonstrate that voluntary, opt-in participation is a common feature in rural regions, where municipalities vary widely in capacity and service needs. Models such as FRCOG allow municipalities to select services based on their needs and capacity, a flexibility that aligns with Vermont's preference for incremental, locally driven collaboration. This flexibility also reflects the reality that municipalities within a region may have different levels of staffing, resources, and readiness to participate in shared arrangements.

Third, the matrix shows that direct service delivery requires both statutory authority and stable funding, reflected in the larger professional staffs and diversified funding streams maintained by COGs and county-based models. RPCs, by contrast, are not currently structured or resourced to provide shared services at scale. These differences illustrate the range of design choices available in regional governance models and the tradeoffs associated with each, rather than pointing to a single preferred approach.

Together, these insights point to several overarching themes that may be relevant as Vermont evaluates different governance options, including the relationship between authority and scope, the role of voluntary participation, and the importance of sustainable funding and staffing. Rather than indicating a single preferred model, the comparative analysis highlights a range of factors Vermont would need to consider in assessing any governance approach.

How These Models Might Work in Vermont

Applying these insights to Vermont's context reveals both opportunities and constraints. Elements of the models that align well with Vermont include the ability to build on existing RPC regional boundaries, the use of voluntary service arrangements, and governance structures that center municipal officials, all of which are reflected across the COG examples in the matrix (see Appendix A). These characteristics reflect Vermont's preference for collaboration that preserves local autonomy while offering practical support. Shared staffing or procurement services, already used informally in some regions, also align with the service menus offered by models such as FRCOG.

At the same time, there are notable constraints. The matrix highlights that models capable of delivering operational services rely on a statutory authority that Vermont RPCs do not currently possess. Municipal capacity varies widely across the state, and stakeholders expressed concerns about creating new governmental layers or adding administrative complexity. Additionally, any regional model would require stable and predictable funding to be viable, a feature that distinguishes the more robust COGs from Vermont's grant-dependent RPCs. Taken together, these factors suggest that any future approach would need to be carefully tailored to Vermont's legal framework, municipal culture, and capacity landscape.

Cultural Implications: Why This is a Big Issue in Vermont

Culture emerged as one of the most influential factors in our research. Vermont's tradition of local control is deeply rooted and shapes expectations about representation, autonomy, and decision-making. Collaboration is often supported in principle but can be difficult in practice when towns have differing priorities or historical tensions. Interviewees described examples where interpersonal dynamics or concerns about representation hindered shared service arrangements, even when the functional need was clear.

Survey responses reflected a similarly wide range of perspectives on municipal autonomy (see Appendix B for a table of themes). A small number of respondents referenced concerns related to local control or the potential unevenness of shared arrangements, while others emphasized the importance of maintaining clear authority and representation in any regional model. These comments indicate that questions about autonomy and balance of control are part of the broader cultural context in which regional governance discussions occur, even if they were not dominant themes across all responses.

A key cultural finding from our survey and interviews is the lack of shared language. Stakeholders use terms such as *governance*, *regionalization*, *municipal operations*, and *shared services* inconsistently, which can lead to confusion or misalignment in discussions about regional collaboration. Survey responses showed substantial variation in how these terms were defined, even among individuals with similar roles, highlighting the absence of a common lexicon. The lexicon developed through this project (presented as a Definition Guide in Appendix B) illustrates the range of interpretations and underscores the importance of establishing shared terminology to support productive dialogue. Without shared language, discussions about governance models are vulnerable to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

The survey results also surfaced concerns about uneven municipal capacity. Respondents from smaller towns described volunteer burnout, difficulty recruiting successors, and the strain of managing increasingly complex relationships with limited staff. Others noted that regionalization could create inequities if larger towns benefit disproportionately or if smaller towns lack the capacity to participate effectively.

Finally, several interviewees cautioned against focusing solely on organizational structure. Effective regional collaboration depends not only on formal governance models but also on relationships, trust, and clarity about roles and responsibilities. This emphasis on culture suggests that any future governance approach must attend to both structural design and the relational dynamics that shape collaboration in Vermont.

What This Means for Vermont's Path Forward

Together, these findings suggest that Vermont's considerations around regional governance are multifaceted and require attention to structural, cultural, and statutory factors.

The comparative matrix demonstrates that while COGs, county boards, and full-service regional entities offer useful examples, none provide a direct blueprint for Vermont. Instead, they highlight principles, such as voluntary participation, municipal representation, and clear authority for shared services, that may inform future exploration. The survey findings further underscore that any future model must account for Vermont's strong local control culture, uneven municipal capacity, and the need for shared language to support productive dialogue.

The central question moving forward is how Vermont and its municipalities can continue to explore regional governance options in a way that aligns with the state's values, legal framework, and capacity needs. This discussion sets the stage for the next sections of the report, which outline the limitations of this project and identify potential next steps for continued exploration.

Limitations

This project provides an exploratory, practice-oriented analysis of regional governance options for Vermont. While it offers useful insights and tools for understanding the issue, several limitations shape both the scope of the research and the strength of its conclusions. These limitations are important for interpreting the findings appropriately and for identifying areas where additional research is needed.

Methodological Limitations

The primary limitation of this project lies in its methodological approach, which relies on a combination of secondary research, a small number of qualitative interviews, and a non-representative survey. These methods were appropriate given the project's scope and timeline, but they constrain the extent to which findings can be generalized.

The interview component included conversations with a limited number of stakeholders selected for their familiarity with regional governance structures. While these participants provided valuable insight, the sample was not comprehensive. It does not fully capture the range of perspectives that would be necessary for a statewide assessment of governance reform. In particular, additional input from a broader cross-section of municipal officials, state agency representatives, legislators, and members of the public would strengthen the analysis. As a result, interview findings should be interpreted as illustrative of key themes rather than representative of consensus across Vermont.

The structure of the interviews also presents limitations. A consistent set of open-ended questions allowed for comparability across respondents and helped identify recurring themes such as local control, statutory constraints, and administrative capacity. However, this approach limited the ability to fully explore the institutional and operational complexities unique to each stakeholder's context. Regional governance in Vermont operates across diverse domains,

including planning, emergency management, infrastructure, and grant administration, and a more flexible interview design could have enabled deeper examination of these differences.

The survey component also has important limitations. Its primary purpose was to gather language and perspectives to inform the project's definition guide and thematic analysis. In that respect, it was effective. However, the survey was distributed through professional networks and public channels associated with the project team, resulting in a convenience sample rather than a representative one. The respondent pool was skewed toward individuals already engaged in governance or public service, particularly municipal officials. Therefore, survey results should not be interpreted as reflecting broader public opinion, but rather as providing insight into how engaged stakeholders understand and describe key concepts.

Scope and Time Constraints

A second major limitation is the scope of the project relative to the time available. Regional governance reform is a complex issue with legal, fiscal, administrative, and political dimensions. Addressing it comprehensively would require extensive data collection, stakeholder engagement, and policy analysis beyond what is feasible within a single academic term.

Time constraints affected multiple aspects of the project. They limited the number of interviews conducted, the depth of comparative case study analysis, and the ability to incorporate iterative feedback from stakeholders. They also constrained the extent to which the project could move beyond exploratory analysis into detailed policy design. As a result, the report does not propose a specific governance model or implementation plan, but instead presents a range of options and considerations.

The comparative analysis of regional governance models illustrates this limitation. The options matrix provides a structured comparison of different governance arrangements, highlighting variation in authority, funding, staffing, and service provision. This is a useful tool for understanding the range of possible approaches. However, the models examined are not directly transferable to Vermont due to differences in statutory frameworks, funding structures, and institutional history. Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions operate within a planning-focused statutory framework and rely heavily on grant-based funding, whereas many of the models reviewed incorporate broader service delivery roles supported by different revenue mechanisms.

Because of these differences, the comparative analysis should be understood as identifying potential design elements rather than offering a blueprint for implementation. Additional legal analysis, fiscal modeling, and stakeholder engagement would be necessary to determine how any elements of these models could be adapted to Vermont's context.

Evolving Deliverables and Problem Definition

Another limitation stems from the evolving nature of both the project deliverables and the problem definition itself. Over the course of the project, the scope of the work expanded to include multiple outputs, including a narrative report, an options matrix, a definition guide, and thematic summaries. While each of these components add value, they serve different purposes and reflect different stages of analysis.

This evolving scope required balancing breadth and depth. Time spent developing accessible tools, such as the definition guide, necessarily reduced the time available for more detailed legal or financial analysis. As a result, some areas of the report prioritize clarity and usability over technical specificity.

In addition, the project addresses an issue that is not uniformly defined among stakeholders. Interviews and survey responses revealed that there is no shared understanding of what *regional governance* entails, and that stakeholders often have different priorities, ranging from improved coordination to expanded service delivery or structural reform. This lack of conceptual alignment means that the project is, in part, analyzing a problem that is still being defined. Under these conditions, the report is better positioned to clarify questions and highlight trade-offs than to provide definitive answers.

Constraints of Urgency

Finally, the project is shaped by the broader context of urgency surrounding municipal capacity challenges in Vermont. Stakeholders consistently identified pressures related to administrative burden, grant management, infrastructure needs, and disaster response. These challenges create a strong incentive to identify practical solutions quickly.

While this urgency underscores the importance of the issue, it also introduces a limitation. The desire for timely solutions can outpace the availability of comprehensive evidence needed to support major structural changes. Effective regional governance models depend on carefully aligned authority, accountability, and funding structures. Developing such alignment requires sustained analysis and stakeholder engagement.

This report reflects that tension. It responds to immediate concerns by outlining options and identifying areas for further exploration, but it does not provide sufficient evidence to support the adoption of any single governance model. Moving from exploration to implementation would require additional work, including legislative analysis, financial feasibility studies, and broader public input.

Limitations Summary

Overall, this project should be understood as an exploratory foundation for further work on regional governance in Vermont. Its methods provide meaningful qualitative insights but do not capture the full range of perspectives needed for statewide decision-making. Its comparative analysis highlights potential approaches but does not produce a directly transferable model. Its deliverables reflect an evolving and not yet fully defined problem space. And its findings are shaped by a context of urgency that both motivates and constrains the analysis.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the project. Rather, they clarify its role as a starting point for more detailed, inclusive, and technically rigorous work needed to support informed policy decisions.

Conclusion & Suggested Next Steps

Growing capacity constraints on municipalities indicate an imminent need to stand up some form of regional governance in Vermont. Although this research highlights existing regional governance models of other states, Vermont's smallness and strong cultural ties to local control position the state uniquely. No single model provides a perfect solution for Vermont's context and unique needs. Rather, our comparative matrix and definition guide serve as tools to highlight key approaches and provide a foundation from which to have productive conversations.

Due to the limited timeframe and scope of our project, we did not endeavor to identify a specific regional governance framework and/or outline an implementation plan. We recognize the critical importance of those next steps and, in an effort to encourage and support that work, we have identified some key projects that would be beneficial in moving the work forward.

Community Messaging

Something many Vermonters are familiar with, and agree on, is that their state is experiencing an affordability crisis. The property-tax burden is high and continues to increase. Regionalized governance presents an opportunity for cost-efficiencies and tax alleviation for community members. From that lens, the conversation may be more approachable and welcomed by the general public. Crafting strong storytelling and packaging it in layperson's terms would serve as a helpful tool in messaging the criticality to community members, especially when boiled down to dollars and cents. Many community members, however, may not have the same day-to-day visibility into current and emerging municipal capacity challenges as those who work within or alongside local government. If constituents understand this reality, legislators may be more willing to champion this project.

Mapping Municipal Networks

RPCs are one of several regional entities within the state that provide either service or planning capacity. Examples of these include Consolidated Waste and Sewer districts, Fire Districts, Mass Transit Authorities, and Regional Economic Development Corporations. These various entities are what contribute to the fragmented, cumbersome nature of Vermont regional governance. Mapping these regional entities to visualize the area covered and clarify the scope and role would provide effective insights. It would be a tool for both municipal and the general public use. As a regional governing body is formed, governing members could leverage this tool to familiarize themselves with current organizational frameworks, while also thinking strategically about how to move these organizational frameworks forward.

Facilitated Municipal Forums

Maintaining the integrity of local control means that whatever form of regional governance materializes, it must come directly from Vermont's municipalities. Facilitating this self-government is where municipal partners (for example, RPCs; Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT); The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships) can serve as the conveners and networkers. We envision this as monthly gatherings of different networks of municipal representatives - either elected or appointed. The third-party partner affiliate(s) will facilitate these gatherings, taking point on logistics, communication, and agenda setting. It could start as a pilot program, aiming to build a space for collaborative problem-solving and creative cooperation, with the ultimate goal of cementing itself as a routine forum self-organized by municipalities.

Funding Model Exploration

There are currently no mechanisms to finance a regional governance structure. In the case of other state models, grants; fee-for-service revenue; state funding; and levying taxes are some ways in which regional entities are funded. Understanding what financial models would be viable in Vermont is a critical next step in creating sustainable regional governance. This project would entail a detailed statutory review and drafting policy options for legislative counsel. This would be an extensive project, requiring partnership and collaboration between state-level and local-level actors. This would require an assessment of current revenues and expenditures for municipal services, both at the local and state levels, paired with suggestions for how those could be reimaged and redistributed. An acceptable and sustainable funding model will be one that prioritizes financial efficiencies for municipalities over further financial strain.

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Appendix A

Options Matrix

Table A1

Options Matrix

COMPARING MODELS OF REGIONAL GOVERNANCE How different regional structures organize services, staffing, and support for municipalities.					
	Regional Planning Commission (RPC) <i>Planning and advisory commissions; limited authority.</i>	Council of Governments (COG) <i>Regional body combining planning and shared municipal services.</i>	COG Example #1: New York County Board of Supervisors (NY) <i>1 of 3 models for county governance in NY State.</i>	COG Example #2: Full-Service Regional COG (MA-FRCOG) <i>Comprehensive COG delivering public health, emergency mgmt, shared staffing.</i>	COG Example #3: Large Regional COG (TX-Alamo Area COG) <i>Large multi-county COG delivering broad regional services.</i>
Governance Structure	Town representatives (appointed or elected).	Governing board of local elected officials from member municipalities.	Board of elected representatives (Town Supervisors) from municipalities across the county; serve 2-4 year terms.	Council of elected municipal officials with operating sub-committees; operates as a COG and a regional planning agency.	Board of elected representatives of local member governments; serve voluntarily on COG.
Legal Fit for Vermont	Already established in statute.	Medium-High Requires expanding RPC authority for shared services and direct service delivery.	Low-Medium County: legally difficult, needs new state law to create a board of supervisors. RPCs: could adapt with town reps for regional services, needs expanded authority and defined scope.	Medium Requires expanding RPC statutes to allow direct service delivery.	Medium Requires broader statutory authority for large regional services.
Funding Model	Grants, contracts, and small municipal assessments.	State support, grants, municipal assessments, and fee-for-service programs.	Tax revenue, State & Federal aid, and fee-for-service programs.	Municipal assessments, grants, fees-for-service programs, public health funding.	Municipal assessments, member government dues, grants, and state/federal program funding.
County Role	None; RPCs transcend county boundaries.	None; organized by municipalities, not counties.	Operates at county scale, but governed by municipal representatives.	Operates at county scale, but governed by member municipalities.	Strong county role; multi-county regional governance.
Staffing	Small professional staff, paid.	Larger professional staff, paid; dedicated to shared and direct service delivery.	Large professional staff, paid; some boards choose to hire executives in addition to service staff.	Large professional staff, paid; spanning multiple service areas.	Large professional staff, paid.
Services Provided	Advisory and Technical Regional planning, transportation planning, housing, water quality, and emergency planning.	Direct and Advisory Shared admin, zoning, procurement, emergency coordination, and grant admin.	Direct Public safety, transportation infrastructure, health and human services, public parks & recreation, and economic development.	High-Capacity Direct Services Public health, emergency mgmt, shared municipal staffing, and procurement, planning.	Technical and Direct Assistance Planning, plus wide range of regional programs, including aging services, transportation, and emergency services.
Regional Scope / Area Covered	Several towns. Can range from 10-48 depending on the region.	Multi-town region.	Several towns. About one-third of the 62 NY counties operate under this model.	Franklin County's municipalities.	13 counties.

Appendix B

Definition Guide

Table B1

Definition Guide

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE TERMS DEFINITION GUIDE

The definitions in the table below are intended to support clear communication among stakeholders by providing a shared understanding of terms commonly used in discussions about regional governance in Vermont.

These working definitions synthesize themes from the Vermont Regional Governance Survey (March 2026), highlighting both common patterns and the variation in understanding across municipal officials, staff, volunteers, and community members.

	Governance	Regionalization	Municipal Operations	Shared Services
Working Definition	Structures, processes, and decision-making systems through which a municipality or organization directs operations and fulfills responsibilities.	Collaboration or coordination across municipalities to address shared needs, deliver services, or achieve efficiencies beyond a single town.	Day-to-day activities, services, and administrative functions carried out by a municipality to meet responsibilities and serve residents.	Functions, staff, or resources jointly used by two or more municipalities to improve efficiency, reduce costs, or expand capacity.
Key Themes	- Decision-making authority and processes - Oversight of functions and operations - Rules, norms, and policies - Leadership roles and responsibilities	- Pooling or sharing resources - Service delivery across boundaries - Economies of scale - Coordination across a region	- Service delivery (roads, public safety, utilities) - Administrative and staffing functions - Policy and budget implementation - Statutory obligations	- Cost-sharing and economies of scale - Joint staffing arrangements - Cross-municipal service delivery - Collaboration to meet shared needs
Range of Interpretations	Emphasis varied between formal structures, day-to-day oversight, and broader community leadership.	Ranged from informal cooperation to formal regional governance structures, including county systems.	Focus varied between service delivery and administrative or organizational functions.	Viewed as formal agreements, informal cooperation, or internal collaboration models.

***"Working definitions" are shared descriptions developed from survey responses to support consistency in discussion. They are not formal or legal definitions.**

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Stakeholder Questions

- What is your involvement with the regional governance in Vermont and/or the VERTA project?
- What is your understanding of the topic of regional governance in VT?
- In practice, what role do RPCs play in regional governance as they currently function?
- How would you describe the strengths and limitations of RPCs in their current role?
- What regional roles or capacities do you think Vermont will need in the future, and what factors might influence progress toward that vision?

Municipality / RPC Questions

- What do your current networks with municipalities look like? How do you build relationships? Who are you working with when you work with other municipalities?
- Can you share examples of regional collaboration that went well, and examples where collaboration was challenging?
- What conditions, resources, or supports help make these networks function effectively?
- What responsibilities or tasks are most difficult for your municipality to manage with current capacity? Which of these could be effectively supported or shared at a regional level, and which do you feel should remain local?

Appendix D

Stakeholder Interview Summaries

Interview 1 - Rural Technical Assistance Sector

VERTA was established under Act 181 (2024) to assess how Vermont supports rural communities and how municipal services, infrastructure, and capacity can be strengthened. The initiative includes a steering committee of state and regional partners and has conducted focus groups with rural municipalities.

Key Themes:

- Regional governance challenges in Vermont are primarily cultural rather than structural
- Lack of a shared definition of “regional governance” contributes to confusion and tension around local autonomy
- RPCs function as conveners and providers of planning and technical assistance but are limited in statutory authority

- Municipalities are not primarily requesting new governance structures, but practical administrative and technical support
- There is a need for clearer language, stronger facilitation, and improved coordination of shared services without imposing top-down mandates
- Vermont is at a critical inflection point where local control remains central but increasingly strained by capacity limitations

Interview 2 - Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA)

VAPDA represents Vermont's 11 Regional Planning Commissions. Engagement with RPC directors focused on current governance challenges and future regional capacity needs.

Key Themes:

- Vermont's system is highly fragmented and administratively burdensome, particularly for small municipalities
- Governance structure, rather than service delivery, is identified as the core challenge
- Shared service agreements raise concerns related to administration, accountability, and municipal power imbalances
- RPCs are seen as trusted existing structures, with interest in strengthening rather than replacing them
- Strong resistance to creating a new layer of government
- Interest in models such as New York's Board of Supervisors and Massachusetts' Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) due to their inclusion of local elected representation
- Preference for incremental, practical reforms over large-scale structural redesign

Interview 3 – Rural Economic Development Sector

The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) supports municipalities with project development, funding navigation, and technical assistance, often in coordination with other regional organizations.

Key Themes:

- Small municipalities face significant capacity constraints in grant management, permitting, sequencing, and multi-year project delivery
- Vermont's support ecosystem relies heavily on informal networks, relationships, and institutional knowledge
- Collaboration occurs across multiple entities, including RPCs, VCRD, Preservation Trust of Vermont, VLTC, and Regional Development Corporations

- Lack of centralized coordination creates challenges for municipalities navigating complex projects
- Flexible funding and intentional coordination structures are important, especially for early-stage project development
- Technical infrastructure responsibilities (e.g., wastewater, water systems, complex development projects) may be better suited to regional support
- Community visioning and local identity-based decisions should remain locally controlled
- Capacity constraints are a primary driver of interest in regional governance discussions

Interview 4 - Vermont State Government

A state government representative provided a systems-level perspective on Vermont's regional governance structure and its operational challenges.

Key Themes:

- Vermont's governance system is highly fragmented, with overlapping and often uncoordinated structures
- This fragmentation creates inefficiencies, confusion, and uneven access to services, particularly in rural communities
- The issue is not the absence of regional structures, but the lack of coordination among existing systems
- Any future governance model should be grounded in accountability, transparency, equity, and efficiency
- A Council of Governments model could risk replicating existing fragmentation without structural reform
- Strong cultural commitment to local control remains a key constraint on reform efforts
- Regional approaches may help address capacity challenges in areas such as emergency response and disaster recovery
- A flexible, research-driven approach is preferred over selecting a single predetermined governance model

Appendix E

Vermont Regional Governance Survey

We would like to hear your feedback so we can better inform our research. Please fill this quick survey to let us know your thoughts. Your answers will be anonymous.

1). What best describes your role?

- ☐ Legislator
- ☐ Nonprofit / Regional Partner

- ☐ Member of the community and/or general public
☐ Municipal elected official
☐ Municipal staff
☐ RPC staff
☐ State agency staff
☐ Other: _____
- 2). In your own words, define “governance.”
☐ _____
- 3). In your own words, define “regionalization.”
☐ _____
- 4). In your own words, define “municipal operation.”
☐ _____
- 5). In your own words, define “shared services.”
☐ _____
- 6). Is there any other feedback you would like us to consider?
☐ _____
- 7). Name (optional)
☐ _____

Appendix F

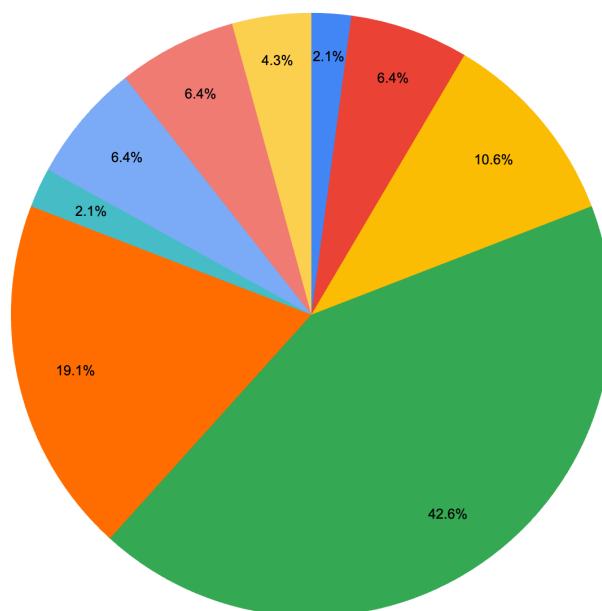
Survey Respondent Demographics

Figure E1

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

What best describes your role?

- Legislator
- Member of community and general public
- Municipal appointed official/representative
- Municipal elected official
- Municipal staff
- Nonprofit/regional partner
- Other
- Researcher
- RPC staff



Appendix G

Thematic Summaries

Governance:

<i>Governs and serves as a defined body.</i>	<i>Manages of and for a people.</i>
<i>Sets priorities, rules, and norms.</i>	<i>Defines decision-making.</i>
<i>System for policy implementation.</i>	<i>Responds to changing conditions.</i>
<i>Individuals who oversee operations.</i>	<i>Participates in shared duties.</i>

Regionalization:

<i>Consolidates and delivers services.</i>	<i>Considers issues between governments.</i>
<i>Collaborates with other entities.</i>	<i>Forms integrated groups within a region.</i>
<i>Delegates municipal functions.</i>	<i>Focuses on the collective.</i>
<i>Creates geographic and cultural areas.</i>	<i>Devolves local authority to a higher control.</i>

Municipal Operation:

<i>Executes daily operations.</i>	<i>Performs under existing statutory authority.</i>
<i>Functions of a local government.</i>	<i>Oversees municipal-wide functions.</i>
<i>Provides local services.</i>	<i>Coordinates operations.</i>
<i>Operates directly to a community.</i>	<i>Ensures community function and well-being.</i>

Shared Services:

<i>Centralizes administrative functions.</i>	<i>Governs jointly across boundaries.</i>
<i>Combines resources to deliver a service.</i>	<i>Collaborates with other entities.</i>
<i>Shares human capital.</i>	<i>Increases efficiency and reduces spending.</i>
<i>Provides when one alone cannot.</i>	<i>Coordinates service delivery.</i>