



# Statewide Regional Planning Commission (RPC) Network Assessment Executive Summary



*Vermont Association of Planning and  
Development Agencies (VAPDA)*

*February 2025*



## Recommendations

### Governance

1. Shift to a Council of Governments (COG) model.
2. If not shifting to a COG model, consider language that maximizes the flexibility of formal membership to RPC governing boards, such as language allowing for alternates or designees to be appointed.
3. Maximize the status of Vermont RPCs/COGs as political subdivisions.

### Funding

1. Shifting to a COG model may necessitate additional funding due to a corresponding increase in responsibilities for staff.

### Programs and Services Delivery

1. Provide more frequent direct feedback about performance at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner/staff level.
2. Formalize the existing strategic planning processes of VAPDA
3. Establish a staff position focused on the management and administration of VAPDA.
4. Utilize RPC working groups and VAPDA committee structure to provide shared trainings, catalyze statewide projects, and maximize efficiencies.

### Equity

1. Continue to examine equity frameworks that may advance the goals of local communities and RPC priorities. Utilize VAPDA as a vehicle to develop statewide approaches for enhancing RPC diversity and equity practices.
2. Work to implement identified and existing Vermont best practices for Equity considerations, like the VTrans equity framework.
3. Continue to address inclusivity within RPC organizations.

### Accountability

1. Continue to build and enhance trust with municipalities
2. Continue to build and enhance trust with state agencies.
3. Enhance the role of RPCs in capacity building of municipalities
4. Continue efforts to improve communication practices and build RPC capacities to share information widely (between RPCs and state agencies, between RPCs and towns, etc.)

### Staffing

1. Prioritize continued investment in building overall RPC capacity across existing statutory service areas.

## Executive Summary

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) is the statewide association for Vermont's 11 regional planning commissions. Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are political subdivisions of the State of Vermont created by their member municipalities (24 VSA §4341), that provide technical assistance to their municipalities. In the absence of county governments, Vermont's RPCs act as intermediaries between the municipal and state levels of government. RPCs work in a variety of fields: land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental quality. RPC executive directors and senior staff are asked to serve on state councils, boards, committees, and working groups, and are often called upon to develop and implement statutorily mandated programs with their member municipalities.

RPCs strengthen the capability and capacity of municipalities and extend the reach of the state connecting their communities with federal and state programs. RPCs are uniquely positioned to provide broad services to every Vermont municipality.

A legislative charge to complete a statewide assessment of performance and accountability for Vermont's RPCs was made in H.687 (Act 181) Section 50a – Regional Planning Commission Study, adopted in June 2024, as stated:

(a) The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) shall hire an independent contractor to study the strategic opportunities for regional planning commissions to better serve municipalities and the State. This study shall seek to ensure that the regional planning commissions are statutorily enabled and strategically positioned to meet ongoing and emerging State and municipal needs and shall review the following: governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability, and staffing.

(b) A stakeholder group composed of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, Vermont Council on Rural Development, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Agency of Administration, the Office of Racial Equity, legislators, and others will be invited to participate in the study to provide their insights into governance structure, accountability, and performance standards.

(c) The study shall identify the gaps in statutory enabling language, structure, and local engagement and make recommendations on how to improve and ensure consistent and equitable statewide programming and local input and engagement, including methods to improve municipal participation; the amount of regional planning grant funding provided to each regional planning commission relative to statutory responsibilities, the number of municipalities, and other demands; and how to make it easier for municipalities to work together.

(d) On or before December 31, 2024, the study report shall be submitted to the House Committees on Environment and Energy, on Commerce and Economic Development, and on Government Operations and Military Affairs and the Senate Committees on

Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs, on Natural Resources and Energy, and on Government Operations. (NOTE: This deadline was subsequently extended to February 28, 2025.)

VAPDA has partnered with the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation to complete the study. The goal of this effort has been to learn more about how Vermont’s RPCs conduct programming and activities for the benefit of member communities as required by Vermont state law. The results of this effort will help to ensure that the statewide network of RPCs serves as a results-oriented, cost-effective and valued-added resource for the State of Vermont and its local communities. The findings will also serve as the RPC study called for in Section 50 of H.687 (Act 181).

This research effort included surveying and interviewing elected officials that are served by RPC organizations; individuals serving on RPC governing boards; RPC executive directors; federal and state agency stakeholders; statewide nonprofit organizations; and members of the Vermont legislature.

Complete research details and discussion regarding these recommendations can be found in the accompanying full report. Overall, the findings reiterate the important role of the RPCs, to serve as intermediaries between municipalities and the state. The State of Vermont has been a strong partner, supporting the work of the RPCs through ongoing funding support. There is interest in enhancing VAPDA as a statewide RPC network but also as a formal organization that advocates for and supports the RPCs in their vision of enhanced performance and impact.

As a result of this research effort, the NADO Research Foundation has crafted recommendations around the areas noted in the legislation: governance, funding, programs, service delivery, equity, accountability and staffing. These recommendations are made with the intent of enhancing these state relationships and building stronger RPCs.

Commentary and Findings .....	4
Overall Performance Evaluation .....	6
Recommendations .....	8
Governance .....	8
Funding .....	9
Programs and Service Delivery .....	10
Equity .....	11
Accountability .....	12
Staffing .....	14
About VAPDA and NADO Research Foundation .....	15

## Commentary and Findings

### Local Stakeholder Feedback

As part of this research project, 158 governing board members and 200 elected officials responded to online surveys offered by the NADO Research Foundation. (Note: Twelve individuals responded to both surveys, since they were both local elected officials AND governing board members.) This provided a perspective on the level of engagement, satisfaction, and desire for service from local parties. Across both surveys, the overall tone of the feedback was positive. Stakeholders expressed their familiarity with the services and activities of the RPC and an understanding of the critical roles that RPCs play in member communities. It is clear that towns face challenging conditions to fulfill a growing number of responsibilities passed down from the state and that partnerships with the RPCs are a key vehicle through which to complete these tasks.

Respondents resoundingly understood the resource limitations that Vermont RPCs face; this understanding was coupled with a strong desire for additional supportive services of all kinds and at whatever levels the RPCs might be able to manage now and in the future. For example, there is a desire for RPCs to provide capacity support to towns, specifically in staffing roles regionally that are challenging to fill locally. Respondents noted that many of the smallest communities face challenges meeting even the basic responsibilities they are charged with, and if RPCs could enhance their capacity by offering shared services with or on behalf of these communities, it would be beneficial. Examples of positions highlighted by municipal responders that could benefit from these types of shared service considerations are clerk, zoning administrator, tax assessor, and town manager.

Overall, the survey results indicated that communities do not seem to be expressing unhappiness or dissatisfaction with the services offered by the RPCs, the level of energy expended in the pursuit of their many responsibilities, or the amount of communication taking place between the RPCs and the municipalities.

### Statewide and Regional Stakeholder Feedback

Interviews were completed with a variety of state agencies that work with RPCs, as well as statewide nonprofits and state legislators. External stakeholders praised Vermont's RPCs for their critical role in connecting municipalities to state government, especially in a state without county governance. Key strengths include their technical assistance, strong partnerships with state and federal agencies, regional expertise, support for project implementation, and contributions to policy development in areas like housing, energy, and climate.

Opportunities for growth focus on increasing public awareness, fostering inclusivity, building municipal capacity, improving collaboration, and exploring governance reforms like transitioning to a Council of Governments (COG) model. Stakeholders also recommend better mentoring, more consistent evaluation, and statewide coordination through a dedicated VAPDA coordinator to enhance RPC effectiveness.

Overall, while RPCs are vital to governance and local capacity building, strategic investments and reforms are needed to address resource limitations and maximize their impact.

## Council of Government Considerations

The NADO Research Foundation team spoke with RPC directors individually and as a group about the ‘council of governments (COG)’ model for RPC organizations in Vermont. The COG model is used by organizations in other states that have similar roles to the RPCs. Two key topics were discussed in relation to this concept: expanded statutory capabilities for shared services and modifying governing board requirements for member communities to enhance local participation and accountability.

### Expanded Statutory Capabilities

A critical topic of concern for RPC leaders and VAPDA is the potential to enhance the abilities of RPCs to participate in regional governance to enable better service delivery, specifically county governments. As outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4341, RPCs are political subdivisions of the State of Vermont. It was noted during the RPC executive director interviews that the organizations are often treated as consultants or contractors. Recognizing and maximizing the capacity for RPCs to act in the political subdivision role could be an initial step toward enhancing their ability to address challenges at the regional level on behalf of member communities as requested and observed during the survey portion of this effort. Fully addressing the concerns raised by local communities regarding additional shared services, or in some cases direct provision of services on behalf of member communities, requires an expansion of authorized capabilities for RPCs by transitioning to COGs. The NADO Research Foundation has provided six examples in Appendix K (of the full report) of how other states allow for formal engagement between RPC organizations and other parties, including member communities within a service region. Of those state examples, the most detailed language which appears to capture the sentiment of Vermont’s RPC leadership and member communities are Connecticut and Maine. Following the statewide reorganization of regional councils of government that took place in Connecticut between 2013 and 2014, the updated language found in Connecticut General Statutes, Chapter 127, Section 8-31 provides the best reference for enhanced service provision. Maine Revised Statutes, specifically those found in Title 30-A, Chapter 119, Article 2, Subsection 2313 (2) Authority, state that regional councils on behalf of one or more members and with appropriate authorization, can execute any power, privilege or authority that a municipal government is capable of. Using this as a model, these concepts would provide Vermont RPCs the ability to provide services on an as-needed basis to residents of towns with limited municipal resources or capacities. This ability would be critical to ensure that policy directives from the state are carried out at a local level. The Franklin Regional COG<sup>1</sup> in western Massachusetts could be considered a specific individual organizational model for the Vermont RPCs to evaluate regarding approaches to implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin Regional Council of Governments; <https://frcog.org/>.

## Governing Board Composition

Governing board composition was highlighted by both RPC executive directors and survey respondents. Feedback received during the governing board survey effort indicated that there may not be enough direct municipal participation on RPC governing boards. This feedback was balanced with similar comments that identifying individuals who can commit the time and energy needed to effectively serve on a governing board remains challenging. The lack of specificity in current Vermont enabling legislation regarding the appointment of commissioners by municipal governments may be contributing to these challenges, and could continue to be a challenge, especially if a shift to a COG model of governance is implemented. Similar to the previous topic, six states were evaluated in Appendix K to assess how their enabling statutes handle this topic, with all six specifying at varying levels of detail that elected officials, or municipal designees, should be among the official governing board membership.<sup>2</sup> A reconsideration of the membership of governing boards as required by state statute to more closely represent the true interest of municipal governments is recommended if a transition to a Council of Governments style of governance is a goal.

The statutory authority given to RPC is primarily focused on planning efforts, assistance to municipalities, and executing state legislative and agency initiatives. Currently, commissioners serve at the pleasure of their legislative bodies. There is no governing or governance authority beyond the commission at the RPC level.

Regional Planning Commissions have no elected legislative body and/or elected executive, no ability to raise general revenue, and no ability to enact and enforce laws, policy, regulations, or issue permits. Appendix K provides comparative examples from other states that includes an examination of their abilities to generate funding.

## Overall Performance Evaluation

Based on the research and analysis completed throughout this effort, the NADO Research Foundation provides the following general observations regarding RPC performance in the key areas outlined in H.687 (Act 181), Section 50 (a) – Regional Planning Commission Study. These observations are supported by discussions in previous sections, the full report, and additional information found in the Appendices.

### Governance

RPCs are performing in a satisfactory manner within the current statutory guidelines provided at 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345(a).

If it is the desire of the State of Vermont to enhance the capability of RPCs to more effectively address issues related to shared services and regional governance raised by member communities throughout this effort, changes are recommended, specifically to implement a COG model, transforming RPCs to COGs.

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<sup>2</sup> In Massachusetts, planning board members are specified in statute – who may be either elected or appointed locally.

## Funding

The funding levels and mechanisms recommended for examination as part of this effort, particularly those provided by the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) for core statutory planning responsibilities, are found to be sufficient for current levels of programming.

Any expansion of roles or responsibilities identified and recommended by the State of Vermont in the future will require additional resources for meaningful and successful implementation by RPC organizations.

Current ACCD funding allocation strategies which include factors for population and densities of towns are also found to be a fair method of distribution at the current time.

## Programs and Service Delivery

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be providing the type and level of programming consistent with the requirements outlined in 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345(a). Interactions with local officials and board members during the survey portions of this effort highlighted the quality and value of the services provided by the individual RPC organizations to member communities.

Service delivery across the RPC network was found to be satisfactory. Regional Planning Commissions are striving to provide the highest levels of service to member communities with the funding, staffing, and resources currently at their disposal. As indicated in survey results and stakeholder interviews, member communities are well aware of the resource limitations and programmatic requirements that RPCs must work within.

## Equity

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be working to improve their efforts in being more equitable and inclusive, based on guiding principles like the Vermont Environmental Justice Law and existing frameworks like the Vermont Agency of Transportation – Transportation Equity Framework.<sup>3</sup> Focus groups uncovered areas where RPCs would like to improve, techniques they would like to discontinue, and new techniques they would like to try. Overall, it is clear that RPCs can learn new approaches in equity practices from each other.

## Accountability

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to be working with a high level of accountability to their member communities and contracts from federal and state agency partners. Survey and interview efforts produced numerous comments regarding the responsiveness of RPC organizations in addressing issues raised by stakeholders and their overall satisfaction with the services rendered.

While the levels of communication are high amongst all parties engaged with RPCs, there was an expression that this level of communication should remain high or even increase if

<sup>3</sup> State of Vermont – Agency of Transportation, Transportation Equity Framework Final Report, September 2023; <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/equity>.

possible. Communications recommendations based on this feedback are provided.

## Staffing

Regional Planning Commissions are observed to have sufficient levels of overall staffing for current programming requirements.

Any expansion of roles or responsibilities identified and recommended by the State of Vermont in the future will require additional resources available for staff support to guarantee meaningful and successful implementation by RPC organizations. This observation is based on the numerous comments received during the survey and interview portions of this effort, requesting support on several topics that were beyond the RPCs' ability to support at current staffing levels.

## Recommendations

VAPDA was created to serve as the statewide association of Vermont's eleven RPCs to ensure effective planning programs that enhance the quality of life for all Vermont residents. Based on information developed throughout the assessment process, these recommendations focus on assuring that VAPDA and the RPCs are well positioned to continue to provide impactful services to Vermont communities and stakeholders who invest valuable resources toward these ends.

Recommendations provided here are offered in the topic areas outlined in H.687 (Act 181) as described. These recommendations are focused on parties who are empowered to act on these matters: the State of Vermont, VAPDA, and RPCs in general.

## Governance

There has been interest on the part of the RPCs in implementing a Council of Governments (COG) model of governance, specifically the COG model used in neighboring New England states. Their interest, and those of some of the state agencies and legislators, is in using the COG model to increase the potential for and ease in providing shared services to municipalities and, as a result, having more representative governing boards, with elected representatives.

1. **Shift to a Council of Governments (COG) model.** To pursue municipal shared services and expanded regional governance in the way that has been effective for other New England COGs, and allowing for greater efficiencies, the COG model is necessary. This model requires revisiting the structure of board membership. If VAPDA and the 11 RPCs are interested in moving from the RPC model to the COG model, it will be necessary to consider additional statutory changes outlined below.
  - a. Amend 24 V.S.A. 4345 and 4345a – Duties and Optional Powers transitioning RPCs to Councils of Government. Enable the RPCs to transition to councils of government, specifically allowing for the ability to increase shared services opportunities on behalf of and between member communities and RPCs without requiring the

creation of other organizational mechanisms. This would also allow RPCs to offer certain fee-for-service opportunities for municipalities to contract for services like administrative support, code enforcement, zoning assistance, development review, etc. We recommend using Franklin Regional Council of Governments as a model for moving forward.

- b. This would also necessitate a statutory change in RPC membership guidelines found at 24 V.S.A. 4342, requiring elected municipal officials to serve on COG Governing Boards.
  - c. This shift may also necessitate a review of the number and size of Vermont COGs and funding equity to ensure that all communities are being served equitably inside the new model.
  - d. With a shift to a COG model, it may make sense for VAPDA to rebrand itself with a new name and logo, that better showcases Vermont COGs.
2. ***If not shifting to a COG model***, consider language that maximizes the flexibility of formal membership to RPC governing boards, such as language allowing for alternates or designees to be appointed. Based on this, if changes in enabling language are unlikely, it may be critical for the RPC organizations to agree on common membership language for individual bylaws that would provide the level of representation necessary to best address all membership concerns outlined in this report.
3. **Maximize the status of Vermont RPCs/COGs as political subdivisions.** RPC directors felt that this status as outlined in Vermont Statutes was underutilized and led to RPC organizations frequently being treated as consultants or contractors creating funding and contractual barriers. If the transition to the COG model is not immediately feasible or until the COG model is assessed and implemented, an increased emphasis on this legal status for RPCs could allow them additional latitude to engage with municipalities and state agencies for the provision of services and other items of need as outlined during the survey and interview effort.

## Funding

RPC directors and governing board members expressed general satisfaction with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) allocation formula and the competitive factors that have been included in the allocation calculations. The ACCD funding formula as presented appears to be sufficient in capturing the specific challenges faced by regions big and small, using the outlined measures of allocation. Immediate improvements or changes to this were not offered during this research effort.

Funding levels appear to be sufficient for current levels of service. While RPC member appropriations did not rise to the level of an issue during the executive director and board chair interviews, continued investment in RPC operations is critical for future success. Should the desire (or demand) for services from either member towns or the state of Vermont escalate, additional funding will be required.

RPCs are grant-dependent, meaning their work programs are largely externally driven, which has the potential to significantly limit their flexibility and responsiveness to regionally and municipally driven needs. As a result, the temporary nature of their funding limits RPCs' ability to grow and retain staffing capacity. There may be value in considering ways to remedy this situation, assuring the consistent funding necessary to grow and retain quality staff.

1. ***Shifting to a COG model may necessitate additional funding due to a corresponding increase in responsibilities for staff.*** As shared services are implemented and COGs offer staffing solutions for their municipalities, additional resources will be required. Increasing funding to make RPCs/COGs more robust would build capacity for both project-level efforts and regional governance concerns, where present.

## Programs and Service Delivery

Overall, executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem pleased with the quality of programs and service delivery their RPCs are providing. External stakeholders are interested in building stronger partnerships with RPCs with increased communication. Positioning VAPDA to be more of a resource will be central to many of the program and service delivery items discussed here.

1. **Provide more frequent direct feedback about performance at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner/staff level.** During the interview process, a number of RPC directors indicated that feedback from partnering state agencies was not always direct or specific and occasionally provided indications that some RPC organizations were not performing as well as others. State agency representatives commented on performance concerns with the work of certain RPCs; in some cases, these concerns were shared with the individual RPC or VAPDA. To create more transparency around areas for improvement, it may be useful to develop regular processes or standards for feedback on both sides. This may include quarterly feedback meetings or a regular timeline for feedback. Where applicable, RPC organizations should be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies. This feedback should be in a direct and constructive manner that provides an opportunity for growth and improvement.
2. **Formalize the existing strategic planning processes of VAPDA.** While VAPDA has an existing strategic planning process, VAPDA leadership may benefit from undertaking a process that results in a Three Year Plan that outlines goals for building the internal organization, including plans for staffing and financial stability of the organization; increasing the visibility of the RPCs as a statewide network; developing consistent and regular communications processes with applicable state agencies and stakeholders; developing systems to allow RPCs to develop coordinated approaches for statewide service alignment; and assuring steps are in place to continue the strong partnership between the RPCs and the state.

3. **Establish a staff position focused on the management and administration of VAPDA.** Based on feasibility and funding, VAPDA should evaluate moving the organization from volunteer-managed to one managed by paid staff. The roles for this staff position to fulfill are many, including ensuring quality control on state projects, while also coordinating RPC efforts in communications, equity, state advocacy, state contracts, transparency, and education/training efforts.
  - a. **Enhance the utilization of VAPDA as a statewide advocacy partner** on behalf of RPCs. Position VAPDA in a way that would facilitate the meaningful engagement of all RPC organizations as it relates to statewide advocacy efforts.
  - b. **Continue to utilize VAPDA to streamline/coordinate program deliverables provided to state agencies.** Staffing VAPDA will allow the organization to function more as a central coordinating body, using a structured and intentional approach to evaluate and support statewide alignment by **creating and fostering opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and learning between members; and managing/streamlining reporting and impact measurement across RPCs.** VAPDA could also explore opportunities to take on more regional planning work and substate service delivery and coordinate with state agencies to enhance local service delivery and community development.
4. **Utilize RPC working groups and VAPDA committee structure to provide shared trainings, catalyze statewide projects, and maximize efficiencies.** Informal committee structures within VAPDA have already been observed as effective methods to allow RPC representatives with common interests to collaborate on relevant topics. Enhancing and formalizing these committees or forming standing working groups could provide additional opportunities for peer learning and resource sharing.

## Equity

Despite concerns about equity at the federal level, Vermont RPCs are likely to continue the discussion around equity, as this topic was raised in survey responses from governing board members and local elected officials. VAPDA has already played a key role in developing the [Vermont Transportation Equity Framework of 2023](#) which may serve as a starting point for any discussions about equity strategies moving forward.

1. **Continue to examine equity frameworks that may advance the goals of local communities and RPC priorities. Utilize VAPDA as a vehicle to develop statewide approaches for enhancing RPC diversity and equity practices.**
  - a. Consider creating a statewide equity plan for RPCs or establishing common Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) goals that each organization could work toward and report on.
  - b. Utilize RPC executive director meetings to share best practices, concerns, and opportunities for collaboration.

- c. Engage in intentional learning and discussions around equity issues.
  - d. Create Public Participation Policy Guidance. Utilize VAPDA as a venue to formulate guidance that leads to the adoption and implementation of additional public participation policies that support RPC efforts to guide outreach and ensure inclusivity in every project and program.
- 2. Work to implement identified and existing Vermont best practices for Equity considerations, like the VTrans equity framework.**
  - 3. Continue to address inclusivity within RPC organizations.**
    - a. Examine internal policies, hiring practices, grant processes, bylaws, strategic plans, etc. with a lens of inclusivity.
    - b. Foster diversity in leadership, committees, and boards. Identify barriers to participation and seek opportunities to expand engagement.
    - c. Maximize local engagement. Meet people where they are, cultivate relationships with different communities and audiences, direct marketing, etc.

## Accountability

While RPC executive directors, board chairs, and local officials seem content with the accountability of the RPCs, there does seem to be a perceived disconnect between state agencies and RPCs in terms of communication.

- 1. Continue to build and enhance trust with municipalities.**
  - a. Lead transparent and inclusive conversations to support overwhelmed municipalities of all sizes, to help align their work more closely with local needs and priorities. Acknowledge overwhelmed municipalities' challenges and strategize how to overcome them.
  - b. Strengthen municipal relationships by understanding municipal needs and offering technical assistance to fulfill those needs as well as offering other kinds of assistance.
  - c. Ensure follow-through on any RPC offers or municipality requests, being sure to report back to municipalities.
  - d. Contact the smallest and most remote communities regularly to see if their needs have changed and if they may want assistance from the RPC. Situations and needs can change.
- 2. Continue to build and enhance trust with state agencies.** Encourage state partners to provide more frequent and direct feedback at the VAPDA, RPC, and planner levels about program delivery. Communications between the state and RPCs should be regular and allow for joint problem-solving.
  - a. Develop and implement a process or standards for mutual feedback between the state and the RPCs, such as quarterly feedback meetings and an established timeline for feedback.

- b. Where applicable, executive directors and board chairs must be apprised of their performance on matters pertaining to their statutory duties or contracted work with state agencies, not just to staff planners.
- c. State agencies need to recognize RPCs as political subdivisions and work to remove funding and logistical barriers, making service delivery easier. RPCs are often treated as contractors only, not as statute-enabled partners.
- d. RPCs need a better understanding of state expectations for balancing these two roles: project-driven entities working through state agency work plans and grants, or flexible field support staff provided with resources to meet the needs of the towns where they are. RPCs wish to build capacity among towns that is unrelated to provision of shared services.

### **3. Enhance the role of RPCs in capacity building of municipalities**

- a. VAPDA may want to enhance its relationship with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) and any other organizations supporting municipalities to undertake periodic municipal capacity assessments that would help bring critical issues into focus such as staffing, public service, public information concerns, data needs, and any similar topic identified by local stakeholders. This will set the stage for a discussion of which organizations are already fulfilling certain capacity building needs and where there may be gaps that VAPDA can fill.
- b. Many municipalities lack the capacity to manage complex challenges, which RPCs could help address. RPCs should continue to play an active role in capacity building, especially in helping municipalities implement plans to access funding. This could involve stepping into a more proactive role in non-planning topics including town administration, project management and grant application preparation.
- c. Evaluate how additional funding and resources could be distributed among RPCs to accurately address expressed needs and capabilities.

### **4. Continue efforts to improve communication practices and build RPC capacities to share information widely (between RPCs and state agencies, between RPCs and towns, etc.)**

- a. Create a refined focus on marketing VAPDA (to the state, towns, etc.), developing shared training opportunities and better programmatic alignment for staff. RPCs thrive when they work together on projects. Embedding an RPC working group into statewide projects can highlight the efficiency of RPCs working together and sharing information/resources.
- b. Establish a written communication work plan for individual RPCs and VAPDA.
  - i. Create a communications budget line item or include communication items in future funding requests

- c. To improve communications between RPC and stakeholder state agencies, VAPDA should occupy an expanded role. This could include VAPDA-specific mailings on behalf of the RPC network, stakeholder visits to share updates, invitation of stakeholders to VAPDA-sponsored events, organization of site visits or road shows for the RPCs to showcase their work, and the creation of an annual statewide impact report.
- d. Better statewide messaging and marketing to increase awareness of RPC work, roles, services, and impacts. Utilize marketing and storytelling efforts, social media, websites and newsletters.
  - i. VAPDA should create core messaging that the RPCs can use to demonstrate what they do and their significant impact in communities. This might involve more outreach, education, and transparency about their operations and decision-making processes, including services available to member towns.
  - ii. Redesign VAPDA.org to serve as a marketing and communications tool for VAPDA and the individual RPCs.
- e. To build RPCs communications expertise, utilize VAPDA to organize RPC communications training opportunities.
  - i. Provide training on communication-centric topics for the RPCs.
  - ii. Contract with communications professionals to offer accelerated assistance to those most in need.

## Staffing

Regional Planning Commission staff are the most critical asset in the cycle of assistance and service delivery to communities in Vermont. While the staffing levels at Vermont RPCs have grown significantly since the previous report in 2011, the observed levels remain minimally sufficient for current endeavors based on feedback received and may not be sufficient to keep up with the expanding roles and expectations placed on them by state entities. This has left RPCs in a position where they are not consistently able to adequately respond to requests for additional services now, and any that may be received in the future. Similarly, the request for additional services heard in survey responses from across the state is beyond what can currently be supported by RPC organizations.

- 1. Prioritize continued investment in building overall RPC capacity across existing statutory service areas.** Based on feedback received during the survey and interview portions of this effort, RPCs are staffed at a minimally sufficient level to meet the current statutory programming requirements. Stakeholders acknowledged the condition of having limited staff working within the constraints of existing resources to manage deliverables and the ability to be responsive to local needs. The request for additional or enhanced services heard within the survey effort are beyond the existing staffing capacity of RPC organizations. As roles and expectations from member communities and the state continue to expand, the observed staffing levels will quickly become insufficient without additional flexible, long term and reliable funding.



### **About VAPDA**

The Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) is the statewide association for the State of Vermont's 11 regional planning commissions. Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are Political Subdivisions of the State of Vermont created by their member municipalities (24 VSA §4341). RPCs provide technical assistance to municipalities, and since Vermont does not have county governments, Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions act as a link between municipal affairs and state government. RPCs work in fields that directly and indirectly affect the public at large: land use, transportation, housing, economic development, environmental quality, and more.



### **About the NADO Research Foundation**

The NADO Research Foundation (NADO RF) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that offers technical assistance, education, research, and training to support and strengthen the national network of RDOs. Established in 1988, NADO RF provides thought leadership, conducts research, convenes partners, and produces publications focused on promising practices and innovative approaches to regional economic development.



### **About NADO**

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) provides advocacy, education, research, and training for the nation's RDOs. Founded in 1967, NADO and its nearly 400 members promote regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions to strengthen the economic competitiveness and quality of life across America's local communities.