

MEMORANDUM

TO: Vermont General Assembly

FROM: Michael Snyder, FPR Commissioner

DATE: January 15, 2019

SUBJ: **Outdoor Recreation Friendly Community Program Report to the Legislature per 10 V.S.A. § 325m**

Background

With the issuance of Executive Order No. 11-17, Governor Scott established the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC). The effort is guided by the VOREC steering committee which is made up of Vermont businesses and non-profits including outdoor manufacturers, retailers, brand representatives, trail and user groups and conservation organizations, as well as state government.

The VOREC steering committee's purpose is to engage with businesses, government, the nonprofit sector and the public to identify specific outcomes that promote business opportunities, increase participation opportunities, and strengthen the quality and stewardship of our recreational resources, and provide recommendations to the Governor based on that purpose.

As part of that charge, the VOREC steering committee hosted seven public meetings as well as an online survey. Overwhelmingly, we heard that Vermont communities are primed and ready to embrace outdoor recreation as a cornerstone to their economies. Based on this response, the Governor and the Legislature believed that with some financial incentive we could create Outdoor Recreation Friendly Communities. This report is meant to convey the results to date of the pilot program associated with that funding.

Program Development

In spring of 2018, Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) and Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) staff began collaborating on a grant program structure based on the likely scenario of receiving \$100,000 for a pilot program. The staff involved in developing the program have extensive grant administration experience and felt that the goals of the program should reflect the goals of the VOREC initiative: open, inclusive and transparent. Since the beginning, VOREC has embraced the motto "If you're outside, you're in." Including as many communities in this opportunity while still achieving the outcome of a pilot means striking a fine balance, and the program structure and subsequent grant materials are meant to reflect that balance.

In developing this grant program, it was clear to all that there is a local and national recognition that outdoor recreation can and should be a cornerstone for rural economies. Vermont is one of the first states in the country to create an “office” of outdoor recreation, and is known as a national leader of the [Outdoor Recreation Industry Offices \(OREC\)](#). In Vermont, we have been promoting outdoor recreation as a central player in our economy for a very long time, but now there seems to be an enthusiasm for this effort because it’s a strategy that works for small towns and regions both as a central economic sector and one that complements other industries.

In developing the program, the working group sought to design the process to ensure a wide variety of proposals were received which could demonstrate success in the four main pillars of VOREC:

- Grow the outdoor recreation related business opportunities
- Increase participation in outdoor recreation activities
- Strengthen the quality and extent of outdoor recreation resources
- Increase stewardship of outdoor recreation resources

A set of selection criteria was developed to reflect these four pillars as well as the factors outlined in the enabling legislation. Existing assets and capacity, planning and environmental stewardship, community support, economic and community need, and existing businesses are all part of the application narrative and will be scored by our selection committee.

The final application was designed to be simple enough that any community could apply, whether they had professional staff to write the application or not. The Governor announced the launch of the grant program on October 9th at the Craftsbury Outdoor Center during one of the Capital for a Day events.

Community Response

From the time that the Governor announced the opportunity, staff received overwhelming interest: many phone calls and emails were received daily. Based on conversations with staff, communities determined whether this program was a good fit for their project needs. Though many did ultimately apply, several communities with eligible projects decided not to apply but want to in the future, which speaks to the interest and need for this type of funding to continue.

Applicants and Project Proposals

On December 14th Twenty-nine proposals (of which twenty-eight are eligible) were received from communities in every county of the state, totaling \$1,690,120.00 in funding requests.

See table below for a summary of projects proposals received:

Project Sponsor	Project Type						Grant Request	County(ies) Served
	Wayfinding & Interpretation	Environmental Stewardship	Recreational Programming	Capital Projects	Community Marketing	Community Planning		
Bennington	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$100,000	Bennington
Brattleboro		X	X	X		X	\$68,000	Windham
Brighton	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$100,000	Essex
Burke	X			X			\$85,574	Caledonia
Cambridge			X	X		X	\$43,000	Lamoille
Colchester			X	X			\$70,000	Chittenden
Craftsbury	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$98,400	Orleans
Dorset	X		X	X	X		\$30,000	Bennington
Duxbury	X	X		X		X	\$73,100	Washington
Essex Junction			X	X			\$100,000	Chittenden
Fair Haven			X	X	X		\$90,264	Rutland
Hardwick				X			\$30,000	Caledonia
Mad River Valley Rec District	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$65,850	Washington
Middlebury				X		X	\$18,250	Addison
Montpelier (1)*	X					X	\$11,000	Washington
Montpelier (2)	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$100,000	Washington
Newport	X			X			\$59,173	Orleans
Poultney			X	X	X		\$17,303	Rutland
Pownal				X			\$23,080	Bennington
Randolph	X		X	X	X		\$70,000	Orange
Rockingham	X		X	X	X		\$25,000	Windham
Rutland	X		X	X	X	X	\$94,643	Rutland
St. Albans			X		X	X	\$31,180	Franklin, Grand Isle
St. Johnsbury	X	X	X	X	X	X	\$98,803	Caledonia
Wallingford		X		X			\$19,500	Rutland
Waterbury	X			X		X	\$50,000	Washington
Weathersfield	X		X	X	X		\$67,000	Windsor
Woodstock	X	X		X	X	X	\$30,000	Windsor
28 Proposals							\$1,669,120	

* Two separate proposals were received from the City of Montpelier.

Potential Impact: Measurable Outcomes and Future Funding Opportunities

Interest in this program extended across the State with proposals seeking to build the outdoor recreation economy in every county and requests totaling nearly \$1.7 million. The tremendous interest in the program has been demonstrated in the ways that each community has thought creatively and deeply about how their project could be successful and how to measure that success.

One of the unique aspects of this grant program is asking communities to identify a diverse project team which must include at least the municipality and a non-profit. Some communities have shown real initiative and even some progress just by putting together these teams, and regardless of funding, these relationships will be essential for their success.

Each project team must identify which outcomes they will measure, and how. Ranging from health and education benefits to economic impact, the application process has required communities to think about potential impacts and how those will be measured over time. We expect through participation in this program, communities will be able to demonstrate an economic and social impact well beyond the \$100,000 investment made through the grant program.

Selection Committee

The VOREC steering committee along with FPR and ACCD staff have been working to assemble a selection committee which represents the range of interests that this pilot program is targeting.

The following categories are being represented:

- Recreation Representatives (2)
- Regional Planning Commission Representative
- Municipal Representative
- Economic Development Representative
- Outdoor Recreation Business Representative
- Financial Sector Representative
- Conservation Organization Representative
- Health Sector Representative
- Education Sector Representative
- ACCD Staff Representative
- FPR Staff Representative

Grant Review and Selection Timeline

This month, state staff will perform a first round of scoring using a score sheet to manage the number of proposals for review by the Selection Committee. The Selection Committee will then begin reviewing proposals and meet in February for a funding recommendation meeting. Staff will then prepare an award recommendation for VOREC chair and co-chair (Michael Snyder and Wendy Knight).

In March we will notify applicants, distribute a press release and update our website. Work on grant agreements will begin.

Next Steps

This spring we will begin working with the selected pilot community(ies) to implement their goals, assure metrics are established which reflect program goals and provide project support. We also intend to work closely with the pilot to identify methods by which their project can be used as a model and replicated in other parts of the state interested in strengthening the outdoor recreation economy.

Because of the overwhelming interest in this program FPR and ACCD staff are being presented with an opportunity to serve as a resource to communities regardless of whether they receive a grant through this program. The application process has enabled state staff to assist communities with refinement of their vision for how the outdoor recreation economy can support the health and vitality of their community or region and will be able to help connect communities that do not receive funding with other state and private funding programs aligned with their goals.

We look forward to reporting our progress to the Legislature both this session and next with measurable results of economic growth.