PLAN FOR THE NORTHWEST REGION

2015 - 2023

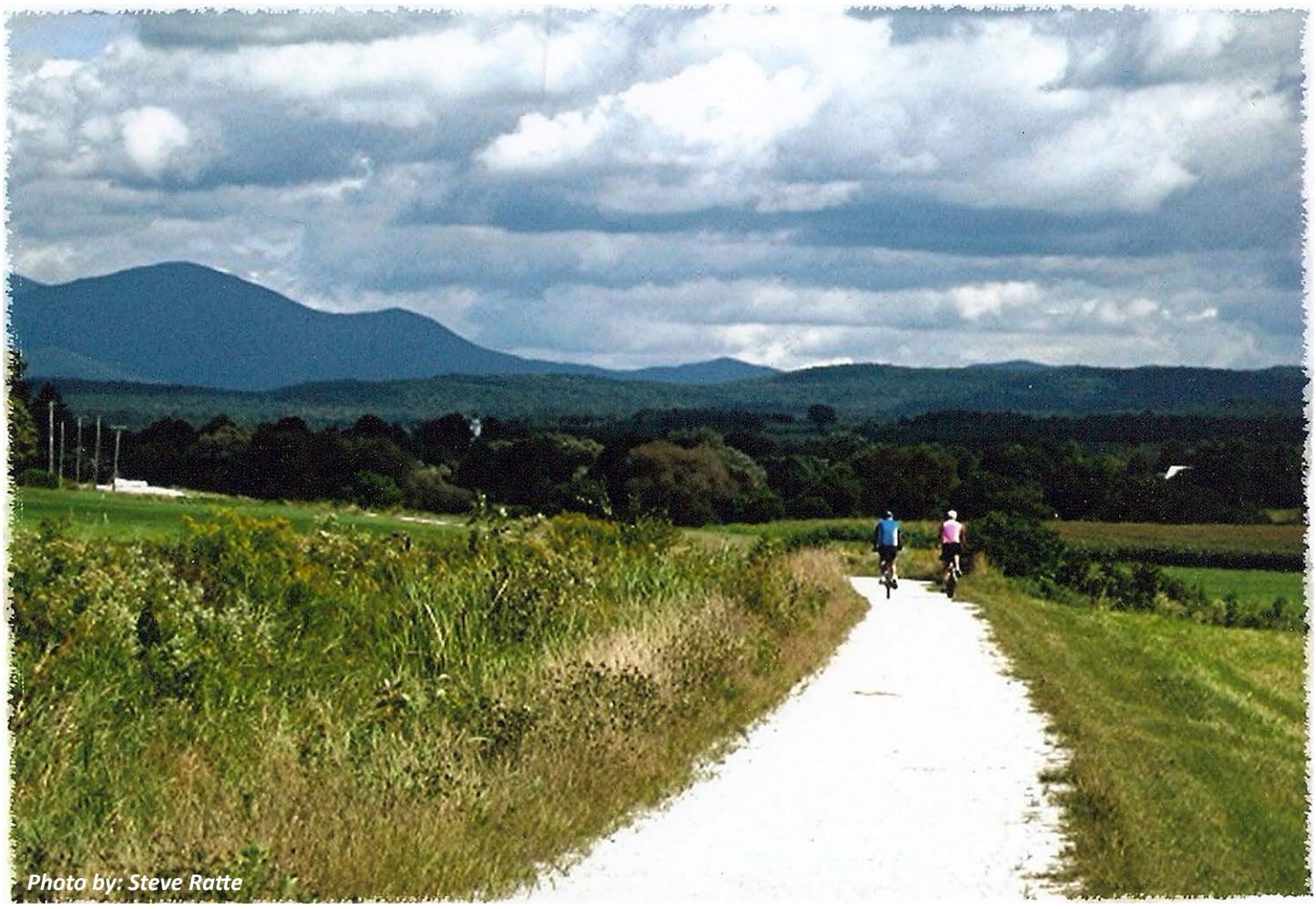

Photo by: Steve Ratte

Serving the Municipalities of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties

Northwest Regional Planning Commission

Adopted by the Board of Regional Commissioners

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Community-supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers' markets are common throughout the region and their success is demonstrated with two examples. The Lake Champlain Islands Farmers' Market has seen a dramatic increase in sales during the past few years. In 2009, the market generated approximately $66,000 in revenue. In 2012, the market grossed more than $190,000. During the same time frame, vendor participation increased from 25 vendors to 40 vendors. In Franklin County, the Fairfield Farmer's Market Online reports that sales increased almost threefold in its first year of business, grossing $9,000 in 2011 and $26,000 in 2012.

Tourism

Tourism is a considerable financial and cultural contributor to the region. In 2011, the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing documented 487,000 visitors to the region. Tourism spending totaled $57.7 million, peaking during the summer months at more than $38 million. Tourism estimates include visitors and a substantial second-home population. In Grand Isle County, the summer population is estimated to be three times the year-round population. Accommodations, food service and retail account for more than 40% of the county's private sector employment. Tourism within the region continues to grow; visitors at the Georgia Information Centers increased by more than 25% from 2013 to 2014, and rooms and meals tax receipts continue to increase each year. Increasing numbers of Canadian visitors account for a portion of the growth in tourism and bike tourism continues to grow in importance.

Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy

The Creative Economy refers to efforts to foster economic growth and development through creativity, cultural heritage and entrepreneurship, which reinforce the region's unique character and sense of place. According to the New England Foundation for the Arts, "Vermont nonprofit arts and cultural enterprises constitute a major industry for the state. In 2009, the spending of their 1,532 arts and cultural organizations amounted to over $148 million, and they provided jobs for over 3,100 people" (New England Foundation for the Arts, *New England's Creative Economy: Nonprofit Sector Impact*, September 2011).

St. Albans City and Grand Isle County were participants in the Vermont Council on Rural Development's (VCRD) Vermont Creative Communities Program. Action items for St. Albans City included *Arts and Community Events in Taylor Park, Organizing Evening Events, Building an Arts Center and Options for High-Speed Internet Access*. The Creative Economy project unified the municipalities of Grand Isle County by identifying two county-wide projects: *Expanding Indoor Community Space and Develop Trails to Tour Local Farms, Arts, and Other Islands Highlights*. Grand Isle Art Works was formed as an artists' collective, and is now a thriving business, with a gallery, café, and represents 40+ artists and crafters. 'Open Farm and Studio Tour: Discover the Heart of the Islands' is in its ninth year. Great Ice in Grand Isle also evolved from this planning effort and just completed its 9th season.

During the public involvement portion of the NRPC's Healthy People, Strong Communities initiative, residents conveyed the need for community centers throughout the region. Members of the public expressed a sense of disconnect with other community members as a result of not having a public gathering site where arts, cultural and community events could be held during all seasons of the year.

GOALS AND POLICIES

1. **Improve the health of citizens and businesses by supporting the region's unique geography and landscape.**
   a. Increase the production and marketing of local foods, beverages and natural products as well as expand access to those products at local and broad-based markets by supporting production and educating and engaging the public.

b. Promote county assets and quality of life for the citizens of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties, tourists and recreationists by collaborating with regional brands and local food and beverage markets and capitalizing on the region's proximity to Canada, Chittenden County and population centers in the northeastern United States.
c. Support efforts to ensure that the working landscape—including agriculture, forestry and value-added production—remains a key sector in the region's economy.

2. **Ensure that communities and businesses can rely on employees who are work ready; have strong work ethics and necessary skills in reading, writing, math and communication; and are drug free.**
   a. All levels of education—both K through 12 and post-secondary—must provide students with the basic skills and solid work ethics for the workplace as well as higher-education programs, and they must deliver skill sets that meet the changing needs of business and the rigors of collegiate programs.
   b. All sectors of business, education, public protection and the community must actively support economic sustainability by educating residents and employees on substance abuse, supporting drug rehabilitation and drug prevention programs, and addressing the crimes often related to drug addiction.

3. **Ensure that businesses, employees and communities have access to funding that is achievable and affordable, business costs that are reasonable and appropriate, and an infrastructure that is available and dependable.**
   a. Ensure that the existing vibrant base of businesses—including manufacturing, agriculture and related businesses, health care, retail and service industries, home-based businesses, telecommuting, and seasonal and tourist-based businesses—have knowledge of and access to existing resources.
   b. Support efforts to bring in additional public and private resources to expand and upgrade infrastructure including water, wastewater, broadband internet, and energy.
   c. Forge strategic partnerships for creating a full range of housing options across the entire pricing spectrum to affordably house the regional workforce.

4. **Facilitate collaboration among Franklin and Grand Isle Counties to address issues that are similar throughout each county and secure the communities' economic future.**
   a. Establish goals for Grand Isle County to improve collaboration among the "islands" while distinguishing each unique community.
   b. Support regional economic development services such as workforce training, public transportation, incubator development and collaborative marketing.
   c. Ensure that new economic development enhances and supports the region's land use goals.
   d. Work cooperatively with other regional partners to maintain/improve a quality of life that is necessary to attract and retain the type of talented workforce required for a high-performance regional economy.

5. **Creative enterprises enhance the local economy and support a superior quality of life in the region. Ensure that opportunities to experience and/or participate in the arts are available to everyone.**
   a. Collaborate with regional partners to expand markets, unify promotion, produce celebratory events, build artists' and artisans' markets, and provide technical support and access to capital for culturally based businesses and creative entrepreneurs.
   b. Facilitate locally designed creative economy projects that build upon the region's cultural heritage and creative assets.
   c. Support collaboration between communities and artists for arts appreciation, arts learning and arts promotion.
   d. Encourage public and private investments in the arts.

Renewable energy generation can be implemented on a home scale, business scale or utility scale. The region encompasses examples of all three. On a home or business scale, systems are either off-grid or connected to the grid through a net metering system. Net metering is an attractive way to invest in renewable energy, as any excess power generated can essentially "spin the meter backward" and reduce the electricity bill. A utility scale system may be either privately or utility owned, and it can contribute sizable kilowatt-hours (kWh) of power to the grid. If the system is privately owned, this can be a profitable business venture because the power is sold to utilities.

Renewable Energy

"'Renewable energy' means energy produced using a technology that relies on a resource that is being consumed at a harvest rate at or below its natural regeneration rate." 30 V.S.A. Section 8001

The numerous ways of generating renewable energy in the region have varying levels of potential, which are summarized in Table 8.

TABLE 8: RENEWABLE ENERGY GENERATION METHODS

Generation Method	Description	Prevalence in Region
Solar	The conversion of sunlight into electricity, either directly using photovoltaics (PV) or indirectly using concentrated solar power	68 rooftop solar PV systems and 20 ground PV solar systems (two are utility scale), 11 solar hot water systems (There are likely more, but records are incomplete.)
Wind	The conversion of wind energy to electrical power through the use of wind turbines	One utility-scale wind energy conversion system at Georgia Mountain, numerous small-scale net-metered wind turbines throughout the region
Geo-thermal	Direct use of geothermal energy for heat or the conversion of geothermal energy to electricity	Two known open-loop geothermal sites, one at the Brownway Residence in Enosburg Falls (There are likely more, but records are incomplete.)
Hydro	Power derived from the energy of falling or running water	Four hydro-electric dams: Fairfax Falls, Enosburg Falls, Sheldon Springs and Highgate Falls
Biomass	Any organic matter that can be burned for energy, including cord wood, wood chips and wood pellets	17% of homes are heated with wood (U.S. Census ACS). The St. Albans Town Educational Center and Grand Isle Elementary School are heated with wood chips.
Bio-Gas/ Methane/ Anaerobic Digestion	Encompasses microorganisms that break down biodegradable material in the absence of oxygen, usually waste from agricultural or industrial uses or a landfill, to produce bio-gas (mostly methane) that can be used as heat or to power generators	Five farm methane digesters

Source: *Prevalence in Region - Renewable Energy Atlas of Vermont*

PLANNING AND REVIEWING ENERGY PROJECTS

Because of rising energy prices, environmental consequences of fossil fuels and new state/federal incentive programs, NRPC anticipates more development of small- and community-scale energy-generation facilities in the region. When planning for and reviewing proposals for energy-generation facilities subject to Section 248 or other regulatory reviews, NRPC shall consider the following strategies and policies:

1. **Aesthetic concerns and scenic character:** Aesthetic and scenic impacts shall be considered, including the character of the proposed site and the degree to which the proposed facility will fit with the existing landscape. Proposed projects shall meet the aesthetic test set forth under Criterion 8 of Act 250.

2. **Natural resource impacts:** Power-generation facilities shall be sited so as not to destroy or have an undue adverse impact on necessary wildlife habitats, ecological systems and water and/or air quality. The review of impacts shall not be limited to the power generators alone, but shall also include other elements of the facility such as access roads, site clearing, on-site power lines, substations, lighting and off-site power lines.
3. **Noise, vibration, glare and other concerns:** Operating noise, vibration, glare and other impacts can be produced by power-generation facilities. Designers shall take reasonable mitigation measures to minimize or eliminate such impacts from having an undue adverse effect on neighboring properties.
4. **Health and safety concerns:** Energy-generation facilities shall take reasonable mitigation measures to minimize or eliminate health and safety concerns resulting from the transport of fuel, waste or other products, and other impacts of generation, such as electric and magnetic fields.
5. **Plans for decommissioning:** Power-generation facilities deemed to be abandoned or unused shall be removed by the owners/operators within a reasonable time from cessation of operations. Restoration or enhancement of the site to its natural state shall be the objective of this effort.

GOALS AND POLICIES

1. **Ensure the region's users have access to reliable, environmentally responsible, affordable and diverse energy supplies.**
   a. Support the diversification of energy sources in the region, including net-metering, off-grid and community-scaled distributed generation projects to enhance self-sufficiency and resiliency.
   b. Ensure that energy generation, distribution and transmission facilities effectively analyze all anticipated socioeconomic, environmental, aesthetic/scenic and public health and safety impacts—both positive and negative—and avoid undue adverse impacts in these areas. Adverse impacts that cannot be avoided shall be minimized and mitigated. (See the Planning and Reviewing Energy Projects section.)
   c. Ensure that energy-generation facilities thoroughly address expected plans for reliability, efficiency, operation and decommissioning.
   d. Upgrade existing and construct new energy transmission/distribution lines or facilities when necessary to improve supply, reliability and efficiency.
   e. Build new distribution lines adjacent to and parallel to existing operational energy transmission corridors except where doing so results in undue negative economic or environmental impacts.

2. **Increase the use of energy conservation practices in site planning and development at the local and regional levels.**
   a. Support land-use patterns that require less energy consumption per the regional land use plan.
   b. Ensure that regional transportation planning accounts for projected population increases while employing methods to reduce transportation carbon emissions.
   c. Ensure that residential, commercial and municipal buildings and facilities are constructed using the most effective energy-efficiency and weatherization methods or standards.
   d. Support energy audits and incentive programs as methods to increase energy efficiency in retrofitting existing buildings or developing new buildings.

3. **Support and enable the development of new renewable energy generation.**
   a. Support and promote renewable energy installations in the residential, commercial, agriculture and industrial sectors.
   b. Support the development of energy systems that utilize locally produced biomass and gaseous by-products for local and regional energy consumption.
   c. Support communities in enabling and establishing standards for appropriately sited and scaled renewable energy systems.