



# Vermont's Land Use Planning Process

Understanding Vermont's land use laws and local government planning processes, and learning the language of land use planning, will help you more effectively engage in promoting healthy community design. Since each community is different, be sure to connect with officials in your town to better understand how your local government is structured.

## Local Roles and Responsibilities

Responsibility for planning is shared by elected officials (selectboards, village trustees and city councils) and appointed boards, including the planning commission.

Many of Vermont's smaller communities rely exclusively on elected and appointed bodies of local volunteers, rather than professional staff, to provide the expertise for setting local land use and other policies.

Volunteers provide the leadership, time and resources to create much of the local infrastructure for healthy communities, and they are often the leaders in creating trails, community gardens and farmers' markets. These volunteers may serve on formal town committees — such as a conservation committee — or organize themselves around community-based efforts, and then seek limited government support. Community members are often more effective than government staff in garnering the support needed for significant community investments and changes in policy.

Vermont also has 11 regional planning commissions (RPCs), charged with helping communities determine how and where development will go, providing technical assistance to local planners, coordinating local and regional mapping projects, and participating in state-level reviews, such as under Act 250, 10 V.S.A. §§6001 et seq. State law requires each regional planning commission to prepare and update a regional plan every five years, and to coordinate local plans with the regional plan.

**Toolkit** ▶ *Who's Who in Local Government*

**Toolkit** ▶ *Recommended Resources: Introduction to Planning in Vermont* (for links to RPCs)

## Vermont's Land Use Law

The Vermont Legislature has established the framework for land use planning through the Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act, also known as the Vermont Planning and Development Act (24 V.S.A. §§4382 Chapter 117). Chapter 117 encourages a coordinated planning effort among state and regional planning agencies and municipalities, and requires citizen participation at all levels of a planning process.

The aim of the state planning goals are to preserve traditional town centers, protect working landscapes and increase economic vitality. They seek to help existing places thrive through investments in historic downtowns, infrastructure, and places that the community values, while building vibrant, enduring neighborhoods and communities that people, especially young people, don't want to leave.

Healthy community design strategies contribute to these planning goals. For example, development must be planned to:

- Maintain historic settlement patterns of compact village and urban centers, separated by rural countryside (*concentrated mixed-use development*).
- Provide safe, convenient, economic, and energy-efficient transportation systems, including public transit options and paths for pedestrians and bicyclists (*bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly*).
- Maintain and enhance recreational opportunities (*access to parks, recreation facilities, outdoor spaces*).
- Encourage and strengthen agriculture (*access to healthy food*).

**Toolkit** ▶ *Land Use Planning Terminology*

## The Municipal Plan

Municipalities are not required by state statute, but rather enabled and encouraged, to develop and adopt a municipal plan. The municipal plan, generally referred to as the town plan, is the principal policy document that guides many municipal government decisions. It establishes the vision and goals of the community, and determines the means of achieving goals. The plan is the foundation for local land use regulation, the capital budget, natural resource conservation strategies, and a range of community and economic development programs.

Health-promoting language in the town plan lays the foundation for future community decisions and investments.

**Toolkit** ▶ *Sample Language for Town Plans*

