

The Purpose of Enhanced Consultation

The Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission's contract with the Department of Economic, Housing, and Community Development (Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development), and Vermont Statutes require the Commission to carry out consultation meetings with all of the towns in the region. The goals are to develop a more consistent and meaningful relationship between the RPC and the Municipality, and to improve the effectiveness of municipal and regional plans, and planning programs by achieving the goals of Title 24, §4302.

Outcome of Consultation

Through this consultation process we hope to better understand the needs of our communities and to have our communities understand how we can work together to advance better planning. Consultations will involve the discussion of important local and regional issues, local planning and training needs, new statutory requirements, planning programs and opportunities available through the TRORC, and importantly, consideration of how effectively the municipal plan addresses Vermont's statutory planning goals.

This consideration will include a qualitative review of the municipal plan, with suggestions as to how the plan might be improved to more effectively satisfy the statutory goals referenced above. Specific findings are reported on each of the following questions:

1. Which parts of the plan are particularly effective in implementing the statewide goals?
2. In which areas do we believe the plan falls short in advancing those statewide goals?
3. What specific opportunities exist to improve the town plan so that it more effectively addresses the statewide goals?

This consultation and plan review is separate and distinct from the formal municipal plan approval process carried out pursuant to 24 V.S.A. §4350, but it does contribute to the municipal confirmation action specified under that section of the Planning and Development Act.

Enhanced Consultation Agenda Items for Monday, March 18th, 2013

- Important local & Regional issues
- Local planning and training needs – Norwich
- New statutory requirements
- Planning programs and opportunities
- TRORC services
- Qualitative review of Municipal Plan

Strafford Town Plan Review

The Strafford Town Plan was adopted on August 10, 2011. The Plan was approved by the Regional Planning Commission.

Required Elements

1. **Statement of Objectives, Policies, and Programs:** The Plan contains goals, policies and recommendations. Recommendations often specifically identify what party is responsible for implementation, which is excellent.
2. **Land Use Plan:** The Land Use Plan does contain information relating to character and location of development, but types of development are provided in very general terms. Appropriate densities are also discussed in generalities.
3. **Transportation Plan:** The present-day road system is discussed. Multi-modal transportation, access management and public transit are also addressed.
4. **Utility and Facility Plan:** The Utilities and Facilities plan is only a general inventory. It does not contain sufficient information regarding future needs of facilities, potential costs of maintenance or upgrades and potential financing methods as is required by statute.
5. **Natural Areas, Scenic and Historic Features:** The Plan addresses natural and scenic features successfully. Historic features are briefly mentioned but not specifically identified.
6. **Educational Facilities Plan:** Education is briefly addressed.
7. **Implementation Plan:** The Plan contains a general inventory of potential implementation methods with some specific guidance on who might be responsible for implementation.
8. **Relationship to adjacent towns and the region:** The Plan assesses its relationship with other plans in a very general fashion.
9. **Energy Plan:** The Plan contains a very brief section on energy resources which uses statewide data. It does not discuss the energy needs of the community, scarcities or costs of energy as is specified in statute.
10. **Housing Element:** The Plan discusses the need for affordable housing and indicates a rough plan for acquiring a location for much needed senior housing.
11. **Economic Development Plan (new):** The Strafford Town Plan was drafted prior to the requirement that all plans contain an economic development plan.

Statewide Planning Goals

1. **Land Use:** Because of the very general way in which land uses are discussed in terms of density (example: “moderate density” or “higher density”) and type (example: “primarily residential/agricultural/silvicultural in use”), it is challenging to determine the level of consistency which the Strafford Town Plan has with statewide planning goals.

While the Village Area description indicates that “services such as the Post Office and the school as well commercial activity are essential to the vibrancy of the Village Centers and any efforts to

disperse such services should be discouraged,” it is not sufficiently clear that these types of uses are only appropriate in the Village Areas.

Retail remains the biggest concern because of its potential to create sprawl. If, for example, retail development is actually allowed in the Rural Residential Area, the Plan would not be consistent with state planning goals as such a pattern of land use has the potential to encourage sprawl which is specifically discouraged in statute. Greater specificity is needed to clarify Strafford’s intent.

2. **Economic Development:** The Plan appears to intend that commercial development be directed into the Village Center Area, which is consistent with statute, but it is silent on the appropriateness of commercial development in other locations. Statute requires that the location, type and scale of economic development be addressed within the Plan.
3. **Transportation:** The Plan discusses transportation reasonably well.
4. **Natural, Scenic, and Historic Resources:** The Plan does a solid job addressing natural areas. Scenic areas are specifically identified, which is good. Historic resources could be more clearly identified.
5. **Air, Water, Wildlife, and Land Resources:** The Plan effectively indicates how it will preserve and protect these resources.
6. **Energy:** The Plan has very limited policies on energy efficiency and the development of renewable resources.
7. **Recreation:** The Strafford Town Plan is very supportive of recreation and offers an extensive discussion of available recreational opportunities.
8. **Agriculture and Forestry:** Agriculture and Forestry discussed in limited fashion. Accepted agricultural and silvicultural practices are not mentioned.
9. **Efficient use of natural resources/extraction and restoration of earth resources:** Mineral resources are minimally addressed.
10. **Safe and affordable housing:** While the Housing element does discuss affordable housing, accessory dwelling units are not.
11. **Community Facilities and Services:** The Plan seeks to maintain a pattern of growth that does not exceed the community’s ability to provide services.
12. **Child Care:** Child care is minimally addressed.

Regional Plan

The lack of specificity with regard to the types of commercial uses allowed outside of the Village Center Areas make it challenging to determine consistency with the Regional Plan. If retail development is allowed outside of the Village Center Areas, it would be in conflict with the clearly written standard in the Regional Plan which states that *“principal retail establishments must be located in Town Centers, Designated Downtowns, or Designated Growth Centers to minimize the blighting effects of sprawl and strip development along major highways and maintain rural character.”*

Summary

Strengths

- Many recommendations identify what party is responsible for implementation, which is excellent.
- The Plan does a solid job addressing natural areas. Scenic areas are specifically identified, which is good.
- The Strafford Town Plan is very supportive of recreation and offers an extensive discussion of available recreational opportunities.

Weaknesses

- The Plan speaks of densities and types of development (particularly commercial) in such general terms that consistency with state planning goals is difficult to determine.
- The Utilities and Facilities plan is only a general inventory. It does not contain sufficient information regarding future needs of facilities, potential costs of maintenance or upgrades and potential financing methods as is required by statute.
- The Plan does not discuss the energy needs of the community, scarcities or costs of energy as is specified in statute.
- Appropriate agricultural and silvicultural practices are not considered.

Opportunities

- Work with the Regional Planning Commission to meet the requirements of state statute by clarifying the types of commercial development allowed in all areas of Strafford.
- Collect information regarding community facilities from the Selectboard to provide further detail to Utilities/Facilities chapter.
- Utilize TRORC energy chapter template to draft an energy chapter that meets state planning requirements.