

**TWO RIVERS-OTTAUQUECHEE
REGIONAL COMMISSION
STRATEGIC PLAN**

**Adopted April 27, 2022
based on the original from September 2013**

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Bill Bittinger (Lebanon-Hanover NH area developer)
 Bill Emmons (TRORC Chairperson; Town of Pomfret)
 Kevin Geiger (TRORC Senior Planner)
 Jeff Goodrich (TRORC Commissioner; Town of Norwich)
 Peter Gregory (TRORC Executive Director)
 Paul Haskell (TRORC Commissioner; Town of Sharon)
 Jeanie McIntyre (Upper Valley Land Trust)
 Jim Masland (Vermont House)
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Knowledgeable stakeholders interviewed as part of the 2013 process provided important outside viewpoints. These interviewees included the following:

Anne Duncan Cooley (Executive Director of the Upper Valley Housing Coalition and volunteer chair of the Long-Term Recovery Committee for the Upper Valley (Vermont only) set up following the disaster from Tropical Storm Irene)
 Paul Costello (Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development)
 Jonathan Edwards (retired director of planning for the Town of Hanover, NH, and member of the Board of Directors of the Upper Valley-Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission)
 Noelle MacKay (Commissioner of Vermont’s Department of Housing and Community Development, with experience in the nonprofit world in the areas of watershed management and smart growth)

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This update was developed by TRORC's Executive Director and Director of Planning in consultation with a second Strategic Plan Committee.

Executive Summary

The original 2013 document was a ten-year Strategic Plan for the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), which serves a thirty-town area in east-central Vermont. The 2022 update reflects changes in the planning field, the region's communities, and larger conditions. TRORC's mission remains to advocate for the needs of member towns, and to articulate a vision for building a thriving regional economy while enhancing the region's quality of life. TRORC's staff continues to provide technical services to local, state, and federal levels of government and to the region's nonprofits and businesses.

The goals of this Strategic Plan largely remain unchanged:

1. Identify areas of strategic focus most likely to foster a thriving, resilient regional economy and high quality of life; and
2. Structure and nurture a regional planning capacity for accomplishing a shared regional vision in these strategic focus areas.

This Strategic Plan differs from TRORC's Regional Plan, as well as other past and current plans that cover the TRORC and adjacent Mount Ascutney Regional Commission (MARC) region, including the East Central Vermont Sustainable Communities Regional Plan, the East Central Vermont Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (ECVEDD CEDS). Those plans by their nature cover a wider variety of topics, and do so in a way that is often related to what other agencies or organizations than TRORC can or should do. Those plans are largely meant to drive or encourage certain kinds of land use and economic development, and are less introspective as to the role of TRORC on a small set of priority strategic areas. Those plans also often have granular policies or recommendations, while this Strategic Plan stays at a less tactical level.

This plan is directed at areas of focus, governance, and some operations, and also addresses the need to align systems within and outside the organization in order to accomplish priorities, especially ways to serve TRORC's customers - the thirty towns.

Five chapters follow. Throughout, sidebars offer additional points of view and information. This makes it simple for more knowledgeable readers to scan the text and reach the heart of the plan, Chapter 5.

The first chapter offers an object lesson for the importance of strategic, long-term action, the region's relatively successful response to the grave challenge presented by Tropical Storm Irene. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated during the response to this catastrophe were developed from long practice of good information, communications, collaboration, and regional planning and leadership.

Chapter 2 provides a further introduction, explaining strategic planning and the method followed to create this plan. Chapter 3 offers an assessment of the conditions under which this Strategic Plan will be carried out, including trends and challenges. Chapter 4 reviews vision, mission, values, and goals and objectives, all needed as general guidance as the Commission undertakes this plan.

The strategies and actions in Chapter 5 are as follows:

Strategy 1: The Commission will redouble TRORC's investment in working with towns.

From one Regional Plan to the next (2012, 2015 and 2020), TRORC began greater investment in its role as “coach” to encourage improved town planning. It is time to consolidate the gains made from this investment and be strategic about the next phase of such programming.

Action 1A: Building on the enhanced consultation process already in place, invest more time and staff to use Regional Plan updates and town plan review and confirmation processes as a platform for deepening town-TRORC relationships and building a planning culture that carries forward a shared regional vision. (Staff lead; short/mid-term; requires additional or relocated funds and staffing.)

Strategy 2: The Commission will maximize results of technical planning through strategic focus on economic development.

Regional planning is complicated, yet it is critical to the region's long-term future. The many topics TRORC must address have important dimensions that can be addressed through a strategic focus on economic development, done in concert with public and private partners, that focuses on creating healthy and attractive communities that will attract and keep talent. At every turn as decisions are made, TRORC and the towns can ask, “How can this decision support our vision of a thriving regional economy and high quality of life?”

Action 2A: Use place-based economic development planning as a central focus of the Commission's work. (Staff lead; short/mid-term.)

Action 2B: Review progress against key sustainability indicators.

Strategy 3: The Commission will serve the region as “player.”

A feature of strategic planning is looking at ways to align systems and operations to support strategic focus. This strategy strongly relates to the first strategy, focusing on town needs. It is critical for the towns and the state to stretch every dollar of governmental and other revenues. TRORC can and should provide leadership and financing to gain regional efficiencies and wield its resources and talents in support of its strategic focus on economic development.

Action 3A: Undertake cooperative services that enable towns to serve their residents more effectively and efficiently through partnerships with existing agencies or institutions and formal creation of new union-district or subsidiary bodies. (Executive director lead/Commission - State outreach; short/mid-term.)

Strategy 4: The Commission will position and brand TRORC as a highly valued contributor to a powerful vision for a thriving regional economy and high quality of life.

The preceding three strategies need well-argued public reasoning undertaken with an eye toward building public trust. Without excellent positioning, messaging, and branding, it will be more difficult for TRORC to achieve strategies and actions outlined in this Strategic Plan and reach the next level of achievement as an organization and as a region.

Action 4A: Implement a communications and outreach plan, including dedicating staff, to provide a powerful message through standard and new media that consistently explains planning concepts and showcases progress in achieving plans. (Executive director lead/Commission - State outreach; short/mid-term; requires additional funding to support temporary effort and may identify the need for additional or reallocated funds and staffing.)

Action 4B: Create formal opportunities at least twice a year to bring regional stakeholders together in ways that foster increased regional understanding and collaboration. (Staff lead; short term; requires additional funding and staff time appropriate to each activity identified.)

Strategy 5: The Commission will maximize its governance through focus on policy and leadership.

The all-volunteer Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commissioners individually and as a group contribute valuable time and participation that must be maximized to the greatest extent possible. To obtain the region that TRORC envisions, the Commissioners must manage their evolution to become the Commission that the region needs. In executing its role as policy leader, the Commission should rely more on collective wisdom rather than knowledge and be focused on strategic leadership, less on administrative detail, in the words of one strategic planning steering committee member.

Action 5A: Match Commission agendas to the Strategic Plan and the primary guidance in plans and policies. (Commission lead; short term.)

Action 5B: Manage the Commission's growth as an organization. (Commission lead; short term.)

Action 5C: Actively work for greater board membership from towns and fill vacant at-large slots with representatives that reflect the diversity of skills and experience needed to support this Strategic Plan. (Commission lead; short term.)

Action 5D: Recruit At-Large Commissioners representing interests, disciplines, and competencies necessary to round out town-appointed membership and align TRORC's leadership to its strategic goals. (Commission lead; short term.)

Strategy 6: The Commission will undertake vigorous resource development to address long-term organizational sustainability and sustained strategic actions.

As governmental resources continue to tighten at all levels, TRORC must seek to maintain and grow its funding, especially to be able to maximize its roles as coach and player and fund strong communications and outreach. An organization such as TRORC with strong, visible programs, a good reputation, and clear results is attractive to funders. While TRORC has sought government grants – the HUD grant for the current Sustainable Communities Regional Plan was one success – it has yet to leverage its track record into routine resource development.

Action 6A: Undertake a resource development plan. (Executive director lead / Commission - State outreach; short / mid-term; requires additional funding to support temporary effort and may identify the need for additional or reallocated funds and staffing.)

1. First, A Story

From August 28-29, 2011, Tropical Storm Irene pummeled Vermont. The rain started in earnest on a Sunday, and it didn't stop. Hurricane Irene was the first major Atlantic hurricane of the 2011 season. It originally was a tropical storm, but gained in strength and became a hurricane when it crossed St. Croix on August 21. Irene made landfall on the Outer Banks of North Carolina on August 27. Though the storm had lost the intensity that had raised it to hurricane status by the time it hit Vermont on August 28, it was still charged with tropical moisture.

Many parts of the state received more than 7" of rainfall, some as much as 11". Flood levels rivaled those of the 1927 floods, long the benchmark by which all other storms in the state have been measured. Intense flooding occurred in at least 10 of Vermont's 17 major river basins.

In Vermont's White River Valley, as with other of the state's steep-sided river valleys in the storm's path, most residents were as ready as they knew how to be, but it is hard to plan for an event you haven't seen in your lifetime. Approximately 73,000 customers in the region experienced power outages, and 1,500 houses, 500 miles of road, and 200 bridges were damaged. More than 20,000 acres of farmland were flooded.

There is nothing like a natural disaster to bring out the best in Americans. We know how to muster considerable resources when lives are threatened. But Irene was still a disaster, and Vermont was hit hard. Lives were lost, rivers were scoured, bridges ripped from their moorings. Caskets floated out of cemeteries. Residents went for days without road access, electricity, water, and even food. Many lost their homes.

Plans for emergency management kicked into gear, as first responders and community leaders did their jobs and more volunteers joined in. Resources from outside the region began to arrive immediately. Electric and road crews, the Red Cross, and the National Guard with bulldozers and helicopters all went to work, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) soon followed. News crews hovered and the nation watched as the ferocity of the storm and the magnitude of its damage became clear. It was a disaster of the first order and a sobering call on the resources of a deeply rural region.

In the middle of it all, the Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), a governmental body serving 30 towns in the watershed and just beyond, emerged as a critical force for coordinating recovery efforts. State agencies relied on TRORC's ability to channel information to town leaders and other organizations and agencies trying to deal with all of the issues that arose as a result of Irene. TRORC also became the go-to source for help, and Commissioners and staff worked together to provide a network that helped keep information, people, and projects moving. In Vermont, where counties have atrophied to the point that they no longer function, TRORC fulfilled a critical governmental coordination role at the sub-state regional level. ¹

TRORC's ability to work as part of the region's response mechanisms was not accidental. TRORC's comprehensive plan for the region had identified flooding as a key hazard to address through emergency planning. Years earlier, the staff had begun specific strategies to help the region become more prepared for what, in hindsight, proved to be the proverbial disaster waiting to happen. Staff developed areas of individual expertise and critical relationships, and guided constituent towns in local planning. This investment of time and energy has

led to significant benefits in terms of lives saved, costs of response reduced, and more creative ideas for recovery and preparedness in the future.

What few realized at the time was that the TRORC and its staff would benefit greatly from the experience. As Irene loomed, TRORC had endured successive shockwaves from a challenge by the Vermont legislature, which had in essence asked the state's regional commissions to prove their value, and the response by the administration, *Challenges for Change*. Regional commissions were seen not as key contributors to the vitality and quality of life of a region, but as merely keeping pro forma tabs on Vermont's regional planning process. Though long ingrained in Vermont's way of governing land use changes, the state's regulatory law remains a source of resentment for some political leaders, developers, property owners, and business leaders. Many seemed to question the entire system and wondered if perhaps there was a better way to deal with regulations in the state.

TRORC's efforts in the recovery from Tropical Storm Irene have led many to see the organization in a new light. Commissioners and staff have received accolades and support and expressions of gratitude from numerous sources.

Recovery is the phase from which, at least technically speaking, this region is now emerging, two years later. While lessons learned have yet to be fully collated and analyzed, what is evident is that no one who lived through Irene and its aftermath now takes planning for granted. New planning projects have emerged as part of TRORC's new sense of its value and needs.

Vermont – Tropical Storm Irene

FEMA-4022-DR

Declared September 1, 2011

On August 30, 2011, Governor Peter Shumlin requested a major disaster declaration due to Tropical Storm Irene during the period of August 27 to September 2, 2011. The Governor requested a declaration for Individual Assistance for four counties, Public Assistance, including direct federal assistance for 13 counties, and Hazard Mitigation statewide. During the period of August 30-31, 2011, joint federal, state, and local government Preliminary Damage Assessments (PDAs) were conducted in the requested counties and are summarized below. PDAs estimate damages immediately after an event and are considered, along with several other factors, in determining whether a disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments, and that Federal assistance is necessary.

On September 1, 2011, President Obama declared that a major disaster exists in the State of Vermont. This declaration made Individual Assistance requested by the Governor available to affected individuals and households in Chittenden, Rutland, Washington, and Windsor Counties. This declaration also made Public Assistance, including direct federal assistance requested by the Governor available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency work and the repair or replacement of facilities damaged by Tropical Storm Irene in Addison,

Bennington, Caledonia, Chittenden, Essex, Franklin, Lamoille, Orange, Orleans, Rutland, Washington, Windham, and Windsor Counties. Finally, this declaration made Hazard Mitigation Grant Program assistance requested by the Governor available for hazard mitigation measures statewide.

-- <http://www.fema.gov/pdf/news/pda/4022.pdf>

The 2011 Statewide Assessment of Vermont's RPCs Was Timely

“Recognizing the state’s economic, social and sustainability challenges and opportunities, the NADO (National Association of Development Organizations) research team observed that the leadership and membership of VAPDA (Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies) has embraced the need for more aggressive and innovative statewide reforms across the broad spectrum of regional planning and development issues.

“The VAPDA statewide assessment initiative is timely and much needed due to several factors. The transition of the state’s executive leadership presents a fresh opportunity for new approaches and dialogue with respect to regional planning and development. It also follows on the heels of lessons learned and outcomes from the previous administration’s Challenges for Change initiative.

“More importantly, the severe financial constraints at the federal, state and local government levels are requiring substantial intergovernmental collaboration, a renewed emphasis on regional approaches and shared services across local jurisdictional boundaries, and a major focus on performance measurement, public transparency, and fiscal and programmatic accountability.”

-- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, p. 2

¹ As noted by the National Association of State Development Organizations in Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, “It was mentioned throughout the interviews that RPCs [Regional Planning Commissions] in Vermont often fill the void of county government in facilitating dialogue between state and local officials, providing regional and local planning services, and tackling a broad array of regional and community development issues. However, they lack the legislative, regulatory and taxing authority of a traditional county government.”(p. 10) “In a state that lacks a strong county government system, the RPCs provide a crucial link between local communities and state leaders. State officials value RPCs for their ability to convene local stakeholders and bring their issues and concerns to the state level. State agencies look to the RPCs as a channel for providing input and sharing information between state and local governments. Likewise, municipalities appreciate that RPCs facilitate intergovernmental connections and inter-municipal coordination.” (p. 22)

2. Introduction

This Strategic Plan is in part a response by TRORC to its experience from Tropical Storm Irene and to the opportunities that have arisen in the years since the state legislature's challenge as described in the preceding chapter. Key among the opportunities was the *Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies' 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment*, which was prepared by the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO). NADO is a national nonprofit association for regional planning agencies like TRORC (see sidebar). Another opportunity was the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development's new contracting procedures for extending support to regional commissions based on performance. The process that led to the development of this Strategic Plan began with two goals:

1. Identify strategic focus most likely to foster a thriving, resilient regional economy and high quality of life; and
2. Structure and nurture a regional planning culture capable of accomplishing a shared regional vision and strategic focus.

This strategic plan differs significantly from the regional plan established and periodically renewed by the Commission under Vermont's planning enabling statutes and from the HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Plan, that was undertaken in collaboration with the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission. Those plans describe the results desired from planning in the region. This plan, while suggesting a basic focus among results and actions described in those plans, describes how the Commission and staff will approach that work.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING?

Our view of strategic planning for nonprofit and public institutions is a simple one. Like all planning, it boils down to three basic processes, which are as follows:

1. Assess: gather information and assess trends, needs, strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities;
2. Analyze: establish vision and mission; set goals and objectives; analyze options; and
3. Act: choose options, set priorities, and plan for action; and plan for evaluation (based on measurements drawn from goals and objectives).

The degree to which such planning can be said to be strategic depends upon level of detail (less is more), time frame (usually shorter rather than longer), and how much it is directed toward focus, governance, and operations more than on technical issues. Aligning systems within and without the organization in order to accomplish priorities is also a part of strategic planning.

This TRORC Strategic Plan emerged from a process designed to identify effective and efficient actions to be taken by the Commission and staff in order to provide the necessary leadership required to implement primary, technical plans. While many strategic plans aim for a three- to five-year timeframe, this Strategic Plan is expected

to provide more general guidance to shape direction for ten years or more. Focus, or priorities, and the *how* of exerting leadership, have been dominant concerns throughout. What has emerged as our focus is economic development or, framed slightly more broadly in a term applicable to a regional agency, economic resilience. The systems part of this program has focused on TRORC's customers, the 30 Vermont towns that compose the TRORC.

METHOD

The initial TRORC strategic planning process focused on eliciting input from key stakeholders who have a thorough understanding of the region. This information was combined with reviews and interviews conducted by the planning team as knowledgeable outsiders. The team met with a project steering committee twice: the first meeting was a half-day introductory session on February 12, 2013, and the second was a day-long workshop on April 29, 2013. The team also reviewed dozens of documents and interviewed four key observers by phone.

For the April 29 workshop with the steering committee, we assembled a range of observations (findings) organized around the following statements:

TRORC is performing two roles: umpire and coach.

TRORC could further serve the region as *player*.

The HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Plan, a three-year project now in its second year, is a major strategic opportunity.

Sustainable economic development and economic resilience should be the basis for many, if not all strategies undertaken by TRORC.

Regional planning is complicated, a severe limitation in a world of short attention spans and small screens, yet critical to the region's long-term future.

Innovative and more extensive communication efforts would enable TRORC to reach the next level in building a regional culture supporting planning.

Those findings were combined with comments from the steering committee and presented to the Commission on May 22, 2013. They also provided the initial basis for this Strategic Plan. This latest update to the Strategic Plan built on the previous plan with small modifications to reflect actions that had happened and to make updates based upon new data and trends.

RPCs Are Invaluable

“Vermont’s RPCs [Regional Planning Commissions] are viewed as highly professional, dedicated organizations. In general, state officials value their connections with local communities and their ability to remain “apolitical” in a highly charged political environment. There is a general consensus that RPCs are essential since they bring continuity to the local level, have broad knowledge and historical context of their regions and help continue programs and projects beyond election cycles. In addition, RPCs are invaluable since they often help state and local officials think about the long-term impact of their decisions and policies.”

-- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, by the National Association of Development Organizations, p. 11

STEERING COMMITTEE AGENDA

The agenda for the Steering Committee workshop on April 29, 2013 followed this list of topics:

Leadership

Management

Positioning [and communications]

Partnerships: Towns

Partnerships: HUD Sustainability Project

Strategic Topics [listed alphabetically]

- *Aging: An Elder Friendly Region*
- *Agriculture and Forestry; Natural Resources*
- *Economic Development*
- *Education*
- *Energy*
- *Environment*
- *Emergency Management*
- *Health*
- *Housing Resources*
- *Infrastructure: Utilities, Facilities, and Technology*
- *Land Use*
- 1. *Community Design (esp. walkability, reinforcement of village centers)*
- 2. *Land Conservation*
- 3. *Irreplaceable Resources: Historic, Cultural, Archeological, and Scenic Resources; Habitat*
- 4. *Recreation*
- *Social Services*
- *Transportation*
- *Watershed Planning*

Appendix A provides a record of the steering committee's discussion. Potential priorities among the strategic topics above, as identified by the committee, include the following (in no particular order):

- *Housing*

- *Energy management/efficiency (especially in the built environment; the committee regards this focus as the best approach for regional and local governments to address concerns about climate change)*
- *Economic development*
- *Transportation (including transit, infrastructure)*
- *Emergency management*
- *Land use planning and sustainability (including infrastructure)*
- *Education*
- *Aging of the population*

3. Assessment

BASIS FOR PLANNING

An early review of the foundation for the strategic plan yielded these findings:

There is an existing, long-standing regional effort among municipalities and the regional commission to address shared needs;

There is critical experience in leadership in emergency management and regional communications and collaboration through Tropical Storm Irene;

The region possesses high-quality natural and economic assets and asset-based community development is consequential already;

A statewide assessment of needs and opportunities has been undertaken for Vermont's RPCs;

A two-region HUD Sustainability Plan (see sidebar), and offered an opportunity to develop a regional vision, including widened public participation, with a renewed take on some ideas that help to redefine the region's perspective on planning and action (e.g., health, economic resilience, food, housing, transit, energy, etc.); and

Upper Valley residents of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds feel strongly that land should be conserved. A poll conducted for the two-state Upper Valley Land Trust by the University of New Hampshire's Survey Center found that 95 percent of Upper Valley residents believe open space is important to their quality of life. A description of the survey at <http://www.uvlt.org/2013/04/who-cares-about-open-space-survey-says-everyone/> adds, "Interestingly, people who rent rather than own their home, and those with lower annual incomes are more likely to feel that land conservation is vital and urgent. These survey findings fly in the face of the notion that land conservation benefits only those people who own land."

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

A number of trends in the region will affect both regular and strategic planning. These include the following:

Changing demographics, age of population. The graying of the Baby Boom generation and resulting issues that include housing, health care, transportation, and social assistance are major issues nationwide.

Vermont is among the grayest states in the nation today, and this trend will accelerate since Baby Boomers have only been eligible for retirement at age 65 since 2011. Although this shift is not necessarily a liability in all ways, there is nevertheless a looming mismatch between the aging of the population and ways the region's communities are set up to serve the residents.

Changing demographics, housing market and property values. Demographic shifts pose a threat to the housing market and property values, and therefore declines in the local property tax revenues that determine towns' abilities to sustain their public budgets.

Changing demographics, size of the U.S. population. Per a U.S. Census report that came out in March of 2013, a thousand of the nation's three thousand counties have declined in population since the 2000 decennial census. Yet, the nation as a whole may grow by 100 million by 2050 – about as much as 50-year-olds have seen in their lifetime. While much of this long-term growth is likely to be concentrated in urban areas, TRORC's region could experience a share of that growth, both its economic benefits and its negative impacts.

More and more frequent natural disasters. These disasters are difficult to predict, but flooding and disruptive winter precipitation are potential concerns. We shouldn't assume that Tropical Storm Irene was a one-time anomaly, as Superstorm Sandy proved in late 2011 in New Jersey and Long Island, New York.

Increasing disaster response and the need for greater infrastructure resilience. The likelihood of more disasters will result in the need for more responses, and these responses would result in a growing share of local governmental resources for both response and preparedness (e.g., hardening facilities against flooding; strategic abandonment of bridges and roads).

Declining governmental revenues (and rising costs of simple stasis). This impacts the ability to support shared infrastructure as well as local and regional projects.

Shorthanded town governance. With leadership turnover, or as civic involvement shrinks (as the population ages or shrinks or copes with economic hardship by working harder or simply gets discouraged), towns experience a lack of critical continuity among leaders.

Relationship between state and local government. "The state's tradition of strong citizen control of and participation in local government often results in a more complicated relationship between state and local government officials (especially without strong county government, the large number of small municipalities and/or the lack of full-time chief local elected officials and professional staff)" (*Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment*, p. 7).

Federal and state funding could be reduced as a source of revenue for TRORC and the towns alike.

Currently about 65 percent of the TRORC budget is directly or indirectly from the federal government, so the loss of this funding may have a significant impact on the types of programs TRORC could offer.

Economically disruptive technologies. Technologies such as mobile internet present advantages as well as disadvantages that communities will need to consider (see *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* by Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013)).

Changing climate. Potential changes in climate and weather patterns are not only a metaphor for an uncertain future, they may also result in an increase in natural disaster events such as flooding, impact the maple syrup industry and the region's winter sports industry, and aggravate invasive and non-native species that already afflict the region. Climate change continues to make areas outside of Vermont less appealing. Vermont ranks very high as a place to be in future climate scenarios.

Persistent rural poverty. Even though this is one region where employment and wages are high as a whole, areas within the region that are further from the region's population centers have less economic opportunity.

Loss of local ownership of land. Farmland throughout the Upper Connecticut River Valley is being purchased as an economic investment by outsiders who typically make decisions based on economics, not on what is best for local communities.

Landscape change. We may have come to accept the idea of death by a thousand telephone poles, but the modern version of such technological change in the landscape – cell towers, windmills, utility corridors – is also likely to have visual impacts on the Vermont landscape.

Energy decarbonization. Shifting thermal and transportation systems off of fossil fuels is paramount in having a somewhat livable climate, but how to make these changes in an equitable manner at the scale and speed needed is a huge challenge.

PLANNING FOR UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS

The phrase *unknown unknowns* is used by statisticians and economists to describe a feature of uncertainty in prediction. For example, rogue waves are a freak of nature and difficult to predict because we do not understand what they are, or where they come from. Part of the challenge of exploring futurist concepts for this Strategic Plan is to figure out what TRORC knows, what they don't know, and what they "don't know that they don't know." With this as a starting point, "What are we missing, here?" is a key question.

It is obvious that TRORC has done an excellent job of scanning its territory to identify opportunities that are consistent with how the organization has done business in the past. In addition, thanks in part to the HUD Sustainability Communities Plan and updated Regional Plan, TRORC is addressing a wider range of topics than required under the state's planning statutes (Title 24, Chapter 117). Health care is an example of a topic that both address that Title 24, Chapter 117 does not. Even so, it is difficult to predict or prepare directly for possible economic and cultural shocks stemming from outside the region.

Some of the potential unforeseen, catastrophic changes that could impact how we make planning decisions in Vermont, the United States, and other parts of the world, include the following:

Unforeseen energy price changes. This could be a result of greater disruption in the Middle East or Russia, an event such as Hurricane Katrina, which had a significant impact on gasoline prices in the U.S, or in changing carbon markets.

Another pandemic. Interestingly, a possible pandemic was listed in the 2013 Strategic Plan as a risk. The SARS Covid -19 Pandemic has played out to be not just a health disaster, but an economic one as well. Pandemics remain a serious future disaster faced by the nation.

An act of terrorism/war. Such an event could have massive consequences in terms of both economic and social stability. In this country, the economic upheaval in the aftermath of 9/11 is an example of what can happen as a result of terrorism. War would obviously be a far greater event.

Sea level rise and climate shifts. These changes are causing an increase in natural disasters and will result in an internal migration in the U.S. as people move away from low-lying areas along the coasts, as well as

areas of extreme heat and drought. These changes are thought of as slow, but individual events or even new studies can spike changes in how humans react that can happen relatively quickly.

Disruptive and creative technologies. Thanks to shifts in the way we communicate and manage information and many other technologies, anyone who has lived through just the past thirty years has experienced vast changes in the way Americans organize their lives, communities, work, and the economy. Most recently the advent of more remote working has changed commuting patterns and where people live. Ahead, the final rollout of cell coverage and broadband, biotechnology and pharmacology, materials like graphene, technologies like 3-D printing, energy management, and the continuing evolution of information management promise many changes to American society.

As rural and remote as East Central Vermont may sometimes seem, the State of Vermont (and New England as a whole) is not immune from disruptions.

Level of resilience and ability to adapt are critical. If we don't know what changes are likely to occur, and when, then it is our ability to adjust to any change that is important. Resilience and adaptability are developed from good information, communications, collaboration, and regional leadership. Communities and regions that have worked to build good government (including capable nongovernmental organizations), efficient and well-maintained infrastructure, and other basics of economic and community development are more likely to withstand potential catastrophic changes, allowing individuals, businesses, and institutions to recover more quickly.

What Is the HUD Sustainability Plan?

The East Central Vermont Community Sustainability Plan is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and covers the area served by two Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs), Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee and Southern Windsor County. It was a three-year project, and it presents a major strategic opportunity for TRORC.

This project enabled critical planning for key topics that had either just begun to be integrated into TRORC functions or which would have been major gaps that this strategic planning exercise might otherwise have had to identify and address. These include climate change, public health and health care, and issues related to the aging of the general population, plus a more complete review of topics that TRORC had already delved into in its regional planning: economic resilience and development, energy, housing, infrastructure, land conservation (habitat), land use, and transportation.

Moreover, this project involved more extensive and/or new kinds of partnerships, relationship-building, and community outreach – reinforcing the coaching role described elsewhere.

The Strategic Planning Steering Committee's discussion of the HUD planning process at its workshop on April 29, 2013 included these points:

The groups participating regard themselves as participating in a consortium; health is a new major player;

The economic development portion of the work is “framed around place” (“permitting as if the environment matters” is a section that addresses the economic development strategy); words/phrases used in the discussion included “people move here and stay here,” “cheese,” “views [of forest and fields],” “schools,” “we feel safe here,” “elusive quality is that our communities work”;

Will result in “action-oriented recommendations” – the final product will be “thin and readable,” and will document what is “going to get done”;

They are learning to avoid technical jargon and try to make its plans, and the planning process, more understandable, with even better and more accessible information;

What they have learned in terms of health is that they are “losing the battle” on chronic disease and that the critical thing is to “get people moving”;

“Active seniors” should not be regarded as a liability;

RPCs Can Help Address Constraints in Public Funding

Current constraints in federal, state, and local government budgets are requiring elected officials and community leaders to rethink existing approaches to growth and economic development. State challenges of trying to balance the budget while federal funding continues to be reduced may require increased collaboration and revision of business-as-usual attitudes. By embracing the opportunities at hand, regional planning commissions offer the state a solid foundation and regional governance platform for stronger program integration, comprehensive regional development, innovation strategies, and forums for problem solving.

-- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, p. 8

Planners Should Watch Emerging Trends

“I am often surprised how many people are unaware of, or in denial about, the emerging trends we are facing in the U.S. and abroad,” says Mitchell Silver, immediate past president of the American Planning Association.

“Among them are climate change, extreme weather, droughts, availability of water and energy, and they will affect how we live. As APA president I urged planners to watch emerging trends the way a stock broker watches the market, so that we can prepare our communities for change. The 21st century presents our planet with challenges we have not confronted before, and these changes have serious implications for how we plan our communities today and tomorrow.

“Changing demographics - the graying and browning of America and the changes to family and household composition - will be among the most significant challenges the United States will confront over the next 50 years. No state, city, region or small town will escape the implications of demographic change, because each generation has different needs, values and aspirations. Planners will be on the front lines for these changes, and they must plan for people, not just for place.”

-- Citiwire.net; http://citiwire.net/columns/how-planning-got-its-groove-back/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign%20=dispatch, July 10, 2013

Business Agility Defined

How does the business world consider adaptive capacity? Here is how Accenture, a business consulting firm with global reach, defined it in an article from Outlook, The Journal of High-performance Business (No. 2, 2012). Few business topics are softer than agility. It's one of those concepts that everyone thinks they grasp. But it's a different story when it comes to deconstructing the concept and coming up with practical ways to put it into action. To anchor our understanding of agility, we should start with the dictionary. According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, the definitions are:

- The ability of being quick and well-coordinated in movement; nimble. Active, lively.
- Marked by an ability to think quickly; mentally acute or aware.

Here are the components of agility that matter most in a business context:

Anticipating. This means developing a view of possible or likely changes—not trying to predict actual changes. Anticipating includes a rigorous review of customer needs and industry forces, and an evaluation of likely scenarios of industry consolidation, product development, pricing, and customer needs.

Sensing. This involves continual reviews of market conditions, looking for trends and especially anomalies in customer behavior, competitor moves, supply chain shifts, supply/demand changes, and macro- and microeconomic developments. It requires strong analytics capabilities. **Responding.** The key is to respond to market shifts faster than competitors do. This includes rapid decision making, testing responses on a pilot basis, and then scaling for a broader response. It frequently includes preset plays, where management teams have agreed ahead of time how they will respond to certain situations; for instance, the response to a price drop by a competitor or the merger of two rivals.

Adapting. Once initial market changes have been identified, organizations often find that they need to rework some of their business processes. Some may tailor their organizational structures to better handle ongoing changes in their markets.

Q: I hear lots of terms being used interchangeably. What are the differences between agility, adaptability, versatility, flexibility, and resilience?

A. Each term touches on a company's ability to respond successfully to change. Agility encompasses the broadest range of abilities. Adaptability applies to organizations that are agile over long periods and can switch to radically new market paradigms, as Fujifilm Corp. has done repeatedly. Versatility typically describes companies such as Amazon.com that embrace a wide range of business models. Flexibility is used for companies that can easily change their supply chains and use multiple customer channels. Resilience refers to a company's ability to absorb and bounce back after strategic, financial, or operational shocks, as Cisco did after the 2000–2001 tech downturn.

What is the bottom line for a regional planning organization seeking to be flexible enough to address opportunities and issues as they arise? Strong analytics capabilities (that is, good systems for measurement and feedback), the ability to formulate and test responses to changing conditions, and the flexibility to reconfigure organizational structure are all important characteristics. An organization with a strong, well-defined vision is expected to also be productive and efficient, and get the job done.

--<http://www.accenture.com/us-en/landing-pages/management-consulting/Documents/pdf/Accenture-Outlook-Corporate-agility-Six-ways-to-make-volatility-your-friend.pdf?v1>

4. Analysis

VISION

TRORC does not have a defined, formal vision statement, although explicit in its mission statement, discussed below, is a “vision for building a thriving regional economy while enhancing the region’s quality of life.” Our short vision statement for this plan is: “a thriving regional economy and high quality of life.”

The evaluation of TRORC’s 2012 Regional Plan was that it “had a good regional perspective with clear land use and resource policies, but lacked a big vision and specific implementation recommendations to achieve goals.” (Commission minutes of 5/22/13)

TRORC still needs to develop a statement that articulates what the organization defines as its priorities and describes a positive future for the region in terms that will engage TRORC constituents in the work required to achieve that future.

MISSION STATEMENT

TRORC’s mission statement, as defined on the TRORC web site, is as follows:

Our primary goals are to advocate for the needs of our member towns, and to articulate a vision for building a thriving regional economy while enhancing the region’s quality of life. The Commission’s staff provides technical services to local, state and federal levels of government and to the region’s nonprofits and businesses. (<http://www.trorc.org/aboutus.html>)

This mission statement is simple and straight-forward, and although it is lacking in detail and specificity, it does follow the National Association of Development Organizations’ (NADO) characterization of core mission areas (see sidebar). Later in this Strategic Plan, we call for communications planning; that process would allow for revamping of the mission statement in order to define TRORC’s direction more clearly.

VALUES

TRORC’s response to Tropical Storm Irene demonstrates many of TRORC’s core values. These can be characterized as follows:

- Commitment to public service;

- Trusted source of accurate, clear information and communication;

- Regional coordination;

- Diligence in anticipating and meeting community needs;

- Teaching, assistance, and collaboration to enable high-quality community planning and to enable others to provide leadership in local and regional planning issues;

Respect for Vermont's quality of life as embodied by the rural landscape, settlement patterns, and sense of community; and

Articulation of a vision for maintaining and enhancing the region's uniquely Vermont quality of life.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goals are currently expressed in the 2012 Regional Plan. Also embedded in this Strategic Plan are a number of implied or potential goals. The following goals and objectives are offered for refinement at the time of formal development of a vision statement:

Goal: Build a thriving and resilient regional economy based on the region's quality of life

Objective: Tie place-based economic development efforts with community development and natural resource protection into a unified whole that is synergistic instead of playing people off against nature or the economy.

Goal: Structure and nurture a regional planning culture capable of accomplishing a shared regional vision and strategic focus; enhance the capability of towns and other local and regional partners to support the goals of the Strategic Plan.

Objective: Upgrade the current enhanced consultation review process available to towns, in a specific program description and three-year work plan. Provide training, assistance, and collaboration to enable high-quality community planning and to enable others to provide leadership in local and regional planning issues.

Objective: Provide towns with training, technical assistance, public administration support, and policy and program know-how to plan and implement essential steps and investments to advance the vision and strategies of each town, the region, and the state.

Goal: Serve as problem solvers by mobilizing and leveraging resources and actions that translate local needs and assets into regional, performance-driven, and publicly accountable actions and investments.

Objective: Undertake the player role: Identify and study options for regional services, including both services and structures for providing services (including cooperating with existing service providers and attaining special designations); develop business plans for the most promising; create a phased approach to implement each.

Objective: Continue to assist towns with grant-seeking and grant administration, including providing assistance with budgeting and capital investment; develop performance-driven measures for TRORC to show regional benefit through this assistance.

Objective: Implement performance-driven energy measures using return on investment analysis and full cost accounting directed at the life cycles of capital investments.

Goal: Provide the regional leadership and neutral forum for towns to think long-term about their futures, including the social and community development and economic resilience aspects of regional planning and development.

Objective: Undertake Commission organizational changes suggested by this Strategic Plan.

Objective: Bring stakeholders together in ways that create opportunities for regional understanding and collaboration. Develop a three-year training and meeting plan to support this objective. (The East Central Vermont: What We Want regional sustainability plan was developed as an action based on the initial Strategic Plan.)

Objective: Create an annual report that covers progress in advancing the Regional Plan and the Strategic Plan.

Goal: Position and brand TRORC as a highly valued contributor to a thriving regional economy and high quality of life.

Objective: Implement a communications and outreach plan to insure that TRORC's messages are communicated effectively to identified, well-understood audiences. (A communications plan was developed as an action based on the initial Strategic Plan.)

Objective: Develop a planning literacy program for adults and schoolchildren.

NADO Recommendation for RPCs' Core Mission Areas

- 1. Provide the area wide leadership and neutral forum for the state and individual regions to think long-term about their future, including the social, community, and economic development aspects of regional planning and development.*
- 2. Provide technical assistance, public administration support, and policy and program know-how to plan and implement essential steps and investments to advance the vision and strategies of the state and regions.*
- 3. Serve as problem solvers by mobilizing and leveraging resources and actions that translate local needs and assets into performance-driven and publicly accountable actions and investments.*

-- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, p. 13

5. Strategies & Actions

The process that led to the development of this Strategic Plan began with two goals: (1) identify strategic focus most likely to foster a thriving, resilient regional economy and high quality of life, and (2) structure and nurture a regional planning culture capable of accomplishing a shared regional vision and strategic focus.

The means of meeting these two goals lie within the following six strategies:

Redouble TRORC’s investment in working with towns.

Maximize results of technical planning through strategic focus on economic development.

Serve the region as player.

Position and brand TRORC as a highly valued contributor to a powerful vision for a thriving regional economy and high quality of life.

Maximize the Commission’s governance through focus on policy and leadership.

Undertake vigorous resource development to address long-term organizational sustainability and sustained strategic actions.

These six broad strategies are explained below with a statement of need followed by more specific actions that can help to carry out the strategies.

STRATEGY 1: THE COMMISSION WILL REDOUBLE TRORC’S INVESTMENT IN WORKING WITH TOWNS.

The Need

TRORC has long pursued two roles in the planning process. The organization functions as both umpire – a regulator, stemming from Vermont’s planning framework with its defined role for regional planning commissions – and coach – a role that involves guiding member towns and other decision makers toward a regionally shared vision and one also consistent with state law. The coaching role is embedded in the enhanced consultation review process TRORC has pursued since 2007.

The umpire role is a critical one that allows TRORC the opportunity to deal with the undesirable consequences of developments that have a regional impact, and to make a strategic difference in key long-term decisions (e.g., participating in utility commission reviews of whether infrastructure is to be hardened or moved to avoid damage from future flooding). As NADO observed, however, regional planning commissions “work best when they are not trying to control an issue, but are facilitating improved coordination, communications and actions among local leaders on common issues.” (*Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment*, p. 12)

From a strictly practical view, better coaching is intended to lead to better town plans, decisions, and investments that minimize the regulatory umpire side of TRORC’s work. The coaching role has the potential to reach beyond

symptoms and last-ditch fights and affect the underlying causes (economics, culture, etc.) that sometimes force TRORC into the regulatory role at considerable cost in terms of staff time, organizational energy, bad press, and so on. While never totally eliminated, the need for the umpire can be minimized by effective coaching.

This idea of more coaching and less umpiring is not a new strategy. From one Regional Plan (2007) to the next (2012), TRORC began greater investment in town planning through enhanced consultation review. The payoffs have been evident. TRORC's role in helping to deal with Tropical Storm Irene exemplifies this more hands-on approach.

Ways to Support Towns

ACTION 1A: Building on the enhanced consultation process already in place, invest more time and staff to use Regional Plan updates and town plan review and confirmation processes as a platform for deepening town-TRORC relationships and building a planning culture that carries forward a shared regional vision.

Act 250 has had major benefits over the years, but it is only one regulatory tool being utilized within the state. It is not a substitute for the basics of building a planning culture that supports the region as a whole and the individual towns. If the process of creating town-region plans does not lead to such a culture over time, the planning process is little more than pro forma.

The regulatory side of planning is designed to prevent the worst, not necessarily to help achieve the best. Without deliberate attention to this challenge, it is possible to create a system that achieves only the least common denominator. During the steering committee's workshop, one participant commented that, "In Vermont it is hard to do the right thing." How can TRORC and towns make the best kinds of development easiest to achieve, in order maintain an economically attractive environment and resilience?

It is also important to understand how plans for the region and for towns are perceived. Are they considered to be rigid, inflexible rulebooks, or seen as flexible plans for achieving a compelling, highly visible, widely understood vision for sustaining quality of life and economic vitality?

Now that the enhanced consultation process is well-established practice, a different and more continual goal of the program must go beyond the short-range objective of enabling towns to develop plans that meet state standards. Consultation should evolve into outreach that focuses on voluntary, annual, strategically focused work plans, capital and general budgeting, and implementing key elements of town plans, step by step, year by year. TRORC can provide the critical facilitation and leadership for the dialogue and training that will make towns' processes for selecting and investing in projects most efficient and effective.

STRATEGY 2: THE COMMISSION WILL MAXIMIZE RESULTS OF TECHNICAL PLANNING THROUGH STRATEGIC FOCUS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

The Need

There are some basic questions that need to be addressed with regard to this strategy. What is the critical path among these topics? Which topics will receive high-visibility emphasis, staff time, or other resources, and which will receive more modest attention? Is there a way to structure or combine these so that they tie more simply into a regional vision or call to action? The strategic planning process included two steps to answer these questions. First, we examined the priorities suggested by TRORC's strategic planning committee (listed earlier). Second, we looked closely at the NADO report to VAPDA.

The NADO report emphasizes economic development as the key strategic focus for regional planning commissions. This goes against the established grain of how planning is perceived by some in Vermont (and elsewhere) – as described by NADO (see sidebar) and discussed below in the section that addresses TRORC's positioning, or branding. Towns within the region, however, seem to be receptive to an approach that integrates economic development into the rest of the planning framework. Planners working in any regulatory arena often are tackling symptoms of underlying systems and trends as opposed to the more visible landscape that consists of settlement patterns, working lands, landforms, rivers, and other physical features. TRORC's desired result is a beautiful landscape of working lands and traditional communities. To safeguard it for the long term, the underlying economic conditions that supported its development in the first place require attention, as well as regulating unwanted changes.

Economic development is much broader than the recruitment-and-retention approach typically employed by regional development corporations in East Central Vermont. The same is true of the work of such other business-related entities as chambers of commerce, main street organizations, Small Business Development Centers, or tourism agencies. All of these organizations address key tasks, but they could be far more effective if supported through TRORC's holistic approach to maintaining a sustainable context for such business development, and the HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Plan's emphasis on place-based economic development and resilience (see sidebar).

A strategic focus on economic development and resilience would require TRORC to address a host of important topics where its involvement is critical to the region's successful, sustainable economic development over the long term. These topics include the following:

- Infrastructure planning and investment;

- Transportation planning and investment;

- Energy management;

- Housing;

Workforce development;

Emergency management; and

Land use – become more proactive on what TRORC wants, and where, instead of what is not wanted, and where.

This strategic focus by no means reduces TRORC’s obligations to address other priorities identified by the strategic planning committee, including education and the many needs of an aging population that can be addressed through community planning. Even these topics have important dimensions that can be addressed through a strategic focus on economic development and resilience.

Ways to Achieve Focus on Economic Development

(Note: The initial Strategic Plan had Action 2A as achieving an Economic Development District designation from US EDA, and that has been formed now covering our region and the Mount Ascutney region.)

ACTION 2A: Use place-based economic development planning as a central focus of the Commission’s work.

Economic development planning can be undertaken to more completely address natural resources (including agriculture, forestry, and fisheries), cottage industries and cooperatives, light manufacturing, heritage tourism, ecotourism and recreation, and the arts. The creative economy theories of economic development should also be considered, along with the potential impact of climate change on the winter sports industry and other weather-dependent industries, such as maple syrup producers.

Even though Vermont has made much progress in specialty areas of economic development, much of its economy appears to remain based on agriculture. Like most parts of the country, economic development has grown as a complement to agriculture, where the agricultural industry (including forestry in the case of this region) is assumed to be doing well and not in need of development, protection, investment, or other means of support. (Outside of the usual USDA systems – Extension, NRCS – that run parallel to other local government systems and have been subject to recent federal disinvestment.) With the rise of the local foods movement, there has been more of an emphasis on the economics of agriculture, and Vermont is leading the way. However, agriculture is still often not addressed in economic development forums. The economic development planning that has just begun at the state level must be integrated with the planning done at the regional level. TRORC will continue to focus on the creative economy, food security, housing, and outdoor recreation as keys to economic success.

ACTION 2B: Review progress against key sustainability indicators.

A ‘dashboard’ of indicators is a long-standing objective, but would depend upon many feed-in sources of data that are not yet available. However, being able to see if there is progress, or lack of it, on strategic priorities is important. This reflective practice would provide critical feedback on the performance of specific efforts. This

task remains in its early stages, but the *practice* of trying to evaluate the value of effort against the outcomes of that effort can be done in a qualitative way while metrics are developed. Such a dashboard should become a highly visible element of TRORC’s communications with stakeholders and the public in general. For example, it would enable TRORC to inform the governor and the legislature of the health of the region as opposed to what some have felt to be an unhelpful focus on the health of TRORC as an organization.

STRATEGY 3: THE COMMISSION WILL SERVE THE REGION AS “PLAYER.”

The Need

As resources stay the same or even shrink in the face of declining governmental revenues, it is critical for the towns and the state to figure out how to make every dollar stretch as far as possible. TRORC can provide leadership and financing for important regional collaboration and wield its resources and talents in support of its strategic focus on economic development if it is prepared to become a different kind of organization, more part of the game than either umpire or coach. For example, certain kinds of infrastructure, such as roads, utilities, sanitary sewers, and broadband, are often better implemented at the regional level because local governments typically do not have the expertise or resources to address these larger, more complex needs. Recent state legislation clarifies TRORC’s ability to be involved in projects at this level. TRORC’s involvement as player would enable broad ideas to be carried all the way down to the local level.

As one member of the strategic planning steering committee put it, knowledge leads to plans, but it takes money to get implementation: “Being a player entails mobilizing resources in ways individual towns and organizations cannot. [TRORC must develop] expertise to marshal money in addition to knowledge.”

Ways to Serve the Region as “Player”

ACTION 3A: Undertake cooperative services that enable towns to serve their residents more effectively and efficiently through partnerships with existing agencies or institutions and formal creation of new union-district or subsidiary bodies.

Following a Council of Governments (COG) model (as is done in other states with regard to regional planning commissions – see sidebar), TRORC could undertake cooperative services that enable towns to serve their residents in ways the towns cannot currently afford to provide. TRORC already provides GIS and other technical services to towns; a cooperative model is a modest next step. COG status could also allow changes in TRORC’s structure that would enable TRORC to become more involved with public transit, solid waste, programs for older adults, and emergency services. TRORC’s Intermunicipal Regional Energy Coordinator is an example of intertown cooperation led by TRORC. TRORC could build on the Keys to the Valley project by shepherding local or regional groups’ efforts on addressing housing.

ACTION 3B: Build on official designations that can maximize TRORC’s ability to receive governmental grant funding, as well as a non-profit arm of TRORC to receive private funding, in order to provide services and implement priorities.

To borrow from NADO: “RPCs across the nation are commonly designated or manage functions such as EDA Economic Development Districts, U.S. Labor’s Workforce Investment Commissions (WIB), U.S. Health and Human Services’ Area Agencies on Aging or U.S. DOT’s Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO). Instead, Vermont RPCs are linked under state law and through federal pass-through or state funded programs such as rural transportation planning, all-hazard mitigation planning for local communities, state contracts for broadband planning and energy efficiency and conservation planning, Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, and regional watershed planning. Even though some of the resources for these efforts originate at the federal level, they are often project-based rather than official program or organizational designations.” (*Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, p. 10*)

TRORC implemented a step in the earlier Strategic Plan by establishing an Economic Development District with the Mount Ascutney (formerly Southern Windsor County) Regional Commission. That work needs to be built upon.

STRATEGY 4: THE COMMISSION WILL POSITION AND BRAND TRORC AS A HIGHLY VALUED CONTRIBUTOR TO A POWERFUL VISION FOR A THRIVING REGIONAL ECONOMY AND HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE.

The Need

Strategies already articulated here need well-argued public reasoning undertaken with an eye toward building public trust. TRORC needs excellent positioning, messaging, and branding to build and maintain public trust and visibility, in order to achieve strategies and actions outlined in this Strategic Plan and reach the next level of achievement as an organization (and as a region).

Careful translation and messaging will be an important part of the leadership needed in implementing the strategy to focus on economic development. While the environmental community (speaking regionally and nationally) has matured in its recognition of the value of including economic development in environmental planning, the words and the groups who make up the environmental and economic development communities can still be at odds. In the discussion above of this strategy, this Strategic Plan suggests ways of expressing and explaining the value of this focus.

Moreover, for the preceding strategy to expand the enhanced consultative review process with towns, noted one committee member, “it will take additional resources, staffing and political credibility that can be earned through better branding and visibility.”

A *brand* is what an organization stands for – what its customers can expect from that organization. It is built up over time through repeated, clear communications, and even more important, through delivery of promises and value (delivery made visible, we might add).

TRORC would benefit from improved branding and a clearer message. Fortunately, TRORC starts from a position of public trust and achievement thanks to TRORC’s efforts in helping the state recover from Tropical Storm Irene and town-by-town services in assisting with local planning issues.

TRORC must also understand its audiences – that is, who TRORC serves and how, who needs to know about its work and why – and how its messages are to be communicated to those audiences through not only one or more logos and a tag line or two, but any mode of communication.

A good plan will identify ways to embed messages in TRORC’s ordinary communications at every opportunity.

Both the Regional Plan, and planning done for towns, needs to frame the topics around purpose-driven (or results-driven) titles. Anyone reading only the chapter titles should gain a sense of the region’s vision for its future, and why the town or Regional Plan should be worth reading further. Possibilities are as follows:

Rather than “land use,” a purpose-driven chapter title could be “Creating Sustainable Community Settlement Patterns” (including brownfields, infrastructure, etc. – a re-mixing of the current order).

“Agriculture and Forestry” could be converted to “Fostering Working Landscapes.”

“Historic and Scenic Resources” could be something like “Preserving Irreplaceable Resources” (which could include habitat).

“Surface Water” could be something like “Saving Rivers and Wetlands.”

“Economic Development” could become “Building on Community Assets to Build our Economic Future.”

The HUD Sustainable Communities Plan, subsequent updates to the Regional Plan, and The Keys to the Valley project took large strides forward in making plans interesting and readable, but work needs to continue so that these plans are used and useful.

Ways to Position and Brand TRORC and Enhance Communications

ACTION 4A: Implement a communications and outreach plan, including dedicating staff, to provide a powerful message through standard and new media that consistently explains planning concepts and showcases progress in achieving plans.

Developing a communications plan is a critical action for this strategy. The plan should identify messages and opportunities to convey them, identify audiences and the best ways to reach them, and explore other ways of improving communications and public outreach. The plan should also describe selected activities and intended outcomes (e.g., the plan would express not simply the task of maintaining a website, but also how maintaining

that website is to enable certain benefits or results). It should address priorities, timing/coordination considerations, resources needed, and measures for success.

Overall, the plan should help to achieve consistency among the ways similar ideas are conveyed via the vision, mission statement, tag line, values, goals and objectives, dashboard, and other programs and communication vehicles, such as the website and press releases.

Great statements about vision, mission, values, and goals, and tag lines do not just happen – they take a willingness on the part of participants to contribute time, effort, and patience. A well-designed process and both leadership and willingness to listen on the part of senior staff and the Commission will be needed.

Once this process is complete, there must be ways of continually reinforcing not only the messages, but the organizational culture that results. How are new Commissioners oriented? Have any been specifically recruited for their communications expertise? How are new staff trained? How will messages be conveyed, communications planned, or feedback obtained? What new partnerships are needed?

In addition to clarity of message and strong communications planning, TRORC must seek innovation in expanding communications to help create a regional culture that supports planning. Reach new audiences by using new media, such as social media, and ensuring that all TRORC documents and products (especially plans and websites) are readable and interesting to the general public, and frame desired results in positive terms. For example, the Regional Plan’s chapter on land use could not only be titled “Creating Sustainable Community Settlement Patterns” as mentioned earlier, but should detail what is desirable, and where, rather than focusing on what is not wanted.

Moreover, consider how leaders learn and grow in the region and reinforce existing programs. Work with schools to create programs for “planning literacy” that include planning and civic problem-solving exercises that reinforce lessons about Vermont’s special environment. Such programs should provide specific experiences revealing how that environment is protected (and by whom) through regional and town action. Create simplified distance learning opportunities for residents seeking fast start-up help as they take on new roles and responsibilities in town government – make the community college a collaborator in addressing this possibility.

ACTION 4B: Create formal opportunities at least twice a year to bring regional stakeholders together in ways that foster increased regional understanding and collaboration.

The communications plan can provide the vehicle for further consideration of how to encourage greater regional perspective and action.

Consider holding an annual dinner to highlight progress and recognize outstanding achievements. Every time TRORC helps move the needle and makes that success visible, the brand grows stronger. Also, consider offering peer problem-solving tours: arranging for town leaders from multiple towns to visit a town or set of towns not their own. Leaders from the region participating would learn more about the region. They would be engaged in looking at specific issues from the region’s perspective, not necessarily limited to their own territory, thus building a sense of teamwork. Hosting community dialogues during the visit would encourage an immediate exchange of

ideas between visitors and the towns being visited. Issues for focus might include economic development, emergency planning, infrastructure, downtown development, heritage tourism, or some combination of topics. A potential partner in piloting such a program could be the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

STRATEGY 5: THE COMMISSION WILL MAXIMIZE ITS GOVERNANCE THROUGH FOCUS ON POLICY AND LEADERSHIP.

The Need

The all-volunteer Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commissioners individually and as a group provide valuable time and participation. Their contribution is a critical resource that must be maximized to the greatest extent possible. Just as this Strategic Plan urges focus on a few key strategies and emphasizes outcomes over outputs (measured by the recommended dashboard), so must the Commission do the same.

As the strategic planning steering committee has observed, to obtain the region that TRORC envisions, the Commissioners must become the Commission that the region needs.

Although the Commission is governmental – established through Vermont’s planning framework – it bears important similarities to nonprofit boards of directors. In that context, a rule of thumb is that boards and commissions lead and set policy; executive directors and their staffs execute and manage.

In practice, of course, the work of the Commission is a collaborative exercise among Commissioners, the executive director, and staff – ideally, to read “Commission” here is to understand that Commissioners are as one with the staff, with no distinction in perceptions internally or externally – but it is well to understand the different roles and seek to use each to best advantage.

The Commission should establish long-range goals and strategies and other policies through the Regional Plan and through such other planning tools as it may decide, such as this Strategic Plan, anticipating rather than reacting to regional issues. Its role also is to set priorities for programs and spending, effectively by approving an annual budget, and periodically evaluate performance.

The executive director is responsible for programs and operations, ensuring that the staff carries out day-to-day responsibilities according to the Commission’s guidance and objectives for performance.

Commissioners and staff work together to communicate the region’s vision and other messages (once established, as discussed above) and to help secure the resources needed to support TRORC’s operations and programs. Furthermore, all are advocates for TRORC’s goals and programs among local, state, and federal governmental partners.

In addition, a study of recent minutes reveals a standard difficulty that is present for most boards with a large agenda, that is, little grounding in a sense of strategy. It is easy to become caught up in formal actions, project details, and announcements in order of a sense of importance for each meeting. A larger sense of priority is not communicated in the way these meetings are constructed. The Commission knows what it is doing and why, of course, but the agenda and minutes present its actions without reference to the Regional Plan or other context that helps to bring home the critical nature of the Commission’s work or implications for regional constituents.

ACTION 5A: Match Commission agendas to the Strategic Plan and the primary guidance in plans and policies.

In executing its role as policy leader, Commission should rely more on collective wisdom rather than knowledge and be “focused on strategic leadership, less on administrative detail, in the words of one strategic planning steering committee member. One way to do this is to shape all Commission meetings around this principle.

Construction of an agenda is a critical task in managing the Commission’s involvement and oversight – and in setting the stage for the equally critical task of evaluation. Commission meetings, perhaps primarily at the Executive Committee level, should be the place where Commissioners ask such key policy questions as, “How are our plans being implemented and what is our progress on our collective regional vision?” and, “How are our towns building their capacities to achieve our collective regional vision?”

Organize a standing agenda around key topics in order to maintain focus on achieving the TRORC’s vision, mission, and goals; development of the dashboard concept above will provide additional guidance in constructing this agenda. Given the great variety of issues that the Commission and staff as a whole must address, it is important to focus closely on how to manage the Commission effectively, how to focus Commission actions strategically, and how to evaluate progress.

ACTION 5B: Manage the Commission’s growth as an organization.

The Commission should also be asking routinely, “How are we doing as an organization?” The Commissioners’ own growth and development, the Commission’s culture as an organization, and Commission relationships with towns, the State, and other stakeholders deserve Commissioners’ attention. Discussion of organizational growth can reinforce the learning experience, keep long-term Commissioners feeling refreshed, and help the Commission as a whole make beneficial changes.

To be more formal about answering such a question, this is a matter that should receive at least annual review. How this is accomplished can vary. An ad hoc committee could undertake surveys and interviews with individual directors and lead Commission discussion. Annual training or retreats can focus on important issues where education and discussion will benefit the development of a sound corporate culture. At least one round of meetings each year should be devoted to evaluating progress on this Strategic Plan and other planning documents; evaluating Commissioners’ involvement in communications and resource development; and establishing near-term strategies that guide staff proposals for annual work plans and the budget.

As the Commission gains knowledge and experience in the implementation of this Strategic Plan, a related, longer-term action would be to set standards of excellence and let partners, funders, and the public know such standards are part of the Commissioners’ expectations for doing business. Some nonprofits strive to meet independent, external standards as a way of reassuring those they serve and funders alike that their operations are in good order. A good list of sources of information about standards of excellence is compiled by Independent Sector at http://independentsector.org/compendium_of_standards. Additionally, Independent Sector offers a set of principles for good governance and ethical practice; although it is a guide for charities and foundations, it suggests principles worthy of review by the Commission (<http://www.independentsector.org/>

uploads/Accountability_Documents/Principles_for_Good_Governance_and_Ethical_Practice.pdf; the reference edition, with legal background, glossary, and additional information, is available for free download at www.nonprofitpanel.org.) Another source of information on good nonprofit practice and board governance is www.boardsource.org.

ACTION 5C: Actively work for greater board membership from towns to reflect the diversity of skills and experience needed to support this Strategic Plan.

The Commission should seek to ensure that its membership reflects the region’s diversity and the diversity of skills and experience needed to support this Strategic Plan and other plans and policies.

In practice, Commissioners are appointed by member towns, up to two per town (but not more than one vote may be cast at Commission meetings; Section 4.2 of the Commission’s bylaws). The Commission might usefully initiate discussions with Town officials about their appointments and the desirability of reflecting Commission needs in order to position it to serve the region and towns most effectively. The process can be more actively managed in the future now that the Strategic Plan is in hand to direct the Commission’s growth as an effective organization.

Action 5D: Recruit At-Large Commissioners representing interests, disciplines, and competencies necessary to round out town-appointed membership and align TRORC’s leadership to its strategic goals.

The Commission has the ability to add to its numbers through a provision in the bylaws to name up to five Members-At-Large (Section 4.3) by annual appointment, “voting representatives from those areas of citizen interest designated by the Commission. Such appointment shall be by favorable vote of at least 75% of the Commissioners present at a meeting noticed for this purpose.” Members-At-Large may not serve as officers.

This provision under the bylaws represents a strategic opportunity for the Commission, and has been implemented to some degree, ensuring that diverse community interests are represented, and that the Commission is a well-rounded body with the skills and experience necessary for guiding the region’s vision, mission, and goals.

STRATEGY 6: THE COMMISSION WILL UNDERTAKE VIGOROUS RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT TO ADDRESS LONG-TERM ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SUSTAINED STRATEGIC ACTIONS.

The Need

First, two definitions: (1) *resource development* is the preferred term for fund-raising – it is meant to remind users that the basic practice of raising funds requires development of resources that include not simply funds but also

relationships, and (2) a *sustainable organization* in resource development terms is one capable of raising sufficient funding year after year from sources diverse enough that it is not overly reliant on any one source or kind of source.

As governmental resources continue to tighten at all levels, TRORC must seek to maintain and grow its funding, especially to be able to maximize its roles as coach and player and fund strong communications and outreach – in order to make significant progress in achieving the vision of a thriving regional economy and high quality of life. Some strategies identified here might be accomplished, at least in the short term or on a demonstration basis, though the reallocation of funding and staff resources. In other cases, it is clear that, in the words of one committee member, “Taking new steps requires getting new shoes.” TRORC must effectively grow available resources in order to pursue priority actions that will require new funding,

An organization such as TRORC with strong, visible programs, a good reputation, and clear results is attractive to funders. For TRORC, diversity in funding should mean having a wide range of governmental and grant sources, including foundations; raising funds from individual donors – which TRORC is permitted to do – is not a priority at this time.

ACTION 6A: Undertake a resource development plan

Regardless of ultimate sources to be tapped, resource development planning (and the relationship-building that is a part of this work) should be integral to TRORC’s strategic and communications planning and annual work plans. A resource development plan is a record of decisions and direction based on research done to learn about possible sources, analysis of strategies for seeking funds, and establishment of objectives and calendar. It can help to set priorities, identify relationships to pursue, and suggest ways to optimize programs to increase the likelihood of raising needed resources. The resource development plan ideally would cover a three-year timeline, to be reviewed and updated annually.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of these strategies and actions can begin immediately. It may take up to ten years to accomplish all of these actions. The Executive Summary identifies lead actors for each action and includes an indication of the timing for each to begin, either short-term (next three years) or mid-term (five years). Many of these actions will need to be phased. For example, a beginning step is to apply for Economic Development District status, but to develop this action into a fully functioning, well-funded activity may well take more than three years.

Two strategies – communications and resource development - specifically call for the creation of special plans as related actions, both identified as short-term. Neither plan is the norm for regional planning organizations, which tend to focus routinely on technical planning. The creation of a communications plan, as well as the formation of the Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Foundation are both fruits of the initial Strategic Plan that need continued attention.

Other actions would also benefit from first-stage planning, generally to be expected for a mature planning organization such as TRORC. For example, the goal suggested in Chapter 4, “Structure and nurture a regional planning culture [...and] enhance the capability of towns and other local and regional partners to support the goals

of the Strategic Plan,” would benefit from a specific program description and three-year work plan, both of which are recommended as part of an objective suggested for this goal. (And good examples of “yes/no” measurement.)

EVALUATION

Each action should be expressed in TRORC’s annual work plans, at the level of effort TRORC determines to be appropriate each year. Detailed evaluation of TRORC’s performance thus becomes a relatively simple task of determining whether or not the projected activities of the work plan were accomplished, and how they contributed to progress in accomplishing the strategies (and TRORC’s goals and objectives overall).

The Commission’s role is to set priorities for programs and spending, effectively by approving an annual budget, and periodically evaluate the organization’s performance against its broad goals and the strategies in this plan. As noted in actions related to the Commission’s governance, the Commission should devote at least one round of meetings each year to evaluating progress on this Strategic Plan and other planning documents, evaluating Commissioners’ involvement in communications and resource development, and establishing near-term guidance for staff in proposing annual work plans and the budget.

Planning IS Economic Development

“If planners want to be valuable, they must show their value. For planners, that means focusing on job creation and the economy. An APA poll last year asked the American public what planners should be working on. 'Jobs and the economy' was the public’s top priority.

Planning is economic development, but for some reason, planners lost ground in the 1980s when the specialized field of economic development emerged. Over the past few years, economic planning is surging back in planning circles. New planning concepts to aid decision-making, like 'return on investment' (ROI), which looks at how long would it would take pay back a public investment like a road with new property and sales tax revenue, are changing how planners look at managing growth and change in a fiscally responsible way.”

-- Mitchell Silver, immediate past president of the American Planning Association (APA); http://citiwire.net/columns/how-planning-got-its-groove-back/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign%20=dispatch, July 10, 2013

EDA’s Investment Priorities

EDA’s competitive grants advance global competitiveness, create jobs, and leverage public and private resources. Projects must demonstrate readiness and ability to use funds quickly and effectively, and link to specific and measurable outcomes. To facilitate evaluation, EDA has established the following investment priorities:

Collaborative regional innovation, supporting innovation clusters based on existing regional competitive strengths. Initiatives must engage stakeholders; facilitate collaboration among urban, suburban, and rural (including tribal) areas; provide stability for economic development through long-term

intergovernmental and public/private collaboration; and support the growth of existing and emerging industries.

Public/private partnerships, using both public- and private-sector resources and leveraging complementary investments by other government/public entities and/or nonprofits.

National strategic priorities, encouraging job growth and business expansion in advanced manufacturing; information technology (e.g., broadband, smart grid) infrastructure; ...natural disaster mitigation and resiliency; access to capital for small, medium-sized, and ethnically diverse enterprises; and innovations in science and health care.

Global competitiveness, supporting high-growth businesses and innovation-based entrepreneurs to expand and compete in global markets, especially investments that expand U.S. Exports, encourage foreign direct investment, and promote the repatriation of jobs back to the U.S.

Environmentally sustainable development, promoting projects that enhance environmental quality and develop and implement green products, processes, places, and buildings as part of the green economy. This includes support for energy-efficient green technologies.

Economically distressed and underserved communities, strengthening diverse communities that have suffered disproportionate economic job losses and/or are rebuilding to become more competitive in the global economy.

-- Adapted from <http://www.eda.gov/investmentPriorities.htm>

Defining the Problem – An Economic Development Focus Is Critical to Effective Regional Planning

The National Association of Development Organization’s (NADO) 2011 assessment of Vermont’s regional planning commissions (Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment) offers a veritable drumbeat of arguments for incorporating economic development into regional planning. Some of these arguments include the following:

“The lack of a statewide comprehensive economic development strategy based on regional and local assets, as well as existing and emerging economic innovation clusters, is resulting in uneven development and growth. There is a significant need for stronger state leadership and actions to assist RPCs and others in integrating and coordinating the various federal and state planning processes required of state and local officials. This should include strategies for better statewide and regional alignment of community and economic development, emergency preparedness, energy, affordable housing, technology, telecommunications, transportation and workforce development plans or a combination of these.” (p. 7)

“A strong state and local orientation toward separating regional and local land use planning and decisions from regional and local community and economic development planning and implementation is causing unnecessary turf battles. It is making it harder to leverage program and project resources and to integrate and coordinate various federal and state resources and policies. This reality is creating unnecessary barriers at a time when the state and its communities should be

leveraging the state's primary asset of "quality of place" as part of a comprehensive statewide sustainable economic development strategy." (p. 7)

"Historically, Vermont's brand has been quality of life and protection of the state's working landscapes and natural resources. The RPCs are central players in this regard. However, they could be used more aggressively and strategically by state and local officials to pursue sustainable economic development strategies that can preserve the physical and community landscape while also generating new economic development growth opportunities. While these two issues are not mutually exclusive, they are currently being treated this way in many parts of the state and within several levels of state government." (p. 8)

East Central Vermont's Sustainable Communities Regional Plan to Emphasize Place-based Economic Development

The HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Plan, developed through a consortium led by TRORC and the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, emphasizes place-based economic development. The website *East Central Vermont: What We Want* states that "such strategies will both enhance and help keep the region a great place to live and work" and explains the approach:

What the Consortium partners intend to do is build on the region's economic strengths (which extend outside of the region into New Hampshire) in the four areas of manufacturing, health care, education, and tourism based on a wonderful environment. We want to keep the quality of life we enjoy that has brought us so many businesses, and attract new businesses as well that complement the region. We believe this can be done by:

- Making the region more energy efficient
- Protecting the environment
- Increasing the talent of our workforce
- Reducing commuting
- Excelling in and enhancing local agriculture
- Investing strategically in infrastructure through long-range capital budgeting.

-- <http://ecvermont.org/focus-areas/economic-development-2/>

How to Approach the "Player" Role

"Many RPCs nationally are increasingly serving as the regional administrators of federally-funded programs for workforce development, transportation (including public transit), business lending, entrepreneurship, disaster planning and recovery, housing and other areas linked to community and economic development....In the vast majority of states, RPCs are directly involved in economic development planning as well as project implementation and funding (i.e., business lending and entrepreneurship technical assistance, grant and financial management, ownership of business incubators and office parks, and preparation and analysis of regional and local data and information.)"

There is a “perception by some that RPCs are legally limited to regional land use planning and other related planning services. This often results in lost opportunities for stronger integration and leveraging of federal and state resources for broader regional development, such as:

Regional and statewide integration and coordination of regional and local land use planning with community and economic development, energy, housing and transportation strategies and investments.

Economic development strategies that leverage regional and local assets, including quality of place for tourism, attraction of knowledge workers and firms, and development of existing and emerging innovation clusters.

Targeting business and commercial development to priority economic development centers with existing infrastructure and capacity to handle growth and development in a cost effective and sustainable manner.

Regional capacity to administer, deliver and manage an array of federal programs under the umbrella of unified regional development organizations, including for community and economic development, public and human services, transportation and workforce development programs.”

-- Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies 2011 Statewide Strategic Assessment, drawn from p.8 and pp. 10-12

Note: In the report cited here, the National Association of Development Organizations produced an eleven-page appendix that provides dozens of ideas for how an organization such as TRORC can define a strategic role as player that includes more local involvement. This appendix, entitled Regional Council Innovations and Noteworthy Programs & Projects, draws from examples around the country.

Messaging and Branding for TRORC

The concept behind a *tag line* or *elevator speech* is to be able to share a basic idea with someone while in an elevator. In 30 seconds, can a Commissioner or staff member clearly define TRORC, and what it does and why? “A trusted source of high-quality information, capable of relaying that information in simple terms and of facilitating civil discussion of how to address community needs, challenges, and opportunities” was one attempt offered by a committee member as an example. A range of ideas developed at the TRORC steering committee’s workshop (April 29, 2013) could be incorporated into an *elevator speech*. These ideas include the following:

- We solve complex problems
- We change trends
- We connect (e.g., we connect demographics with town budgets)
- We create opportunities and provide benefits for everyone
- We guide towns around obstacles
- We give communities opportunities to help themselves
- We smooth the way for good development
- TRORC is necessary to keep a well-oiled machine on the level

- An invaluable partner
- Making sure that change is good
- Helping communities make positive changes
- “Two Rivers can be a hub”
- We bring folks together
- We invest in leadership
- “Rural sustainability” (different from urban)
- Taking care of the land
- We are good at what we do
- We are proactive – we get ahead of the curve
- We look for visible results – we are out front
- We are a maker of beautiful communities
- “Town by town, we add up to a region”
- “Services in making our towns,” not services TO our towns

The Challenge of Branding Vermont’s RPCs

In NADO’s 2011 report to the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (Statewide Strategic Assessment), a weakness identified in terms of clarity and scope of mission, as RPCs’ role has diversified and expanded, is that they “have struggled to clearly define, communicate, and brand their role and mission statewide....While regional land use planning and general purpose planning have been the traditional mission and core focus of RPCs, [they] are clearly engaged in a much broader array of regional community and economic development services and programs today.” (p. 27) Furthermore, NADO says, “RPCs are often (mis)perceived as ‘only regional land use planners’ or ‘just planners’.” There is a general lack of understanding of how the RPCs’ work in issue areas such as brownfields, housing, transportation, and GIS data and mapping is part of regional community and economic development. ... The role of RPCs in the oversight and implementation of specific Act 250 regional land use planning requirements is a major issue facing the RPC network statewide. In some cases, it has branded RPCs as only regional land use planners; and in other cases, it has created a strong and powerful perception that RPCs are anti-development or major barriers to economic development. There is a major opportunity for RPCs to more aggressively educate and raise awareness about their roles and mandates under Act 250. Since federal and state officials are also focused on establishing stronger quality of place strategies and performance measurements, as well as promoting better integration of economic development, housing, land use, and transportation planning, VAPDA and its RPCs are in a unique position to advance these concepts.” (pp. 23-24)