

# Bennington County Regional Commission

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Friday – June 23, 2023  
8:30 AM  
Meeting Conducted via ZOOM**

In attendance: Nick Zaiac, Dan Monks, Shelia Kearns, James Salerno, John Lavecchia, Jr., Janet Hurley (staff), Bill Colvin (staff)

The meeting was called to order at 8:33am.

Monks moved the approval of minutes from the April 28, 2023 BCRC Executive Committee Meeting. Motion seconded by Salerno. Approved.

Financial- FY23 Audit, FY24 Budget

Colvin noted with the upcoming retirement of Steve Love of Love, Cody & Company, BCRC is in need of a new auditing firm. We prepared an RFP for auditing services and sent it out to seven firms. We received a single bid back from RHR Smith. Fortunately, RHR Smith is well known in the RPC circles in Vermont performing many of the other RPC's audits. In further good news, the quote came in within budget at \$12,400. Amanda has already had a planning call with RHR Smith and the firm plans to be on site in late August. Zaiac cautioned that RHR Smith had some internal staffing issues that may delay this timeline and to please be aware.

The FY24 budget is complicated due to the uncertainty around base funding elements as a result of the Governor's veto of the state budget passed by the legislature. While the state budget was finally approved on June 20, 2023, there are still some unknowns. Colvin noted his overall approach to the budget was to be conservative when it comes to estimating income and expenses, attempting to err low on income and high on expenses, if in question. As discussed and encouraged at previous Executive Committee meetings, the proposed staff salaries include some generous increases to balance compensation among factors such as program income staff is managing or generating, current employment market conditions and sustainability. It is the hope that going forward as inflation and the employment market moderate, with these adjustments, we will be back to more traditional percentage-based raises in future years. Even with the adjustments, the proposed salary to overall budget ratio is 42% (39% if all funding in the legislative budget survives), consistent with the range of 42% to 48% over the past several fiscal years.

Colvin responded to questions on various line items of the budget. Following the discussion, Monks moved approval of the FY24 budget as presented. Kearns seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously.

## Staffing Update

Dara Zink was hired and began work on June 5<sup>th</sup>. This was for a position that opened when Allison Strohl left BCRC to relocate to Minnesota to be closer to family. Dara will spend approximately half-time overseeing the Emergency Management Program and half-time supporting general land use planning and other special projects.

Samantha Page graduated from the Harvard Graduate School of Design on May 25<sup>th</sup> and has taken some time to be with family and travel before beginning her full-time position at BCRC on June 26<sup>th</sup>. Sam has already been a tremendous asset to the BCRC working five to ten hours per week since January as she finished up her degree. We are looking forward to her joining us full-time.

## Act 250/Section 248

Green Mountain Reserve/Benson Road: You will recall this application was approved and it has been appealed. BCRC comments were addressed in the findings, but the decision remains inconsistent with BCRC testimony. The decision to approve the project contains language suggesting that it should not be used to establish precedent for commercial development of this type in rural areas of the region. Previously, the BCRC through the Executive Committee determined that the best course of action is to provide testimony during the appeal process only as requested and work on an amendment to the Regional Plan to specifically address this type of “resort” development in the Plan’s Rural land use district. We have been informed that BCRC is likely to receive a subpoena to provide testimony when the case appears in front of the Court.

Shaftsbury Solar: On May 3, 2023, VT Real Estate Holdings 1 LLC (Shaftsbury Solar) filed its Section 248 petition for a Certificate of Public Good with the Vermont Public Utility Commission. As currently envisioned, this 20MW project would be tied for the largest in Vermont with an existing array in Ludlow. Neighbors and Shaftsbury community members rallied opposition to the project even in advance of a formal filing. Stop Shaftsbury Solar is well organized, and representatives have attended numerous public meetings. A meeting to allow for community input on the project was hosted by the Shaftsbury Planning Commission at Shaftsbury Elementary School on February 8<sup>th</sup>. Over 150 people attended in-person or remotely. The Shaftsbury Planning Commission reached out to BCRC requesting a proposal for BCRC to assist with the development of an enhanced energy section for the Shaftsbury Town Plan. The Shaftsbury Select Board approved our proposal and we have initiated this work with the town. The project development team held an open house for the community on May 2<sup>nd</sup> to provide additional information in several categories such as aesthetics, traffic, project engineering and design, natural resources, and others. A status call to determine a proposed calendar for the hearing process is scheduled for June 15<sup>th</sup>.

Manchester Cell Tower: A proposal by AT&T to construct a cell tower on property owned by Donald Dorr just south of Depot Street in Manchester Center is generating a lot of attention. An advance notice has been filed with the Vermont Public Service Commission. A public meeting to discuss the project took place on Tuesday, April 25<sup>th</sup> in Manchester. At that meeting the Manchester Select Board and the Manchester Planning Commission both voted unanimously to oppose the project.

Chelsea Solar: Chelsea Solar has submitted a revised plan for a 2MW solar facility in Bennington. As discussed and agreed at the October, 28, 2022 BCRC Executive Committee meeting with this third go-round of the project in Bennington; the BCRC position hasn't changed and there is no need for new testimony or involvement.

Orchid LLC: Application filed on June 7<sup>th</sup> by Bill & Stephen Drunic. Application is for a 67-room hotel and spa on 46.1 acres located across Main Street from the Manchester Town Offices. This permit would replace the previous one for an 80-room hotel on the same site.

Letter of Support – Economic Development District (attached)

Work on a submission to the United States Economic Development Administration (EDA) to establish a formal Economic Development District across Southern Vermont (Bennington and Windham counties) is nearing completion. Legal work for the formation of the entity, which will help guide revisions to and implementation of the *Southern Vermont Economic Development Strategy* is complete. BCRC staff and those from our Windham County partners spent the fall months visiting municipalities seeking letters of support as well as soliciting letters from regional businesses, and institutions. BCRC is partnering with Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and Windham Regional Commission on this effort and expects to be submitting the formal application sometime this Summer.

Kearns moved approval of the letter of support. Seconded by Monks. Approved unanimously.

Program Updates: Q&A Time with Bill & Janet

Community and Economic Development

April Career Month: April Career Month activities were back in full swing and back in person following a pause and then move to virtual platforms during the pandemic. Organized by BCRC's Workforce and Education Committee, this year over twenty events took place, including a number of open houses, class sit-ins and the return of the Financial Reality Fair. Once again, the *Bennington Banner* was a terrific partner in the endeavor hosting op-eds by regional businesses and attending and writing about several events.

Putnam Phase 2: Planning for the next phase of the Putnam Block Redevelopment is picking up steam as M&S Development has completed an initial feasibility study and a draft investor pitch deck. Investors and other funding will be sought through the fall and winter with the goal of lining up all financing by summer 2023. BCRC continues to support the effort and had a pre-development services agreement for FY23 and is working on a new one for FY24.

Southern Vermont College Redevelopment: Jonathan and Bill met with a representative of the Alfred Weissman Real Estate (AWRE) the development group hoping to attain the former Southern Vermont College campus from Southwestern Vermont Healthcare and to convert it into a high-end resort. AWRE has over fifty years experience developing hospitality and commercial properties, primarily in the Northeast. The representative noted the work BCRC did on the Everett Reuse Study and Trails Report.

BCRC will continue to serve as a resource to the developers assisting them with state, local and regional connections and weighing in on permitting issues.

**Pownal Commercial Siting Criteria Study:** A delayed round of municipal planning grant (MPG) funding is supporting this project with BCRC working with the Town of Pownal to develop siting criteria and identify potential sites for commercial and industrial uses in the community. A list of forty-seven potential sites has been presented to the Planning Commission which will be narrowed to a list of about twenty priority sites over the course of the project.

**Community Recovery & Revitalization Program (CRRP):** CRRP grants are available to for-profit, nonprofit, and municipal applicants. The funding is intended for projects making capital improvements or capital expansions that spur economic recovery and revitalization in communities across the state. Eligible projects may include those that assist industries most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic such as arts and entertainment, hospitality, agriculture, and educational services. The funding is also available for capital expenditures that support childcare and affordable housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income households, and to establish or improve municipal water and wastewater systems to build housing or create jobs through business creation and expansion. Projects must show a COVID impact. In the first round three awards were made to three Bennington County entities – \$603,776 to the Town of Manchester for a sewer line extension and water system upgrades, \$500,000 to Hale Resources for the creation of housing at the former Benn High building and \$36,944 to Bennington Museum. The Town of Dorset received \$1,000,000 for water system upgrades in Round 2. Applications still pending include one for Putnam Phase 2 and another one for Benn High. The Round 3 awards announcement is imminent.

**Southern Vermont Economy Summit:** The 6th annual Southern Vermont Economy Summit took place in Wilmington on May 23, 2023. The theme of the 2023 Southern Vermont Economy Summit is “Forging our Future” and it was a raging success bringing together just under 300 people dedicated to improving the economic conditions and lives of those living in Southern Vermont. At the Summit, BCRC’s Callie Fishburn was named one of eighteen Southern Vermont Emerging Leaders.

**Notice of Opportunity Walloomsac Inn:** Similar to the BCRC’s previous work with Southwestern Vermont Health Care and the former Southern Vermont College campus, we were hired by the Preservation Trust of Vermont to put together a Notice of Opportunity for the Walloomsac Inn. The historic structure in old Bennington is in a period of transition as the children of the prior owner contemplate its future.

**Shaftsbury Economic Development:** BCRC will be submitting a proposal to develop projects on behalf of and provide support to the Shaftsbury Economic Development Committee.

## Planning Programs

**Regional Planning:** The regional plan is coming due for an update in 2025. The current regional plan was adopted in 2015 with minor revisions and graphic improvements to the previous plan. Then in 2017, the regional energy plan was adopted, which reset the 8-year clock on plan expiration. Janet Hurley met with our counterparts at Windham Regional Commission about their effort to develop a web-based plan begun last year and anticipated for adoption in 2024. Windham planners have agreed to present their work and lessons learned at BCRC’s July commission meeting.

Municipal Planning: Work is continuing on nine municipal land use regulations as part of the bylaw modernization grant (BMG) program. This work is set to wrap up by the end of 2023 and is well under way with revisions actively being pursued in three municipalities (Shaftsbury, Stamford, Old Bennington), revisions being reviewed by five others (Sandgate, Rupert, Peru, Manchester Village, Landgrove), and monitoring of adoption of basic provisions that will remove housing barriers in one village (North Bennington). BCRC is also monitoring adoption of a revised zoning ordinance for Arlington, which was accomplished separately under Municipal Planning Grant (MPG) funds. BCRC is assisting Sunderland in the development of an application for Village Center designation for the section of the community along Route 7A near the access road to Equinox Mountain. Previously, BCRC assisted Stamford in gaining a village center designation as a precursor to the BMG bylaws work.

BCRC assisted four communities with new MPG applications:

- Woodford – relatively simple town plan update, BCRC expected to do all of the work. – **Not Awarded**
- Bennington – phase one of a town plan update focusing on public outreach, development of themes, especially around DEI. BCRC has submitted a proposal to assist with this work. – **Awarded**
- Pownal – planning and conceptual design for a “town green” or park adjacent to the new town hall, with BCRC potentially coordinating the public outreach and report development. - **Awarded**
- Manchester - a new town plan focusing on updated demographic and housing data, public outreach, and an action-oriented structure. BCRC is optimally positioned to function as the planning consultant on the effort. - **Awarded, but town asked for postponement of award due to staffing shortages.**

In addition to these grant funded efforts, BCRC has offered planning and zoning assistance to Manchester on an hourly contractual basis until staff vacancies are filled. Manchester authorized BCRC to prepare zoning revisions under this agreement.

Hurley conducted the annual land use and planning training for municipal officials on April 13<sup>th</sup> in Sunderland. There were 14 participants, 12 in-person and 2 via Zoom representing nine municipalities. We received positive feedback from participants, as well as suggestions for future trainings - including leaving more time for questions and discussion, breaking up the topic matter between multiple trainings, or allocating twice the amount of time under a brown bag lunch structure. Bill and Janet have discussed hosting quarterly municipal officials’ coffees to supplement the annual training.

Energy: The BCRC has been coordinating work statewide, with the Public Service Department, on updates to energy data, electricity generation modeling, and local and regional energy plan guidelines. Callie Fishburn has been appointed to a team of three energy planners statewide to coordinate directly with BGS, on behalf of all the RPCs, on the roll out of the MERP program. Applications are live for the \$4,000 mini-grants for public education efforts and regional municipalities have been applying for funding. In addition to this work, as noted above, BCRC has entered into an agreement with Shaftsbury to develop an enhanced energy plan. Callie Fishburn, Samantha Page, and Janet Hurley are conducting this work with Shaftsbury. A meeting to present baseline data and garner public input was held on June 14<sup>th</sup>.

Environmental: BCRC applied to the EPA for a \$500,000 Brownfields assessment grant but was not funded. We will receive a new round of \$50,000 State Brownfields funding and may request additional funds when that is committed. We are also continuing to assist towns and villages with municipal roadway general permit requirements and other stormwater management and flood resiliency projects.

There being no other business Monks moved adjournment of the meeting. Seconded by Zaiac. Approved. The meeting adjourned at 9:54am.

Respectfully submitted,

William Colvin, Director