

Vermont's Climate Action Plan

Vermont Planners Association Recommendations

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Overview

The reality of climate change makes our state's future uncertain, affecting our natural resources, the built environment, our economy and jobs, public health, food system and more we cannot anticipate. Vermont has the highest per-capita GHG emissions of any state in the region (15.6 tons). Good planning helps communities navigate uncertainty and achieve the best outcomes for all, particularly those whose voices often aren't heard. To that end, VPA is grateful for the enormous effort by the Vermont Climate Council to develop the Vermont Climate Action Plan, in synchrony with the data and updated recommendations generated in the draft Comprehensive Energy Plan and we support implementation of both Plans' recommendations.

In line with those recommendations, this is a uniquely critical time to create and align a new Capability and Development Plan (C&D Plan) with the Climate Action Plan (CAP), together with updates to other existing planning frameworks such as the municipal and regional planning statutes (24 V.S.A Chapter 117) and related energy and hazard mitigation planning. Aligning the land use policies for all these programs would enable coordinated, multi-sector land use policies to address the combined challenges of climate adaptation and mitigation, infrastructure investment, housing needs, economic development, and natural resource conservation.

Challenge

- **Local communities need help making climate resilience happen.** Both the state's response to Tropical Storm Irene and the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that local networks are most crucial in responding quickly to disruption, connecting those in need to resources, and recovering robust communities. The most important means for Vermont to meet the challenge of climate change is to support local action through planning commissions, energy committees, community resilience and watershed organizations and hazard mitigation planning.
- **Vermont must address mitigation, while equally fostering resilience and adaptation to already occurring climate impacts.** Greenhouse gas emissions obviously must be reduced, to help reduce future calamities. Equally important, the state must support communities in preparing for change driven by climate migration and more extreme weather by elevating the importance of stormwater management, fostering community self-sufficiency and social cohesion, strengthening transportation and electric grid systems, and requiring net zero cooling/heating systems in new structures.
- **Vermont must invest in infrastructure to support resilient communities.** Both the CAP and C&D Plan re-emphasize longstanding state land use policy -- the goal to encourage compact settlement patterns. A crucial barrier is inadequate water and wastewater infrastructure. Use of ARPA funds must be strategically designed to maximize the leverage of both local and state allocations that result in community water and wastewater solutions for village centers, and needed maintenance and upgrading for downtowns. Not only will this make compact settlement possible, but Vermont's rural housing future depends on it.
- **Future development and re-development needs to strategically retreat from river corridors, while demanding creative approaches to make historic centers more resilient where they stand.** Gaining consistent protection and reduction of losses statewide will require reliance on state, rather than local, regulation in many communities.

- **Vermont needs a means to integrate and coordinate land use policy and investment across state agencies.** The CAP identifies the need to invest in infrastructure, update regulations and improve data collection and analysis to better direct development to “compact centers,” as the first and primary Cross-Cutting Pathway. For this to work, action must be taken at all government levels, with consistent measures applied across government silos. There is no framework to better coordinate the decision-making and investment. In other states, a single office focused on integration has been more successful than multiple offices dedicated to climate change, planning, or directing investment.
- **Vermont needs consistent statewide mapping and data** on existing compact settlements, infrastructure service areas and capacity, showing availability sewer and water systems and other types of infrastructure supporting existing settlements. Better refined mapping of river corridors is needed in many communities to support wise land use decisions. Both the CAP and updated draft of the Comprehensive Energy Plan recommend better mapping of where development should be prevented or discouraged, as well as a study that quantifies the vehicle miles traveled and GHGs comparing compact and dispersed development, and an evaluation of the Complete Streets Program as well as a land value taxation pilot study. All require underlying data in order to move forward. The research will be an expense but is necessary to support strong land use decision-making, and to improve state policy alignment with Act 250 and local development review, to improve predictability for developers and to provide for a safer future.

Opportunity

Strong momentum behind the Climate Action Plan and the once-in-a-generation infusion of federal ARPA and infrastructure funding, provide the right moment to create stronger state level integration of policy, coordinated by one central state office close to the Governor. This will not only serve the policy basis for a renewed Capability and Development Plan and Act 250, but also address the policy frameworks needed to achieve the land use goals of the Climate Action Plan, and Vermont’s long-established intent to focus development investment on existing and planned villages and downtowns.

Recommendations

1. Fully restore allocations to the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund (MRPF). The CAP recommends a new staff position in each RPC, as well as funding the RPC’s and VHCB according to the original formula. The Municipal Planning Grants and VCGI should, likewise, be fully funded according to formula.
2. Create one State Office of Strategic Investment and Coordination to distribute funding, share best practices, and improve coordination among state agencies. The Office should be charged with integrating state policy, implementing the Climate Action Plan recommendations related to land use, and aligning them with Act 250, municipal and regional planning processes, and other relevant plans. The Office would also assist in prioritizing climate planning and investment in the allocation of state and federal funding.
3. Create a summer study committee, to include representation from state agencies, regional planning commissions, municipalities, the Vermont Planning Association, and allied organizations, to recommend revisions to the planning half of Title 24, Chapter 117, Sections 4302, 4348a and 4382, in order to modernize the law and integrate climate mitigation and adaptation into municipal and regional plans. A reasonable appropriation, \$100,000, will be needed by the Department of Housing & Community Development for a staff person to support this, and other work being recommended here.

4. Fund consultant review and assessment of effectiveness of state designation programs, the Complete Streets Program, and a shared state agency partnership (VTrans, ACCD, ANR, PSD and other entities interested in land use) to develop a research agenda to collect data that addresses the value of compact development.
5. Provide VCGI with the funding and authority to organize data collection, analysis, and interagency/sector policy buy-in on data needed to help communities navigate climate change uncertainty and achieve the best outcomes for all. Please see VPA's position paper on the Capability and Development Plan for more specific information on how this tool could help.
6. Refresh and update Act 250 in keeping with the Climate Action Plan recommendations.
7. Revise state oversight of river corridors to recognize that different standards and tools are needed within existing settlements, including residential and mixed use areas surrounding but outside the designated centers.

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VPA is a non-profit advocacy and educational organization of nearly 200 planners and related professionals. We are dedicated to the advancement of community planning in Vermont at the local, regional, and state levels, to foster vibrant communities and a healthy environment.

Our membership is diverse, including municipal planners, regional planning commission staff, private planning consultants, state planning professionals, etc. We also work to coordinate VPA's advocacy and education with other groups involved in planning policy such as VAPDA (VT Association of Planning & Development Agencies), VLCT, and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.



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