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## Introduction to Planning in Vermont

Since 1960, a remarkable transformation has occurred in the economy of Vermont, which is moving away from its traditional bases in agriculture, natural resources, and manufacturing toward its new bases in the post-industrial age: service industries, tourism, information industries and high technology manufacturing. This transformation has been accompanied by, and in part fueled by, rapid population growth and physical development at a scale without precedent in Vermont history.

—Vermont Law School, *Vermont's Next Decade of Growth: Development Policies for the 1980's, June 1985*

The economic transformation in the state over the last thirty-five years, and the population changes associated with it, stimulates the need for communities to examine their current conditions and their prospects for the future. To benefit from change, communities must recognize and understand the problems and opportunities that they face and must identify their goals for the future. Communities have a choice in the ways they can provide for orderly growth, balance the natural and built environments, provide for community functions and services, and respect their heritage - the settlement patterns, neighborhoods, town centers, and rural landscapes that have evolved with time. This opportunity to choose a future is a fundamental reason for planning.

Over 90% of Vermont's cities and towns are engaged in a planning process to address problems and opportunities and to meet goals. While these plans often have proven satisfactory during periods of little or no growth, many municipalities have found them to be inadequate in light of new challenges.

Critical planning issues face Vermont municipalities today. These issues vary from community to community. Some towns have emerged as suburban growth areas with sprawling residential subdivisions, congested commercial strips, and spacious industrial and business parks. These towns are now confronted with the loss of open space, the demand for urban services, and a need to redefine their image. The urban centers these suburban towns surround are striving to maintain the viability of their downtowns, to respond to low- and moderate-priced housing shortages, and to

### 1.1 Need for Planning

upgrade antiquated water systems, storm drainage systems, and streets.

Some rural communities are experiencing piecemeal, large-lot subdivision that wastes valuable farmland and forest land and increases housing costs beyond the reach of many residents. Once distinctive centers for rural life, villages often are indistinguishable from the rapidly developing landscape around them. In resort areas, large-scale vacation home developments are concentrated at the bases of ski areas and along local access roads. At peak periods of the year, the small towns that serve the resorts suddenly face big city problems—traffic congestion, inadequate sewage disposal and water supply, and the need for police protection.

The effects of vacation home development on towns may not be clear. Real estate prices generally rise, making it very difficult for people who grew up in or work in a resort community to own a home there. Roads and utilities may need to be expanded or upgraded. Even schools that may not be affected when a home is a vacation retreat may need to be enlarged if vacation homes are converted to year-round use.

Communities also are realizing that many of the issues they face cannot be solved on a local basis. Some towns have found that the location of a large employer in a neighboring town has increased housing development within their boundaries. Some municipalities have found inefficiencies in trying to solve problems, such as solid waste disposal and traffic congestion, without cooperating with other towns.

Economic changes in the state have created booms in some regions, while other areas have been bypassed by the new prosperity. Several urban centers have suffered serious economic decline after the loss of major employers, while remote towns that once had thriving farms and productive forests have seen young people and families move away.

A well grounded economic development element in a municipal plan can encourage and facilitate appropriate development. It can guide people seeking to build housing or start a business in town. It can also help the municipality avoid doing things that might inadvertently discourage desirable development. A plan can also reduce the likelihood of conflict arising around development, and can ease the local and state permit process. District environmental commissions rely on municipal plans unless the issue is one of substantial regional impact; a strong economic development element can help clarify the town's intentions as to projects regulated by Act 250.

Uncontrolled land development threatens Vermont's finite resource areas, such as shorelines, watercourses, wetlands, natural

areas, ridgetops, historic sites and districts, lands needed for public recreation and open space, and productive farmland and forest land. Once these resources are physically altered or subdivided, the opportunities for preservation, public access, or management are severely limited or lost altogether.

Vermont communities today are looking for ways to manage their growth, to plan for future facilities in a fiscally responsible way, and to deal with the cumulative effects of piecemeal, uncoordinated development. They are seeking solutions to allow increased appropriate development while protecting open spaces and agricultural resources. Communities are trying to find ways to provide housing at prices that are affordable to area residents. Municipalities are studying and implementing ways to meet their capital investment needs.

#### *1.2.1. Planning Law in Vermont*

Two major pieces of legislation have established the framework for planning in Vermont. The first is **24 V.S.A. chapter 117**, the Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act, also known as the Vermont Planning and Development Act or Chapter 117. The second is **10 V.S.A. chapter 151**, known as Act 250, which regulates land use and development projects.

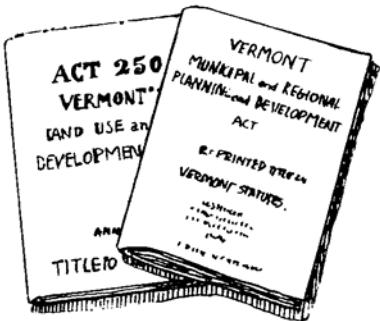
Chapter 117 was originally enacted in 1967. It permitted the establishment of municipal and regional planning commissions, and set forth general purposes to guide them. Municipalities were given the option to develop plans and implement them through regulations and a capital budget and program. The standards and procedures to which municipalities must adhere in their planning programs were prescribed. The law has been amended over the years, and in 1988 significant amendments were enacted that are popularly known as Act 200.

Municipalities still have the option to plan or not plan, however, they are all members of regional planning commissions. Regional planning commissions have to prepare a regional plan. Another important aspect of Act 200 is the requirement that state agencies that affect land use prepare a plan every two years.

The second piece of legislation, Act 250, sets forth state policies on land use and development to guide municipalities and regional and state agencies. It also establishes criteria to be considered during a development review process for projects meeting the definition of "development" or "subdivision."

The policies in Act 250 and the stated purposes of Chapter 117 should be followed in the preparation of municipal plans. Details as to how to utilize these policies in local plans can be found in Chapter 5.

## **1.2 Framework for Planning in Vermont**



### 1.2.2 Planning Goals in Vermont

The Vermont Planning and Development Act sets forth general purposes that have been part of planning law in Vermont since it was first enacted in 1967. In short, the general purpose and intent of Chapter 117 is to encourage appropriate development of lands in the state in a manner which will promote public health, safety, welfare, prosperity, and comfort; to protect areas from overcrowding, traffic congestion, and loss of peace, quiet and privacy; to facilitate the creation of an optimum environment; and to provide the means and methods for municipalities and regions to plan for eliminating and preventing development problems and to implement those plans. See **24 V.S.A. §4302(a)** for the full text of the purposes.

Recent amendments have added process and substantive goals, which represent generally accepted planning practices, to guide municipal, regional and state agency planners in achieving those purposes. The goals also provide a framework for the coordinated planning process envisioned by the legislature. In 1989, all regional planning commissions devised "implementation guidelines" to help themselves and member towns address all the goals as they developed their plans. Even though the substance of the goals was simplified in 1990, the guidelines are still useful for local planners.

Figure 1.1 lists the four process goals as they are found in **24 V.S.A. §4302(b)**. The statute also sets out 12 substantive planning goals in **24 V.S.A. §4302(c)**. These are shown in Figure 1.2.

### 1.2.3 The Vermont Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act

The Vermont Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act provides the framework for municipalities to achieve orderly development in accordance with duly adopted plans. Chapter 117 specifies the process, requirements, and guidelines by which municipal plans are to be developed, reviewed, and adopted. The Act includes guidelines and requirements for the content of plans, timelines, and adoption and amendment procedures. Chapter 117 enables the establishment of municipal planning commissions and sets forth their terms, method of appointment, powers, and duties. Communities that have prepared and adopted plans are authorized to adopt bylaws that conform with the plans. Chapter 117 spells out precise procedures for bylaw adoption, administration, and enforcement. It enables the adoption of capital budgets and programs for communities that have adopted facilities and services plans. Finally, it authorizes the establishment of

**Figure 1.1**  
**VERMONT PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT ACT**  
**PROCESS GOALS**

1. To establish a coordinated, comprehensive planning process and policy framework [that] shall guide decisions by municipalities, regional planning commissions, and state agencies.
2. To encourage citizen participation at all levels of the planning process, and to assure that decisions shall be made at the most local level possible commensurate with their impact.
3. To consider the use of resources and the consequences of growth and development for the region, the state, as well as the community in which it takes place.
4. To encourage and assist municipalities to work creatively together to develop and implement plans.

regional planning commissions and the adoption of regional plans.

The 1988 amendments to Chapter 117 were enacted in recognition of the increasingly complex nature of our changing society. The actions of one town increasingly affect its neighbors, and this reality has led us to change some of our ways as independent municipalities. Commercial development along a highway may affect traffic in several towns. The employees of new businesses in one town may live in an adjacent town, which then will have to provide public services without the benefit of the increased tax base. Some issues should be resolved at a regional level. For example, with new environmental standards for lined landfills, it no longer makes sense for each town within a region to have its own place to dispose of trash.

Considering these factors, the 1988 amendments called for coordination among towns, regions and state agencies as they prepare their plans and encourages public participation throughout the process. Decisions are to be made at the most local level possible commensurate with the impact of the decision.

A key change in the law requires that state agency plans be compatible with town plans that have been approved by the regional planning commission. The approval process is also one of coordination and compatibility. The municipal representatives to a regional planning commission may vote on the sufficiency of a town's plan if the town so chooses. This peer review enables one

town to point out the potential spillover effect of another town's plan and is intended to raise the effectiveness of town plans by allowing these concerns to be worked out early in the process. Compatibility of local plans should help state agency plans to achieve, in turn, compatibility with those approved plans.

The criteria for regional review for approval are listed in **24 V.S.A. §4350(b)**. In order to approve a municipal plan, the regional planning commission must find that it is consistent with the state planning goals established in **24 V.S.A. §4302(b)**, that it is compatible with the regional plan, that it is compatible with approved plans of other municipalities in the region, and that it contains all the elements included in **24 V.S.A. §4382(a)(1)-(10)**. The process of this review for approval is discussed further in Section 2.4.7 of this manual.

Another 1988 amendment was the creation of the Council of Regional Commissions to review regional and state agency plans, and

**Figure 1.2**  
**VERMONT PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT ACT**  
**SUBSTANTIVE PLANNING GOALS**

1. To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside.
  - A. Intensive residential development should be encouraged primarily in areas related to community centers, and strip development along highways should be discouraged.
  - B. Economic growth should be encouraged in locally designated growth areas, or employed to revitalize existing village and urban centers, or both.
  - C. Public investments, including the construction or expansion of infrastructure, should reinforce the general character and planned growth patterns of the area.
2. To provide a strong and diverse economy that provides satisfying and rewarding job opportunities and that maintains high environmental standards, and to expand economic opportunities in areas with high unemployment or low per capita incomes.
3. To broaden access to educational and vocational training opportunities sufficient to ensure the full realization of the abilities of all Vermonters.
4. To provide for safe, convenient, economic and energy efficient transportation systems that respect the integrity of the natural environment, including public transit options and paths for pedestrians and bicyclers.
  - A. Highway, air, rail and other means of transportation should be mutually supportive, balanced and integrated.
5. To identify, protect and preserve important natural and historic features of the Vermont landscape, including:
  - A. Significant natural and fragile areas;
  - B. Outstanding water resources, including lakes, rivers, aquifers, shorelands, and wetlands;
  - C. Significant scenic roads, waterways and views; and
  - D. Important historic structures, sites, or districts, archaeological sites and archaeologically sensitive areas.
6. To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife and land resources.
  - A. Vermont's air, water, wildlife, mineral and land resources should be planned for use and development according to the principles set forth in 10 V.S.A. section 6086(a).

to help resolve disputes by non-adversarial means or, as a last resort, by an administrative procedure. The Council is a statewide body consisting of municipal and regional planners, state agency heads and members of the public.

As the source of the enabling authority for municipal planning actions, Chapter 117 is an indispensable guide and tool for the development of municipal plans.

#### *1.2.4. Municipal Planning Programs in Vermont*

A major incentive for planning in Vermont was provided from the late 1950's to the 1970's by the "701" grant program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Urban municipalities in Vermont were the first recipients of funds from this program. Later, funds were made available to regional

7. To encourage the efficient use of energy and the development of renewable energy resources.
8. To maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for Vermont residents and visitors
  - A. Growth should not significantly diminish the value and availability of outdoor recreational activities.
  - B. Public access to noncommercial outdoor recreational opportunities, such as lakes and hiking trails, should be identified, provided and protected wherever appropriate.
9. To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries.
  - A. Strategies to protect long-term viability of agricultural and forest lands should be encouraged and should include maintaining low overall density.
  - B. The manufacture and marketing of value-added agricultural and forest products should be encouraged.
  - C. The use of locally-grown food products should be encouraged.
  - D. Sound forest and agricultural management practices should be encouraged.
  - E. Public investment should be planned so as to minimize development pressure on agricultural and forest land.
10. To provide for the wise and efficient use of Vermont's natural resources and to facilitate the appropriate extraction of earth resources and the proper restoration and preservation of the aesthetic qualities of the area.
11. To ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing for all Vermonters.
  - A. Housing should be encouraged to meet the needs of a diversity of social and income groups in each Vermont community, particularly for those citizens of low and moderate income.
  - B. New and rehabilitated housing should be safe, sanitary, located conveniently to employment and commercial centers, and coordinated with the provisions of necessary public facilities and utilities.
  - C. Sites for multi-family and manufactured housing should be readily available in locations similar to those generally used for single-family conventional dwellings.
12. To plan for, finance and provide an efficient system of public facilities and services to meet future needs.
  - A. Public facilities and services should include fire and police protection, emergency medical services, schools, water supply and sewage and solid waste disposal.
  - B. The rate of growth should not exceed the ability of the community and the area to provide facilities and services.

planning commissions, which assisted towns in the development of plans and bylaws. As a result, a majority of both urban and rural municipalities in Vermont had plans and zoning bylaws by the mid-1970's.

After the demise of the HUD "701" program, funding of the regional planning commissions was continued by the State of Vermont. The 1988 amendments to Chapter 117 for the first time made state funds directly available to municipalities for planning, and significantly increased state funding for regional planning commissions. The source of these funds is the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund, which receives a percentage of the funds brought in by an increase in the property transfer tax.

Both municipal and regional planning commissions receive state funding based on formulas established by rules of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs. The legislature directed the Department to consider the following factors in developing the rules for dispensing funds to municipalities: population; indicators of growth, such as grand list, local development permit activity, and property transfer tax activity; level of development activity in nearby municipalities; community need indicators, such as per capita income and percentage of population considered lower income; and existing level of municipal and financial support for planning. The legislature originally directed that a minimum level of funding be made available under the formula to all municipalities. See **24 V.S.A. §4306.**

However, in hard economic times, the legislature subsequently has waived municipal funding by formula for a given year and directed the Department to allocate funds according to a competitive process in which not all municipalities are funded.

Municipalities contribute funds to their regional planning commissions according to policies established by each region. Regional planning commissions collect and maintain data, and provide technical assistance to municipalities in the preparation and amendment of plans, and the development of bylaws to implement them. Each region and its member towns have devised the manner in which these services are provided and supported.

There are special purpose planning programs in Vermont, such as the Community Development Block Grant program, administered by the Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

## 1.3 Responsibility for Planning

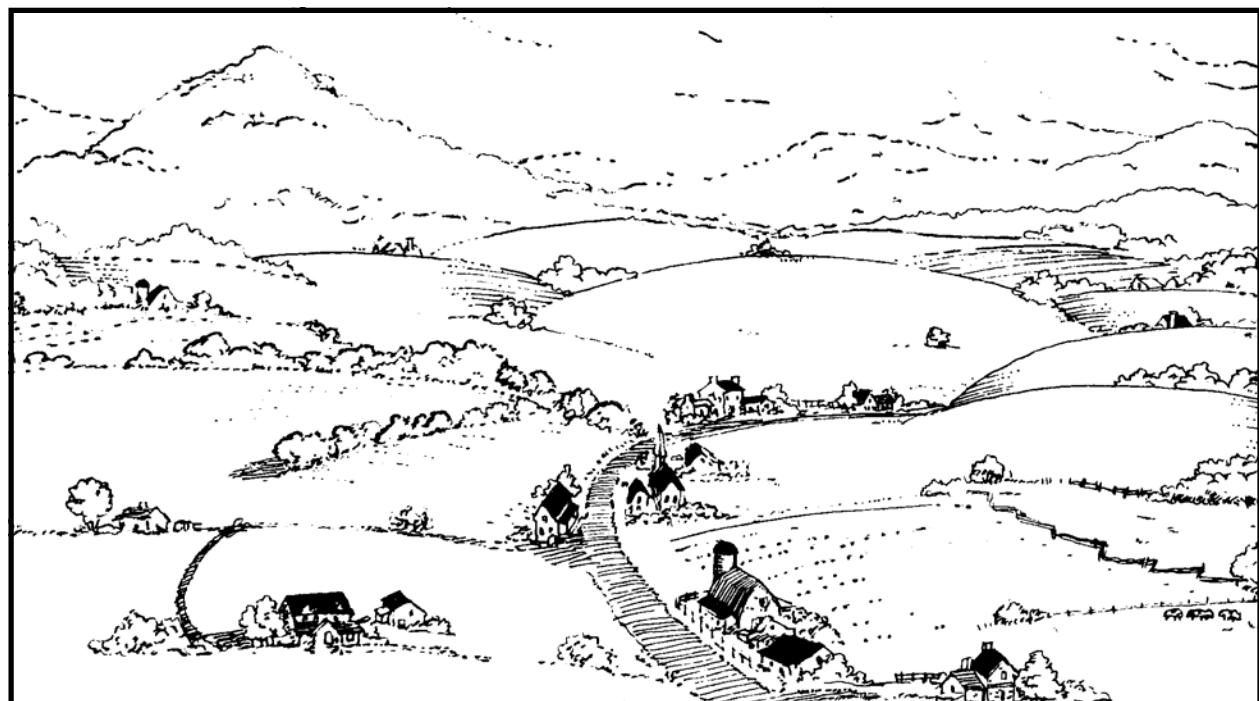
### 1.3.1 Role of the Municipality

Any municipality may undertake a comprehensive planning program including related preliminary planning and engineering studies, and prepare, maintain and implement a plan within its jurisdiction in accordance with this chapter. **24 V.S.A. §4381(a)**.

Not only is it the municipality's role to undertake local planning activities, but also to participate in regional and state planning programs. As members of the regional planning commission, municipalities participate in the decisions of the commission, including the adoption of the regional plan. Through their legislative bodies and planning commissions, municipalities are parties to the review of applications under Act 250.

### 1.3.2 Role of the Regional Planning Commission

There are twelve regional planning commissions in Vermont. These commissions were formed by towns to provide a continuing program for comprehensive and functional area-wide planning. The powers and duties of regional planning commissions include, but are not limited to:



- promotion of intermunicipal cooperation and coordinated development
- provision of technical assistance to municipalities for the preparation and maintenance of plans, studies, bylaws, and other implementation activities
- preparation of and amendments to regional plans and related preliminary planning and engineering studies
- preparation of studies and recommendations on land development,
- urban renewal and beautification, transportation and scenic preservation, and conservation of energy
- implementation of programs in cooperation with municipalities for appropriate development, improvement, protection and preservation of the region's physical and human resources

See **24 V.S.A. §§4345 and 4345a** for the full text of regional planning commission duties, both optional and mandatory.

The plan that a regional planning commission is now required to prepare is intended to accomplish the following general purposes, set forth in **24 V.S.A. §4347**:

- guiding coordinated, efficient, and economically sound development in the region
- promoting the health, safety, order, convenience, prosperity, and welfare of the region's inhabitants
- accomplishing efficiency and economy in the process of development

Municipalities in Vermont find the regional planning commissions valuable resources for background data and maps; suggested planning goals, objectives, and policies; techniques for implementing plans; assistance in program development and administration; and information on regional trends, development patterns, and issues. Therefore, the regional planning commissions can and do play an important role in the municipal planning process.

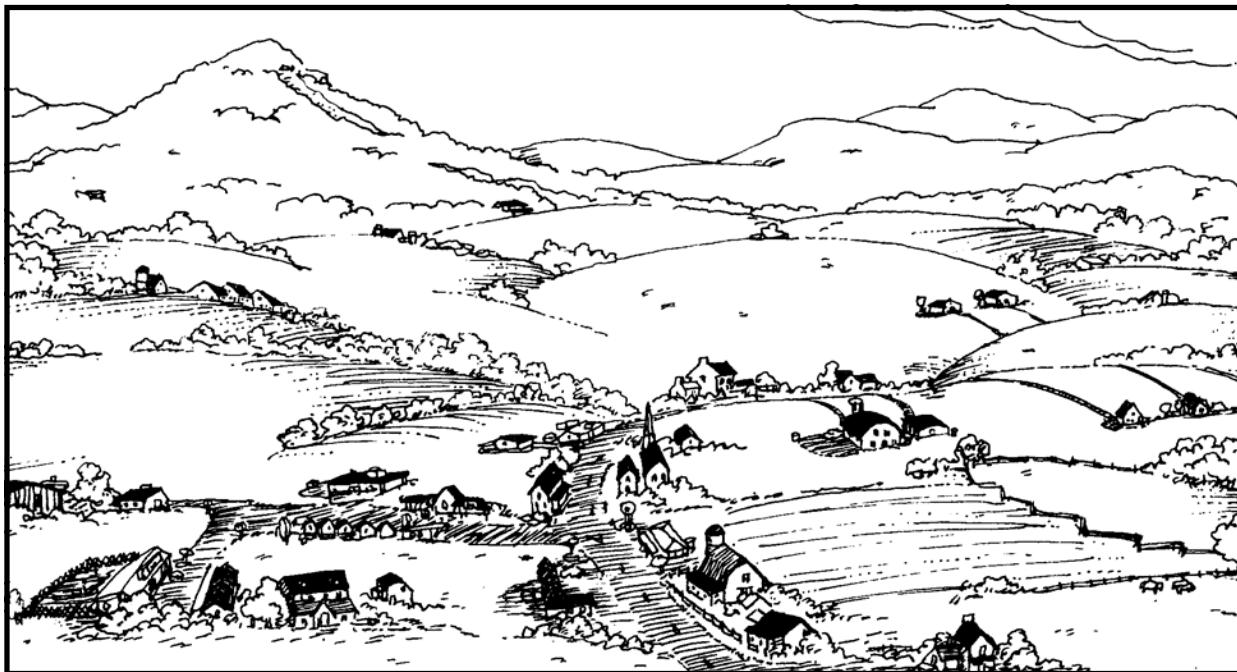
#### *1.3.3 Role of the State*

The State of Vermont through its legislative and executive branches establishes the authority for local and regional planning, sets forth planning policies and guidelines, and undertakes its own planning for state capital investments, transportation, housing, social services, economic development, and environmental protection.

The Vermont legislature adopts the laws under which municipalities are authorized to plan. Chapter 117, described above, is the primary law guiding local and regional planning. Municipalities operating under charters may also be authorized to undertake planning or planning-related actions by legislative approval or charter amendments. The legislature also adopts laws that affect local and regional planning. Act 250 (the State Land Use and Development Law), environmental protection laws, taxation laws, and authorizations for grant and loan programs are examples of legislation that affect land use planning. These statutes may contain standards, policies, and guidelines that affected or participating municipalities must follow.

The executive branch of the state government is responsible for the development of the capital budget for state investments. These investments—including road improvements, municipal water pollution control and water supply facilities, local and state recreation land acquisition and development, and government buildings, such as courthouses, administrative offices and jails—affect both the way municipalities grow and the nature and pattern of their development.

State agencies also undertake planning for the activities and resources for which they are responsible. There are plans for solid waste management, air quality, transportation, housing, and outdoor recreation, to name a few. These plans are usually implemented and administered through state capital investments, regulatory programs, grant and loan programs. See Appendix D



for a list of state plans.

In addition to the planning that agencies have previously engaged in, a new role for certain state agencies was created by the 1988 amendments. Title 3 V.S.A. §§4020 and 4021 provide that the Governor identify those agencies that have programs or take actions affecting land use, and that the identified agencies prepare plans. Each agency's plan, planning process, and programs and actions must be "consistent" with the goals of 24 V.S.A. §4302, and "compatible" with the plans of municipalities with approved plans, regional planning commissions and other state agencies. This policy changes the way state agencies will have to deal with municipalities and regional planning commissions. State agencies will have to work closely with local governments and regional planning commissions to ensure that state programs and actions are compatible with policies set out in local and regional plans.

#### *1.3.4 Role of the Council of Regional Commissions*

The Council of Regional Commissions was created under 24 V.S.A. §4305 for purposes of review and coordination. The Council consists of one representative selected by each of the twelve regional planning commissions. That Council member must be a municipal representative to the region. In addition, the Governor appoints five members: three state agency or department heads, and two representatives of the public. The Council, therefore, reflects the opinions of municipal and regional planners from all areas of the state, and the perspective of high state government officials and the public as well.

The role of the Council is to provide a forum where regional and state agency plans may be reviewed for their consistency with the planning goals, and their compatibility with other plans. The Council reviews proposed regional plans and amendments to determine whether the plan contains all the elements required by law, and whether it is consistent with the planning goals and compatible with other regional plans. In addition, a town may ask the Council to review a regional plan for compatibility with an approved municipal plan. Every five years, the Council reviews adopted regional plans. Lack of funding for the council has kept it inactive since 1995. It exists in statute and appointments only, but could be activated whenever necessary to respond to an appeal.

Every two years, state agencies are to adopt or readopt their plans, and a two-step Council review is part of that biennial process. The Council reviews proposed state agency plans to determine if they are consistent with the planning goals, and compatible with the plans of the regions and other agencies. A

town may ask the Council to review a state agency plan for compatibility with its approved plan. The Council then makes comments and recommendations to the agencies. After the agencies have adopted their plans, which they are to do by January 1 of each odd-numbered year, the Council reviews the adopted plans and writes an evaluation that is sent to the Governor, the legislative leadership and the regional planning commissions. Copies are available to the public on request. The Council's review functions provide an important avenue for coordination among municipal, regional and state agency planners. With the council's functions basically suspended, the review of state agency plans has also been suspended.

The Council's dispute resolution functions are also part of the legislative scheme for a coordinated planning process. On request, the Council offers mediation services and conducts a "formal review" of certain regional planning commission decisions.

Mediation may be requested at any time when a dispute arises between a regional planning commission and a state agency or a municipality. This informal procedure allows the parties to the dispute to select a neutral third party to help manage the process by which the parties discuss their interests and try to find a solution satisfactory to all involved. The mediator has no power to impose a decision on the parties, but rather helps them articulate their concerns as clearly as possible. The parties participate actively in the search for a solution, and therefore have a vested interest in making it work.



"Formal review" may be requested after a regional planning commission has confirmed or declined to confirm a municipal planning process, acted on a request for approval of a municipal plan, or adopted its own plan. The law sets forth the people and entities that can request or become parties to a formal review, and the criteria for each review. The formal review is an administrative procedure. Parties do not need to have lawyers, although they do need to present the facts and their arguments as clearly and concisely as possible. The formal review is conducted by three members of the Council of Regional Commissions who constitute a "regional review panel." The ruling of the panel may be appealed to the Vermont Supreme Court. However, the court does not hear new facts; it merely looks at the record of the proceedings before the panel. Therefore, it is important for the parties to present their facts and arguments fully to the panel.

### *1.3.5 Union Municipal Districts*

The original boundary lines for Vermont towns were established in the eighteenth century, often with little regard for the lay of the land or for patterns of settlement. These artificial, political delineations frequently conflict with the actual natural and socio-economic conditions. Neighboring towns commonly share transportation networks, surface water drainage areas, recreation facilities, and employment centers. Where such "communities of interest" involving two or more towns exist, it may be advisable to create a multitown planning process. The Mad River Planning District, comprising the municipalities of Fayston, Waitsfield and Warren, is an example of a multitown planning district. The regional planning commissions, described in the preceding section, do approach issues from an area-wide perspective, but they too have fixed, predetermined geographic areas that may not fit the need.

In such cases, towns may consider the authority provided them through **24 V.S.A. chapter 121** to create a union municipal district. The enabling statute is quite flexible and grants the union municipal district any powers that "are exercised or are capable of exercise by any of its participating municipalities, and are necessary or desirable for dealing with problems of mutual concern." **24 V.S.A. §4866**. Within this context, a district could be merely a forum for the discussion of issues and exchange of information, or it could be a jointly administered planning and regulatory program. By pooling resources and by drawing upon their combined population base, towns cooperating in such a district may find that they can carry out more sophisticated and comprehensive planning. It is important to emphasize, however,

that a union municipal district has only those authorities and responsibilities that its member towns choose to grant it.

#### 1.3.6 Solid Waste Districts

In 1987, the legislature passed Act 78 concerning the management of solid waste in the State of Vermont. The new law established a hierarchy of priorities for the future management of solid waste: reduction in generation of waste; reuse and recycling; processing to reduce volume needing disposal; and, finally, land disposal of residuals.

The law also required that planning for solid waste management, although still a responsibility of the municipalities, be done at a regional level. Municipalities must either join a regional solid waste district or work with their regional planning commissions. The solid waste district is an example of a union municipal district. Each solid waste district is required to adopt a regional plan for the management of solid waste within the district. For towns not belonging to a solid waste district, the regional planning commission must adopt such a plan.

While the state was made responsible for developing a State Solid Waste Management Plan describing overall state strategy for implementing requirements of Act 78 and for providing technical and financial assistance to the regional entities, Act 78 clearly placed the responsibility for management and facility decisions on the regional and local entities.

### 1.4 The Planning Process

The single most important planning function of the municipality is to prepare and maintain the comprehensive municipal plan. Developing the plan is usually the community's introduction to the planning process. Once embarked upon, the planning process is continual—the completion of one step will lead to the next step. Each step in the process is critical to good planning. Communities should be aware of all the steps regardless of the step in which they are currently involved.

The **first step** in this process is the *formulation of the planning program*. During this step, planners design the program for developing or amending the plan and identify sources for technical assistance. This step provides the framework under which municipalities proceed to develop their plans.

In the **second step**, planners *collect and analyze background information*. This step begins with a preliminary assessment of the community's aspirations, problems, and opportunities and is followed by intensive data gathering and study. Make an inventory

of the natural environment, existing structures and current land uses in town, and the educational and economic resources of the community. Such information is essential for further defining the problems and opportunities confronting the municipality and for evaluating the alternative approaches to solving planning issues.

The **third step** is *establishment of goals and objectives*. Goals and objectives provide a coherent vision for the community and guide recommended actions to implement the plan.

The **fourth step** is the *preparation of the plan*. In this step the municipality will set forth its specific plans for land use, transportation, community facilities and services, and the other topics described in the planning goals. These plans will address the planning issues defined in the second step and will be designed to meet the goals and objectives developed in the third step.

An important part of the plan is the implementation program. The program defines the specific actions the municipality will take to implement the plan and carry out the goals and objectives. These actions provide the specific measurements for evaluating progress in carrying out the plan. Often the implementation program includes identified areas for further detailed study that the plan itself is unable to adequately address.

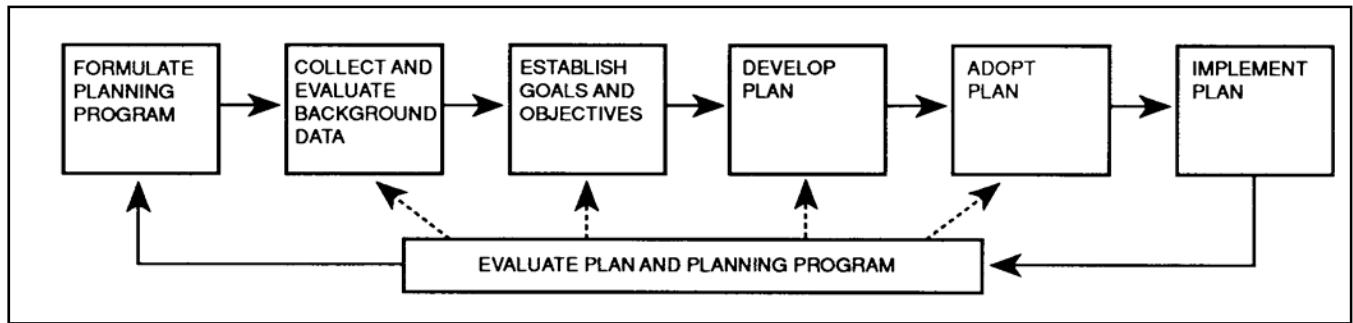
The **fifth step** in this process is *adoption of the plan*. In the past, all town plans were adopted by vote of the legislative body. Now, a town may also publish a warning for a regular or special town meeting to determine whether the voters want to adopt their plan by Australian ballot. If the voters select the Australian ballot option, the voting to adopt the plan is warned and conducted. The 1990 amendments to Chapter 117 permits a town to decide whether it will submit its plan to the regional planning commission for approval, and, if so, whether to submit it before or after the town adopts the plan.

The **sixth step** is the *implementation of the plan*. In this step, regulations are adopted, amended, administered, and enforced. Other actions, such as the adoption and maintenance of a capital program or the administration of a community development program, may occur in this step as well. Through implementation, the goals, policies, and recommendations of the plan are carried out.

Planning is an ongoing process requiring evaluation, updating, and amendment to fit changing needs and opportunities. Therefore, the cycle of the planning process begins anew following the **seventh step** *evaluation of the plan and planning program*.

Figure 1.3 illustrates the planning process.

Figure 1.3



## 1.5 A Coordinated Planning Process

The Vermont planning goals address both the planning process and the substantive issues surrounding development and preservation of resources. A major goal is to establish a coordinated, comprehensive planning process and policy framework to guide decision-making by municipalities, regional planning commissions and state agencies. A second important goal encourages citizen participation at all levels of the planning process, and seeks to assure that decisions will be made at the most local level possible commensurate with their impact. Taken together, these goals are at the heart of the planning process in Vermont.

*Municipalities* are directed by law to solicit public participation, and to hold working sessions at times and places that are intended to make it easy for people to attend and participate. When a town has developed a plan, it must send copies to neighboring towns, the regional planning commission, and, on prior written request, to business, conservation, low income advocacy and other groups. If one town has a concern with another town's plan, the towns are urged to try to resolve the dispute in an informal, amicable way. If they are unable to do so by themselves, the regional planning commissions have the specific duty of convening an ad hoc working group to address the issues.

A town also participates in the coordinated planning process as a member of its regional planning commission. By law, each regional planning commission must decide what constitutes substantial regional impact in that region. By participating in defining substantial regional impact, a municipal representative helps determine whether a project will be controlled by the regional plan or the town plan if the plans conflict.

In addition to helping coordinate the planning activities of member towns, *regional planning commissions* must communicate with each other during the planning process, and their plans must be compatible with those of adjoining regional planning

commissions.

*State agencies* are also part of this coordinated planning process. Their plans, planning process, programs and actions must be compatible with regional and approved municipal plans. A coordinated planning process depends on timely communication and assistance among towns, regional planning commissions, and state agencies. Establishing such a network may seem like a formidable task. However, most regional planning commissions consider providing planning services and technical assistance to member towns to be their primary function. Therefore, the regional planning commissions are very likely to be aware of the areas where coordination is needed among member towns and between a town and the region. In addition, the Department of Housing and Community Affairs is working with other state agencies, the regional planning commissions, and the towns to establish procedures for conveying relevant planning information between towns and state agencies. A town should also contact relevant state agencies directly to communicate about the respective planning processes of the town and the agency. Conversely, an agency should contact a town that is in the process of planning to discuss issues that are or should be addressed in both the agency and the town plan.