

FY2018-2020

Better Connections Grant Program Application Guidelines



Program Website:
[http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/
better-connections](http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/better-connections)



Better Connections Grant Program

Vermont Agency of Transportation

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development

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Better Connections Application Checklist

Download the Cover Sheet, Resolution Form, Application Form, and this application packet at: http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/Better_Connections. The website also shares examples of previous successful Better Connections applications, a list of funded Better Connections projects, and additional support documents.

Applications are due Wednesday, **January 31, 2018** at 4:00 PM and **MUST** be submitted **BOTH** electronically and in hard copy.

Electronically submitted application materials must include:

- Grant Application Cover Sheet** **1 page**
To be completed by the local project manager. An authorized signature is necessary on one of the five mailed paper copies. (Page 2 of the [Grant Application Instructions & Form](#).)
- Grant Application Form** **10 single-sided pages**
Complete pages 3-7 of the [Grant Application Instructions & Form](#) - Must not exceed 10 single sided pages, with a minimum of 11-point font. Excess pages will be discarded.
- Resolution Form** **1 page**
A letter of support from the legislative body of the municipality, such as selectboard, village trustees or city council. (Page 9 of the [Grant Application Instructions & Form](#).)
- Confirmed Planning Process Letter** **1 page**
From the municipality's regional planning commission.
- District Contact** **1 page**
Documentation of contact with VTrans District Office if project is on the State System.
- Project Area Map** **1 map**
Include a clearly annotated map that delineates the project area, key features, issues and opportunities.
- Appendices** **no page limit**
To include additional supporting documents, including previous planning studies, capital improvements, private investments and ongoing grants and projects.

Electronic applications are due 4:00PM, Wednesday, January 31, 2018. Email them to Jackie.Cassino@vermont.gov. Put the municipality's name and project in the subject line. If your materials exceed 10MB, divide them into two emails and include 1 of 2 and 2 of 2 in the subject line. Request a Read Receipt if you want confirmation that your application had been received.

If you encounter any issues with the electronic submittal process, please contact:

Jackie Cassino, VTrans Better Connections Program Manager
Jackie.Cassino@vermont.gov (802) 272-2368

Also mail or hand-deliver five (5) paper copies of all electronically submitted application materials. Paper copies must have an original signature and be submitted on white, 8-1/2" x 11" recycled paper. No covers or additional binding.

Mailed applications must be POSTMARKED by January 31, 2018 and sent to:

Jackie Cassino, Planning Coordinator
VT Agency of Transportation
Policy and Planning
1 National Life Drive
Montpelier, VT 05633

Introduction and Grant Basics

The Better Connections Grant Program (the Program) invites municipalities to apply for funding in the 2018 grant cycle. The annual Program is a competitive grant reimbursement program available to Vermont municipalities outside of Chittenden County¹ with approximately \$200,000 in total funding available, inclusive of a 10% local cash match. Awards may range between \$35,000 and \$67,500. Projects are selected on a competitive basis. The Program represents a cooperative effort between state agencies to align state and local investments to increase transportation options and build resilience and economic vitality in Vermont's community centers.

The Program is a joint effort of two state agencies: The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) and the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD). The Program is primarily funded by the federal transportation legislation, Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, under an agreement with the Federal Highway Administration, with additional staff support and funding provided by the State of Vermont, ACCD and VTrans. Awarded projects are administrated by VTrans on behalf of a local jurisdiction according to state and federal requirements.

Purpose & Objectives

By providing resources and state assistance, the Program encourages municipalities to proactively coordinate land use decisions with transportation investments that build community resilience, with a particular emphasis on projects that support the implementation of innovative transportation and land use concepts. The Program works in partnership with municipalities and other stakeholders to accomplish the following objectives:

- Provides safe, multi-modal and resilient transportation system that supports the Vermont economy
- Supports downtown and village economic development and revitalization efforts
- Leads directly to project implementation (demonstrated by community capacity and readiness to implement)

Priority consideration will be given to projects that:

1. Are located within (or adjacent to) a state designated downtown, village center, neighborhood development area, new town center or growth center. (To determine if your community has a state designation, visit the [Vermont Planning Atlas](#)).
2. Represent inter-municipal efforts.
3. Demonstrate a local commitment to the project (as represented by the commitment of in-kind staff services, an overmatch of local funds, strong community and partner support (evidenced through letters of support) or complementary local activities or initiatives).

Eligible Applicants

Applicants must be a unit of local government (town, city, or village) in Vermont outside of Chittenden County with a confirmed local planning process. To be confirmed, an adopted municipal plan must be approved by December 31, 2017 by the municipality's Regional Planning Commission (RPC) and the municipality must maintain efforts to provide local funds for municipal and regional planning purposes as required by [24 V.S.A. §4350](#).

For the purposes of the Program, a municipality is defined by [24 V.S.A §4303 \(12\)](#). Under this definition an incorporated village is not considered a separate municipality unless the village adopts its own plan and one or more bylaws either before, concurrently with, or subsequent to such action by the town.

Awarded projects must be consistent with the goals of the regional and municipal plan. Inter-

¹ Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) is already investing in these types of projects through a similar program funded by federal metropolitan transportation planning funds for municipalities in Chittenden County. Chittenden County municipalities with projects integrating transportation and land use decisions should contact [CCRPC](#) for information on their program.

municipal efforts are encouraged and multiple municipalities may apply as a consortium. If applying as a consortium, all towns must have a confirmed municipal plan by December 31, 2017. Consortium applications must address a shared issue and identify a lead municipality to administer the project. If applying as a consortium, each town must submit a resolution, designating the same local project manager and showing support from the legislative body of the municipality, such as selectboard, village trustees or city council.

Only one project per municipality can be funded in each grant cycle. If a municipality is awarded funds in the previous grant year, the municipality is not eligible to apply in the next grant cycle.

Municipalities are ineligible to receive funds if they are (a) suspended or debarred by the Federal Government; (b) delinquent in submitting their subrecipient annual reports; or (c) delinquent in submitting their Single Audit Reports (if required).

Eligible Projects

Program grants are for planning projects that inform local policy decisions and facilitate the implementation of projects. Projects should address land use and development, context-sensitive design, transportation network connectivity and roadway design, housing, water quality, green and grey infrastructure capacity, revitalization and economic development. All projects must include an effective community visioning process and must identify and prioritize implementation measures and the economic benefit of such measures (i.e. economic impact analysis; demonstrated intent to inform the municipal capital plan; etc.). Prioritized recommendations and/or the implementation plan should coincide with capital projects identified in the regional and municipal plans, municipal capital plan or the VTrans Capital Program. Projects must support the Program purpose and objectives (on page 2). Examples of eligible projects include, but are not necessarily limited to:

A. Activity Center Plans. Activity Center plans are smaller in geographic focus than Municipal Plans, and because of their smaller geography and focus they present a community-driven vision of the physical environment for a downtown/village center/neighborhood/street for the next 10 years. Activity Center Plans are illustrative in nature and address detailed improvement strategies for both improvements to the public realm and private sector development. A successful activity center plan will also include an extensive and diverse public engagement process with multiple public meetings, workshops, charrettes, and/or pop-up events. Activity Center plans engage the community in a process to evaluate ways to enhance their community through improved connectivity, rehabilitation of buildings, or redevelopment of sites, adding housing, and the introduction or improvement of streets, parks and open spaces. In addition to the physical plan, there can be a corresponding economic and marketing plan to ensure the market viability of the proposed improvements and inform the municipality's capital planning. The plans are action-oriented and layout a strategic implementation plan for both short-term and long-term public and private investments in the defined project area. The relationship between transportation and land use must be clearly articulated, considering the impacts to the transportation network, local land use, water quality, housing, economic development and community resilience. This could include:

- Downtown Transportation and Land Use Plan
- Village Center Transportation and Land Use Plan
- Neighborhood Transportation and Land Use Plan
- Complete Street Plans
- Wayfinding and Traffic Calming Plans
- Access Management Plans
- Parking Management Plans

B. Corridor Transportation and Land Use Plan (CTLUP). A CTLUP supports and encourages safe, comfortable multimodal transportation options (bicycle, pedestrian, vehicles, and transit) on state highways and town highways. The CTLUP geography varies, but the plan should be implementation-driven and deliver strategies to improve both the transportation and land use

along a specific area of the corridor. A successful corridor plan will also include an extensive and diverse public engagement process with multiple public meetings, workshops, charrettes, and/or pop-up events. In addition to the corridor plan, there can be a corresponding economic and marketing plan to ensure the market viability of the proposed improvements and inform the municipality's capital planning. The relationship between transportation and land use must be clearly articulated, considering the impacts to the transportation network, local land use, water quality, housing, economic development and community resilience. This could include:

- Corridor Transportation and Land Use Plans
- Active Transportation Plans
- Traffic Calming Plans
- Access Management Plans
- Multi-modal Linkage Plans
- Complete Street Plans
- Transportation Impact Fee Studies
- Transit Impact Development Fee Studies

C. Innovative Transportation and Land Use Guidelines and Policies. Guidelines and bylaws that integrate transportation and land use to increase transportation options, support economic development, housing, water quality and community resilience. Successful guidelines and policies will also include an extensive and diverse public engagement process with multiple public meetings, workshops, charrettes, and/or pop-up events. The guidelines must be specific to a certain area (downtown, village, neighborhood or corridor) and not municipal-wide bylaws or standards. This could include:

- Form-based Codes for a specific area
- Streetscape Design Guidelines
- Complete Street Guidelines/Bylaws
- Specific Bylaws that integrate transportation and land use in a specific area
- Street Design Guidelines with typical drawings
- Parking regulations, pricing, and management strategies

Ineligible Projects

The Program funds eligible planning activities only. The following are not eligible uses for Program funds.

- Right-of-way acquisition
- Detailed engineering
- Construction
- Land Surveying
- Project Scoping
- Political Activities
- Storm water/sewer system design
- Construction of transportation system facilities
- Capital oriented implementation actions
- Projects inconsistent with the goals of the Municipal or Regional Plan
- Regional Plans and Municipal Plans
- Municipal-wide bylaws and standards
- Municipal and regional planning commission staff time
- Projects located within Chittenden County
- Support plans, bylaws and policies that violate the State or Federal Fair Housing Act. Fair Housing Training is available to all grantees and is encouraged for projects which relate to housing and/or revisions to zoning bylaws. Please contact Shaun Gilpin, Housing Policy Specialist for the Department of Housing and Community Development at Shaun.Gilpin@vermont.gov if you're interest in participating in a training.

NOTE:

- Poor administrative performance on previous state grants will affect the competitiveness of an application (points deducted).
- When application scores are tied and only one can be selected for funding, preference will be given to the municipality without a recent Program Grant and projects located in or adjacent to a state designated center.
- Experience has shown that funding the development of plans and bylaws to include “adopted” versions as a deliverable product is not realistic. Municipal planning and achieving community consensus takes time. Applicants are therefore encouraged to use the grant for activities leading up to (and including) distribution of a draft plan or bylaw for the first required public hearing by the planning commission or governing body.

Grant Selection Overview

The Program awards grants on an annual basis. Grants generally have eighteen (18) months for projects to be negotiate and completed. Awards range between \$35,000 and \$67,500. Projects are selected on a competitive basis.

The Program will involve a three-step project selection process:

- Step 1: Pre-application Meeting.** All applicants are required to contact the Program Managers, Richard Amore (Richard.Amore@vermont.gov) and Jackie Cassino (Jackie.Cassino@vermont.gov) to set up a pre-application meeting. All pre-application meetings will be conducted by conference call and shall occur prior to December 31, 2017. VTrans and ACCD staff will conduct a preliminary screening process through a pre-application meeting with the potential applicant.
- Step 2: Formal Review.** Program Managers (PMs) will review the submitted applications to ensure they are complete and meet all program requirements. Incomplete submissions and those that do not meet program requirements will not be considered for funding. PMs will review scope of work tasks proposed for each project and the estimated budget. Project budgets will be evaluated based on staff's experience with similar studies and consultant work. Once budgets and scopes are reviewed for all projects, the submissions will be forwarded on to the Grant Selection Committee for full evaluation, with award decisions announced by March 2, 2018.
- Step 3: Grant Selection Committee Evaluation.** The Grant Selection Committee is comprised of representatives from VTrans, ACCD, the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), and the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA). The VAPDA selection committee representative will not review nor score applicants from their respective region. The Selection Committee will evaluate all the submissions. The likelihood of a study receiving funds will not be known until all submissions are received and evaluated by the selection committee.

By March 2, 2018 successful applicants will be notified via email and an official grant award letter will be sent to the municipality(ies). In the event of partial funding, applicants are asked to submit a modified work plan and budget. Grant agreements and other required documents will be provided shortly thereafter. Completion and electronic submittal of these forms will be required for payment. All grant management forms and instructions will be provided via email. The grant agreement articulates the roles and responsibilities of all parties throughout the project process and payment provisions. The grant award is not final until the agreement between VTrans and the local grantee is signed by all parties.

Use of Consultants

Grantees will contract with consultants for Program projects. To satisfy federal and state requirements, use of an appropriate means of consultant solicitation and selection is required prior to selection of a consultant. To avoid conflicts of interest, applicants should be aware that if consultant assistance is used in the preparation of the Program grant submission (i.e. in the

development of the scope of work for the study), that consultant will not be eligible to conduct the work. A sample request for proposals (RFP) template and guidance on where to advertise the RFP is located on the [Program website](#).

Program Managers Activity Guidelines

VTrans and ACCD program managers will assist the municipality throughout the consultant procurement process, including, but not limited to: serving on the municipal project selection committee; cooperatively developing the final scope of work, schedule, budget, and contract for each individual project along with the municipal project manager, local representative, and where appropriate, RPC representative.

Program Funding

The Program provides a total of \$200,000 consisting of \$180,000 in grant funds and up to \$20,000 in local cash match. Grant funds consist of: \$160,000 in Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) State Planning and Research Funds and \$20,000 in ACCD funds. It is anticipated that the program will fund 3-4 projects per grant cycle. The maximum total grant award is \$67,500 (with 10% match requirement and a total project cost of \$75,000). Awards may range between \$35,000 and \$67,500. Total funds for the Program may vary from year to year based on the availability of the Federal and State resources. VTrans and ACCD reserve the right to modify the grant program without prior notice.

Grantee Obligation

Match Requirement: The Program requires a minimum 10% local cash match of the total project cost. Municipalities may not use other federal or state funding sources to cover the local match. If a municipality is awarded an ACCD Municipal Planning Grant in the same year, the municipality cannot apply for a Better Connections Program grant. Leveraging additional funds from other grant programs (state or non-profit) is encouraged and sources should be identified in the project application. Additional consideration will be given to submissions with a commitment of local in-kind staff services or an overmatch of local funds. However, in-kind services are not eligible to satisfy the minimum 10% local cash match requirement. Match funds require documentation at the close-out of the grant. If a project is completed with less than the total project cost expended, the required match funds will be reduced proportionately.

Cost Estimates: Applicants must provide a detailed cost estimate for the planning project in their grant submission. The cost estimate is to be broken down by task. VTrans and ACCD reserve the right to award less than the amount of the applicant's request, based on availability of grant funds. VTrans and ACCD reserve the right to confirm or modify all cost estimates based on prior experience.

Eligible Costs: Program grants and required match can be spent only on "direct project related costs." Eligible costs include consultant costs, postage, travel, supplies and printing. Equipment purchases and indirect costs, including general administrative overhead, are NOT eligible costs. Costs incurred prior to signing the Program grant agreement with VTrans are NOT eligible project costs.

Reimbursement: The Program is a reimbursement program. Applicants submit quarterly invoices for completed work and VTrans pays the state and federal share of the total. Eighty percent (80%) of the total project cost will be paid for with state and federal transportation funds. Ten percent (10 %) of the total project cost will be paid for with recaptured state municipal planning grant funds. The applicant is required to pay the remaining ten percent (10%) local match of the total project cost plus one hundred percent (100%) of any additional funding above the grant amount necessary to complete the project

Local Project Management: Local commitment is critical to a successful project. As a condition of the award, grantees will be asked to provide a written commitment that they will meet all grantee obligations in a timely manner. Grantees must designate a local program manager (LPM) who will:

- Serve as principal contact person for the project;
- Develop the RFP (review the RFP Guidance Document and RFP template online) and advertise (review the RFP Advertisement Guidance document [online](#));
- Monitor and coordinate work, including consultant work products;
- Inform local decision makers about the process in a timely manner;
- Provide logistical arrangements for stakeholder meetings, public meetings and other engagements as necessary;
- Provide public notification for all local meetings and public events;
- Work with the Program grant managers and consultant to ensure the completion of all work is on time and within budget;
- Review consultant work produces and payment requests, and;
- Prepare progress reports, match reports, and reimbursement requests.

Grant Administration Roles

Local Project Managers

May perform all the functions described in this document. Awardees can also elect their RPC to serve as the LPM- with an authorized municipal official serving as the Grant Administrator.

Grant Administrators

Municipal official authorized to sign the Grant Agreement, Resolution, and submit project invoices.

Grant Administration: Grantees are required to submit project invoices and progress reports on a quarterly basis, beginning upon execution of the grant agreement. The reimbursement is made when the project and its deliverables, as detailed in the Grant Agreement, are complete, the expenditures are properly budgeted and documented (copies of invoices and canceled checks or a detailed transaction report) showing that the funds were spent for the purposes specified in the grant agreement. Invoices must show that grantees have spent or obligated all grant funds and match funds, if applicable, no later than September 1, 2019. Funds that are unused as of September 1, 2019, as well as expenditures that are ineligible or have not been documented, must be returned to VTrans.

While grant activities must be completed by September 1, 2019, grantees have until the end of the month to assemble the final report. The final close-out report and the project reports/files must be submitted electronically via email no later than September 27, 2019. For more information, review the grant administration guide [online](#).

Minor alterations to the work plan or the approved budget may be allowed but only upon request and approval from VTrans. Substantial alterations are not allowed and the end product must remain the same. Projects that cannot be completed within the grant period under the terms of the grant agreement are closed out. The grant will cover eligible work completed and documented costs, however, ineligible or undocumented costs will not be funded and associated funds must be returned.

All final products and public communications must acknowledge funding from the Better Connections Grant Program, administered by VTrans and ACCD.

Completion of Project Work: The applicant is strongly encouraged to work with their Regional Planning Commission (RPC) and must provide a letter of support and municipal planning process confirmation letter from the RPC. The applicant must employ third party contractors in order to complete the work associated with a project. The applicant shall have the demonstrated ability to manage federal funds or provide a letter from their RPC confirming their grant technical assistance. The applicant or their RPC shall be the local project manager. RPC technical assistance of projects funded through the Program will be reimbursed directly through the Transportation Planning Initiative (TPI) program funds. The Program does not fund RPC or municipal staff time.

Title VI/Environmental Justice/Americans with Disabilities: Awarded projects are expected to abide by Title VI and related authorities including Executive Order 12898 (Environmental justice) which prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or income, and other demographic characteristics. They are intended to make planning and decision-making more inclusive and to more equitably share the impacts and benefits of projects that receive federal funding. The public involvement program must include specific steps to provide opportunities for participation by federal Title VI communities. In addition, grants that include planning for pedestrians must consider Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. For more information, see:

- http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/environmental_justice/
- <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titlevi.php>
- http://www.ada.gov//2010ADASTandards_index.htm

2018 Grant Timeline

Better Connections Program projects must be completed within 18 months from the award date. No time extensions are granted.

- Program Grant Announcement: October 16, 2017
- Pre-application meeting deadline & RPC confirmation of municipal planning process : December 31, 2017
- Application Deadline: January 31, 2018 @ 4:00 p.m.
- Award Decisions: March 2, 2018
- Project Started: June 1, 2018
- Project Completed: September 1, 2019
- Final Report Due: September 27, 2019

Final reports must be submitted electronically and in hard copy no later than 4:00PM EST September 27, 2019 to VTrans BETTER CONNECTIONS program manager – [Jackie Cassino](#).

Grant Award Criteria

Applications may receive up to a total of 115 points. Projects are selected primarily on scores; also considered are the grant amounts requested, the estimated amount the Program managers believe is needed to complete a project, and ensuring a fair distribution of grant funds to smaller or economically distressed communities is available. Program Managers will consult with other state agencies to gain further insights about the proposed projects as appropriate. VTrans and ACCD reserve the sole right and responsibility to allocate grant resources and modify the program as needed.

Examples of awarded Better Connections Program applications, links to the final Grant Products, and other resources are on the Program webpage: <http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/Better-Connections>.

Applications are scored using the following priorities and criteria:

1. Well-defined Purpose and Need – *Up to 25 points*

The application should clearly identify the project scope and expected outcome, it's purpose and community need. Clearly explain how the project addresses a local or regional transportation, land use, and economic development issue, need or opportunity. The application should also clearly demonstrate how the project: supports the goals of the municipal and regional plan; will be incorporated/integrated into the municipal capital plan; and will support and implement capital projects identified in the regional and municipal plan, municipal capital plan or the VTrans Capital Program.

2. Clear Linkage to Program Purpose and Objectives – *Up to 25 points*

The project and application supports the Better Connections Program Purpose and Objectives. The application demonstrates a clear approach to achieving the expected outcome and results

in consideration for approval, adoption and/or implementation. Where substantial coordination with other local, regional, and state planning efforts occurs (or will need to occur), the mechanisms and responsibilities for the coordination are clear and explained. The application should demonstrate how the project will support the following:

- Provides safe, multi-modal and resilient transportation system that supports the Vermont economy
- Supports downtown and village economic development and revitalization efforts
- Leads directly to project implementation (demonstrated by community capacity and readiness to implement)

3. Quality Work Plan, Schedule & Budget – Up to 25 points

The work plan is well developed, focused and tasks are appropriate for the proposed project, timeline and budget. Cost estimates are well-documented by task.

4. Quality Public Engagement Plan – Up to 20 points

An innovative public engagement plan is developed with activities that educate and involve the public in transportation and land use planning are integrated into the work plan; the application demonstrates cooperation and coordination with relevant local, regional and state organizations and partners, the local business community and the general public. Projects that engage the public and stakeholders from the start and propose multiple innovative outreach activities (i.e. charrettes, community events, pop-up demonstration projects, etc.) score the highest under this criterion.

5. Application Quality – Up to 5 points

The application submission complete, well-written, clearly identifies the project, and is internally consistent.

6. Priority Consideration Points - Up to 15 points (up to five points for each item detailed below):

- Is the study area located in or adjacent to a state designated downtown, village center, neighborhood development area, new town center or designated growth center? (To determine if your community is state designated, visit the [Vermont Planning Atlas](#) to view designated boundaries).
- Does the submission represent an inter-municipal effort? An inter-municipal effort is defined as the joint effort of two or more applicants to address a common issue.
- Is the submission supported locally **through** complementary activities and/or funding commitments beyond the minimum match requirements? A letter of intent will be required to document the availability of the local cash match. Is there strong community and partner support for the project?

Letters of support from the business community, local organizations and regional partners are required to demonstrate this support.

Program Contacts

For questions regarding the Program, contact the Program Managers:

Jackie Cassino | Planning Coordinator
Policy, Planning & Intermodal Development
Vermont Agency of Transportation
One National Life Drive
Montpelier, VT 05633-5001
802.272.2368
jackie.cassino@vermont.gov

Richard Amore | Planning & Project Manager
Community Planning + Revitalization
Agency of Commerce & Community Development
One National Life Drive
Montpelier, VT 05620-0501
802.828.5229
richard.amore@vermont.gov