

# FY 2021 Better Connections Grant Program Overview

Vermont Agency of Transportation

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development

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## Introduction and Grant Basics

The Better Connections Grant Program (the Program) is a competitive grant reimbursement program available to Vermont municipalities outside of Chittenden County<sup>1</sup>. 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.

### Program Objectives

The Program works in partnership with municipalities and other stakeholders to accomplish the following objectives:

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

### Priority Consideration

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. Support public health policies, increases access to healthy food and/or opportunities for physical activity in the community.
4. Support water quality improvements that reduce nutrient and sediment pollution (by applying for a Clean Water Fund planning project as part of the Better Connections application).

### 2021-2022 Grant Timeline

- **Letter of Intent deadline: January 15, 2021 @4:00 pm**
- **Application deadline: February 19, 2021 @ 4:00 pm**
- RPC confirmation of municipal planning process: February 19, 2021
- Award decisions: March 19, 2021
- Project started: June 1, 2021
- Project completed: December 1, 2022
- Final report due: December 31, 2022

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

# Program Funding

The Program awards grants on a bi-annual basis and provides a total of \$200,000 in funding consisting of \$180,000 in grant funds and \$20,000 in local cash match. A 10% local cash match minimum is required.

It is anticipated that the Program will fund up to 3 projects per grant cycle, which runs every other year. Awards may range between \$35,000 and \$67,500. The maximum total grant award is \$67,500 (with 10% match requirement for a total project cost of \$75,000). Grantees generally have eighteen (18) months to complete projects.

Grant funds consist of \$160,000 in Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) State Planning and Research Funds and \$20,000 in ACCD funds. Total funds for the Program may vary from year to year based on the availability of federal and state resources. VTrans and ACCD reserve the right to modify the grant program without prior notice.

## 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. 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.

## Additional Funding Opportunities

### Clean Water Fund

Applicants will have the opportunity to apply for up to \$30,000 (although applicants may be required to adjust project budget and scope based on available funding) in additional funds from the Agency of Natural Resources Clean Water Fund to support Better Connections projects that improve water quality by reducing nutrient and sediment pollution. No match is required for these funds.

Clean Water Funds shall be used in coordination with the FY2021 Better Connections project for developing plans and preliminary designs that improve water quality by reducing nutrient and sediment pollution through stormwater management and green stormwater infrastructure best practices (see [Title 10 V.S.A. § 1389](#)).

The Clean Water Fund supports: stormwater master plans or assessments; the identification of potential locations and high-priority projects; the planning and preliminary design of

stormwater projects to address and mitigate stormwater runoff; and the planning and preliminary design of low impact development and green stormwater infrastructure. The Clean Water Funds can also be used to determine the feasibility and preliminary designs of stormwater treatment options that collect, store, infiltrate, and filter runoff from transportation infrastructure. Clean Water funded projects must be developed and designed in coordination with the land use and transportation planning projects identified through the FY2021 Better Connections planning process.

The [Vermont Green Streets Guide](#), [ANR's Green Stormwater Infrastructure \(GSI\) website](#) and a new [story map on Green Stormwater Projects](#) are resources to help plan clean water projects in coordination with transportation and land use planning. In addition, the [Ecosystem Restoration Program grant application manual](#) provides detailed information about clean water projects as it relates to stormwater and road projects ([see appendix 2](#) for project type, definition and performance metrics).

### **Quick Build for Health**

Successful grantees may have the option to apply for a Vermont Department of Health Quick Build for Health grant in Fall 2021 or Winter 2022 to accelerate the implementation of projects that support public health, physical activity, and access to healthy food to prevent chronic conditions.

## **Program Partners**

The Program represents a cooperative effort between state agencies to increase transportation options and build resilience and economic vitality in Vermont's community centers. The program is primarily funded by the Agency of Transportation (VTrans) through 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 Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), Agency of Natural Resources, and Department of Health. Awarded projects are administrated by VTrans on behalf of a local jurisdiction according to state and federal requirements.

## **Eligible Applicants**

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 village plan and one or more bylaws either before, concurrently with, or subsequent to such action by the town.

Inter-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 February 19, 2021. 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 two previous grant years, the municipality is not eligible to apply in this year's grant cycle.

If a municipality is awarded an ACCD Municipal Planning Grant in the same year, the municipality cannot apply for a Better Connections Program grant.

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

Awarded projects must be consistent with the goals of the regional and municipal plan. Program grants are for master planning projects that inform local policy decisions, identify priorities, guide future investment, and facilitate the implementation of projects. Projects should address the Program purpose and objectives to improve the multimodal transportation system, downtown and village revitalization, and lead to project implementation. All projects must include an effective community visioning process and robust stakeholder involvement. The Program funds various types of master planning for regions, downtowns and villages, neighborhoods, and streets and corridors. See [Program story map](#) and [Program website](#) for examples of prior projects funded by the Better Connections Program.

Master plans are specific in focus and they present a community-driven vision of the physical environment for a region/downtown/village center/neighborhood/corridor for the next 10 years. Master plans engage the community in a process to evaluate ways to enhance their community through improved multimodal connectivity, active transportation and complete streets, access management, traffic calming, parking, wayfinding, rehabilitation of buildings, or redevelopment of sites, housing, land use, stormwater management, and zoning bylaw and form-base code development. In addition to the physical master 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. A successful master plan will include an extensive and diverse public engagement process with multiple public meetings, workshops, charrettes, and/or pop-up events. 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.

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 take 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.

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. 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.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/environmental_justice/)
- <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titlevi.php>
- [http://www.ada.gov//2010ADASTandards\\_index.htm](http://www.ada.gov//2010ADASTandards_index.htm)

## 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
- Wastewater or 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 staff time and administrative costs
- 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](mailto:Shaun.Gilpin@vermont.gov) if you're interest in participating in a training.

# Project Management Approach

Local commitment and strong project management is critical to a successful project. The Program provides two primary options for project management: Municipal Project Management or RPC Project Management. These options are based on the capacity of the municipality. Interested applicants may contact Better Connections program managers if they have any questions regarding project management before submitting the Letter of Intent. In the event that municipal and RPC project management are not a feasible option, AOT can provide project management assistance to the municipality.

Project management tasks include, but are not limited to:

- Serve as principal contact person for the project;
- Develop the Request for Proposals (RPF) in accordance with AOT procurement and advertisement standards (review the RFP template and RFP Advertisement Guidance documents [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 products and payment requests, and;
- Prepare progress reports, match reports, close-out reports, and reimbursement requests.

## 1) Municipal Project Management

Municipalities must demonstrate capacity to manage the project. Demonstrated capacity could include having a dedicated staff person with experience managing a State or Federal grant and with the project management tasks outlined above. 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. The Program does not fund municipal staff time.

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. Eligible RPC technical assistance of projects with municipal project management will be reimbursed directly through the Transportation Planning Initiative (TPI) program funds.

## 2) RPC Project Management

Should the municipality not have the capacity to manage the project, management by the relevant RPC is an option, based on agreement and capacity of the RPC. The municipality must include a letter of commitment from the RPC in their application.

In this model, up to 10% of project costs (amount to be determined by municipality and RPC, but not to exceed 10%) would be paid to the RPC for project management directly out of the Better Connections grant award. The municipality would essentially be hiring the RPC as project manager. In this model, TPI funds would not be eligible for RPC staff time.

Under RPC project management, a municipal contact is still required to have a strong role in the project, including attendance at meetings and review of consultant projects. Specific project management duties are to be determined between the RPC and municipality.

## Grant Selection Process

Program Managers will review 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.

Following application review by Program Managers, the Grant Selection Committee will evaluate all the submissions. The likelihood of a proposal receiving funds will not be known until all submissions are received and evaluated by the Grant Selection Committee. 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 representative will not review nor score applicants from their respective region. Award decisions will be announced by March 19, 2021.

## Grant Selection Criteria

Projects are selected primarily on Program criteria and priority scores, but consideration is also given to grant amounts requested and to fairly distributing grant funds to smaller or economically distressed communities. 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.



<b>Better Connections Competitive Criteria Scoring Summary</b>	<b>Points: 120</b>
<b>Project Purpose and Need</b>	<b>Section: 20</b>
Project Purpose	10
Community Need	5
Building of Past Efforts	5
<b>Alignment with Better Connections Program Objectives</b>	<b>Section: 30</b>
Transportation	5
Land Use	5
Community Capacity and Project Management	10
Project Readiness to Implement	10
<b>Work Plan, Schedule, and Budget</b>	<b>Section: 25</b>
Work Plan	15
Budget	5
Schedule	5
<b>Project Outreach and Partnerships</b>	<b>Section: 20</b>
Public Outreach	10
Project Partnerships	10
<b>Priority Consideration Areas</b>	<b>Section: 20</b>
State Designation Area Projects	5
Inter-municipal Projects	5
Water Quality Improvement Projects	5
Public Health and Physical Activity Projects	5
<b>Application Quality &amp; Past Performance</b>	<b>Section: 5</b>

Clean Water Fund projects will be scored independently of the Better Connections project award criteria.

<b>Clean Water Fund Competitive Criteria Scoring Summary</b>	<b>Points: 35</b>
Purpose, Need, Outcome	15
Prior Efforts	10
Engage and Educate	10

## Project Purpose and Need

The project addresses a local or regional transportation, land use, water quality, housing, and economic development issue, need, or opportunity and builds on past planning or community efforts.

## Alignment with Program Objectives

The project supports the Better Connections Program Purpose and Objectives:

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

## Work Plan, Schedule, and Budget

The work plan is well developed, detailed, focused and tasks are appropriate for the proposed project, timeline, and budget.

## Public Outreach and Partnerships

Planning projects are more successful: 1) when there is sustained public outreach throughout a project, 2) when they begin with strong community support, and 3) when they are done in partnership with organizations outside the municipal government. Competitive applications will demonstrate engagement with community members and partners from the project outset through an equitable and inclusive process, connecting with diverse socioeconomic groups, under-served, and under-represented populations in the community, in addition to cooperation and coordination with relevant local, regional and state stakeholders. Letters of support from the business community, local organizations and regional partners are required to demonstrate this support.

## Priority Projects

The Program recognizes projects with outcomes that meet statewide priorities, including:

- Projects that support a State Designation Center<sup>2</sup>
- Inter-municipal projects
- Water quality improvement projects
- Public health and physical activity projects

## Notes on Scoring

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.

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<sup>2</sup> To determine if your community is state designated, visit the [Vermont Planning Atlas](#) to view designated boundaries.

## Grant Award Notification

Award notices to successful applicants are sent 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](#).

## Grantee Obligation & Administration

**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 municipal 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.

**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 December 1, 2022. Funds that are unused as of December 1, 2022, as well as expenditures that are ineligible or have not been documented, must be returned to VTrans.

While grant activities must be completed by December 1, 2022, 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 December 31, 2022. For more information, review the grant administration guide on the [Program website](#).

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 in partnership with the Agency of Natural Resources and the Department of Health.**

## Program Contacts

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