

FY 2023 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 County¹. 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. Thank you for your interest!

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, recreation opportunities, and/or other 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).

2023-2024 Grant Timeline

- **Program Announcement: December 5, 2022**
- **Pre-Application Meeting: January 31, 2023**
- **Application deadline: February 17, 2023 @ 4:00 pm**
- RPC confirmation of municipal planning process: February 17, 2023
- Award decisions: March 20, 2023
- Project started: June 19, 2023
- Project completed: December 16, 2024
- Final report due: January 15, 2025

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.

Application Process

1. Submit Pre-Application Form Electronically and Schedule Pre-Application Interview

All applicants are required to complete a [Pre-Application Form](#) and interview by January 31, 2023 at 4:00pm with Program Managers, Matthew Arancio and Richard Amore. The following is a link to the [Pre-Application Form](#).

2. Prepare and Submit the Grant Application Form

Complete the [Grant Application Form](#) and submit required documents by February 17, 2023. Incomplete applications will not be considered.

Electronic applications are due 4:00pm, Friday, February 17, 2023.

Email applications to matthew.arancio@vermont.gov. Application Materials MUST be submitted electronically.

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 FY2023 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 support: [stormwater master plans](#), which include the identification and assessment of potential locations to implement high-priority surface water improvement 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, [urban forestry practices](#), 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 FY2023 Better Connections planning process. The goal of the Clean Water Funds is to support planning projects that improve water quality by reducing nutrient and sediment pollution, thereby protecting or restoring natural resources such as lakes, rivers, and wetlands. The project must primarily mitigate nutrient or sediment pollution. Eligible projects include municipal stormwater planning projects that implement stormwater management practice(s) that collect, store, infiltrate, and filter runoff that contains nutrient and sediment pollution from hard surfaces associated with Better Connections project area.

The [Vermont Green Streets Guide](#) and [DEC's Green Infrastructure website](#) are resources to help plan clean water projects in coordination with transportation and land use planning. In addition, the [Clean Water Initiative Funding Policy](#) provides detailed information about clean water projects as it relates to stormwater funding eligibility and requirements.

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), and the Agency of Natural Resources. Awarded projects are administered 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 17, 2023. 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 each 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 fiscal 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; grantees are strongly encouraged to consult with their Regional Planning Commission to verify this information. 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.

Better Connections plans are specific in focus and document a community-driven vision of the physical environment for a region/downtown/village center/neighborhood/corridor for the next 10 years. Better Connections plans evaluate and prioritize ways to enhance a 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 land use and transportation 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 Better Connections plan will include an extensive, equitable, and inclusive public engagement process with multiple public meetings, workshops, charrettes, and/or pop-up events. Successful Better Connections plans are also action-oriented and layout a strategic implementation plan for both short-term and long-term public and private investments in the defined project area.

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 a first required public hearing by the planning commission or governing body. Subsequent conversations and input will be required; the draft plan that is the ultimate goal of a Better Connections grant is a catalyst for grantees to begin this process.

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.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titlevi.php>
- 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 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 the project management approach.

Project management tasks include, but are not limited to:

- Serve as principal contact person for the project;
- Develop the Request for Proposals (RFP) 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.

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

Applicants are required to complete the [Pre-Application Form](#) and schedule a pre-application meeting by January 31, 2023 with the Program Managers as part of the Grant Selection Process. During the Pre-Application Form and meeting, the Program Managers will discuss the project goals, evaluate whether the project is appropriate for Better Connections, and assist the applicant if need be in refining their application, scope of work, and/or any additional project elements. After a final confirmation with the Program Managers, the Local Project Manager may submit an application.

Program Managers will then 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), Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC), 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 20, 2023.

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.

Better Connections Competitive Criteria Scoring Summary		Points: 130
Project Purpose and Need		Section: 20
Project Purpose		10
Community Need		5
Building of Past Efforts		5
Alignment with Better Connections Program Objectives		Section: 30
Transportation		5
Land Use		5
Community Capacity and Project Management		10
Project Readiness to Implement		10
Work Plan, Schedule, and Budget		Section: 25
Work Plan		15
Budget		5
Schedule		5
Equitable Engagement, Project Outreach, and Partnerships		Section: 30
Equitable Engagement		10
Project Outreach		10
Public Partnerships		10
Priority Consideration Areas		Section: 20
State Designation Area Projects		5
Inter-municipal Projects		5
Water Quality Improvement Projects		5
Public Health, Recreation, and Physical Activity Projects		5
Application Quality & Past Performance		Section: 5

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

Clean Water Fund Competitive Criteria Scoring Summary	Points: 35
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.

Equitable Engagement, Public Outreach, and Partnerships

Planning projects are more successful: 1) when there is sustained and inclusive public outreach throughout a project, 2) when they begin with strong community support and engage the community in an equitable process, 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 Consideration Areas

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

- Projects that support a State Designation Center²
- Inter-municipal projects
- Water quality improvement projects
- Public health, recreation, 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.

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. Grantees will receive additional guidance from AOT and ACCD staff on consultant selection.

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](#).

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

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 16, 2024. Funds that are unused as of December 16, 2024 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, 2024, 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 January 15, 2025. 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.

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