



**Town of Bristol**  
Planning & Zoning Department  
1 South St.  
PO Box 249  
Bristol, VT 05443  
Tel: (802) 453-2410 x2  
[zoning@bristolvt.org](mailto:zoning@bristolvt.org)

# MEMORANDUM

From: AZ Larsen, Planning and Zoning Administrator

To: Bristol Planning Commission

CC: Bristol Selectboard, Town Administrator

Date: January 20, 2026

RE: Bristol Town Plan Update

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## **Town Plan Context**

According to the VT Planning Atlas, the current Town Plan is set to expire in March 2029 and was approved in September 2021. The Town Plan document was drafted and approved for the years 2020 through 2028.

It is important to first acknowledge that the current Town Plan was updated and adopted during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has increased how we engage with our communities, an infectious virus makes gathering public engagement much more difficult. Given the complexities of planning in a pandemic, I believe it is vital to this update that the Planning Commission (PC) approach this process with public outreach and community engagement at the core. Bristol as a community is built on a strong passion for the place they have made home. In this update, the focus must be on the public engagement that will guide the Planning Commission. The State requires a plan to have certain required elements and to involve the public in the process. However, in this update the Planning Commission has the opportunity to take the baseline requirements and expand them to create a living document that will lead this vibrant community not just through the required eight-year plan but to a vision twenty years in the future.

As the Planning & Zoning Administrator (PZA), my role is to serve as a liaison to the PC and to provide guidance and assistance with planning initiatives. Throughout this update process I will be working to support the PC to tackle each step of the process. I look forward to delving into this process and working together to develop a vibrant and accessible Town Plan that will guide Bristol for years to come.

## **Town Plan Update Overview**

The State gives municipal Planning Commissions the responsibility of preparing that plan in 24 V.S.A. § 4384, however there are additional steps prior to the final adoption of the plan.

Statute requires that the PC hold at least one public hearing to review the draft plan. Once the PC has completed a draft plan, they must submit the draft to the Selectboard for their review. The Selectboard must then hold at least two public hearings when reviewing the draft plan (24 V.S.A. § 4385). After approval of the plan by the Selectboard, the Regional Planning Commission must review and approve proposed plans. In order to be approved by the RPC plans must be consistent with the state planning goals, compatible with the regional plan and other approved plans of municipalities in the region, and contain all elements as required by 24 VSA 3832(a)(1)-(12).

Bristol already has an approved Town Plan. With this update the PC does not need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, the PC can take the current document and modify the elements to be reflective of this unique community.

### **Municipal Planning Grant FY2026**

In December 2025, Bristol was awarded funding through the Municipal Planning Grant (MPG), administered through the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Bristol previously received funding through this grant for the 2020 Town Plan update. The grant will support Bristol in approaching the planning process through inclusive public involvement. Public outreach will be used in the updating of the Town Plan, with priority to flood resiliency, natural resources and renewable energy opportunities, and compliance with regional and state planning goals and statute. The MPG award ends December 2027, giving the Planning Commission a timeline of roughly two years of resources to update the Town Plan. It is my recommendation that the Town select a consultant for this project using competitive selection. The intention is to bring a new perspective to the planning process that will assist the Planning Commission through a coordinated public outreach strategy, providing technical expertise on data and maps, and offering guidance on complex planning topics.

Looking forward, the next step in this project is selecting a consultant. As this project moves forward there will be more collaboration between the consultant, Planning & Zoning Administrator and the Planning Commission.

### **Vermont Municipal Climate Planning Guides**

The State of Vermont Climate Action Office launched a pilot program in December 2025. This pilot program is part of the Climate Action Offices work to develop a Framework and Guide that municipalities can utilize throughout planning processes. There are three draft guides (Social Resilience Process, Municipal Plan, Capital Program). Bristol has applied to be one of six pilot communities. If selected, Bristol will receive a draft guide and technical assistance that can be used as a resource as the PC moves through the planning process. This program aligns well with the MPG award and the work the PC is beginning. While this program would run the full extent of the update process, the intention is to use this resource to support the PC in public outreach and community engagement.

### **Timeline and Budget**

The goal for this update is to be ready for voter approval in March 2028. Currently if the PC continues meeting once a month that gives roughly 24 meetings in which the PC would

complete the update. Meeting only once a month, while possible, could limit the PC's ability to make significant progress towards this goal.

The MPG grant awards ends in December of 2027. In order to maximize the benefits of this grant, I propose the follow timeline:

### **2026**

**Spring:** Review of existing planning documents and resources; MPG consultant selected; Develop strategy for process; begin public outreach and developing shared vision

**Summer:** Continue public outreach; Community engagement activities (i.e. townhall, design charrettes); Begin review and revisions to plan elements in break out groups

**Fall:** Wrap community engagement and finalize community assessment. Identify goals and objectives

**Winter:** Revision of plan and creation of new draft proposal; MPG progress report due

### **2027**

**Spring:** Finalize draft edits and preparation for PC public hearing

**Summer:** Revisions if necessary; submit to Selectboard for public hearings

**Fall:** finalize reports; begin MPG closeout

**Winter:** Preparation for voter approval; MPG close out

### **2028**

**Spring:** Town Plan voted on at Town Meeting Day

**Summer:** Town Plan sent to RPC and DHCD for review and approval

**Fall:** Celebration!

This is a rough draft of the timeline and is intended to be changed as the planning process unfolds.

To accomplish this update the PC has a budget allocation of \$5,000. This is proposed to increase to \$7,500 pending approval of the budget. The MPG has a total of \$21,400 in funding from both the award and Town match. The Addison County Regional Planning Commission also has funds allocated for assisting with updates to the Enhanced Energy Plan.

### **Approaching the Update**

A timeline of roughly two years to update such an important document may seem daunting. However, there is a wealth of resources that the PC has access to in order to approach this process not with dread but excitement. This is the opportunity for the PC to dig into the more enjoyable aspects of planning through cultivating a shared community vision that pushes past the requirements.

The DHCD has published a Planning Manual, which will be linked below, that provides an in-depth overview of the Town Plan process. I highly recommend that PC members review this manual as we begin the process. In this manual, the DHCD recommends approaching the process using a 5-Step process (Figure 1). Considering the MPG award, I would recommend that the PC adopt a similar workplan to what is recommended by the State to keep the process consistent and clear throughout.

Beginning this process now gives the Planning Commission the ability to approach the update with intention and a clear direction in order to complete the process by or even before the expiration date. At the November 2025 meeting, the PC began the update process by reviewing the implementation goals, policies and tasks as assigned in the 2020 plan. Currently a survey is being drafted to collect an initial general sense from the population. Both these actions will yield important data points for future use in the process.



Figure 1: DHCD 5 Step Planning Process (source: DHCD Planning Manual)

It is recommended that towns develop a communication strategy that will be used during the process. My proposal to the PC is to break into three focus groups (People, Land, Infrastructure). Each group will have a designated leader who will also be a point contact for the public to reach out too. Regular meetings are already open to the public but are rarely attended by the public. The intention of focus groups is to cultivate more engagement by having smaller groups of PC members who are passionate about specific planning topics. I propose to the PC that an additional meeting day is added on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesdays of the month. This meeting day would give the focus groups dedicated work time and provide a space that could be more inviting to community participation. The PC would continue to meet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday and that would remain similar to meetings now.

## Resources

- [Department of Housing and Community Development Planning Manual](#)
- [West Central Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy](#)
- [Vermont Green Streets Guide](#)
- [Smart Growth Strategies Research](#)
- [Vermont Energy Dashboard](#)
- [Historic Preservation – Online Resource Center](#)
- [Vermont Community Data Profiles – VHFA](#)
- [Community Development Toolkit – Agency of Commerce and Community Development](#)
- [DHCD Planning Atlas](#)
- [US Census Reporter](#)