

## **Vermont Housing & Conservation Board**

### **Conservation Issues Committee**

#### **MINUTES**

**April 13, 2026**

**Zoom & In Person at VHCB Conference Room, 58 East State Street, Montpelier, VT**

Committee Members: Kate McCarthy, Amy Mynter, David Marvin, Ari Rockland-Miller (designee for VAAF), and Billy Coster (designee for ANR). All Board Members called into the meeting.

VHCB Staff: Gus Seelig, Trey Martin, Stacy Cibula, Karen Freeman, Isaac Bissell, Bill Dell'Isola, Elizabeth Egan, Holly McClintock, Janice Pello, Rebecca Williams, Pollaidh Major, and Bonnie Woodford.

Others/Partners Present: Gannon Osborn (The Nature Conservancy), Dave Erickson (Cold Hollow to Canada), Britt Haselton (Vermont Land Trust), Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Land), Peg Merrens (Upper Valley Land Trust), Matt Kelly (Stowe Land Trust), Marli Rupe (VT Department of Environmental Conservation), Charles Martin (Agency of Natural Resources), Gunnar Nurme (Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation), Jens Hilke and Will Duane (VT Fish and Wildlife Department).

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Chair Kate McCarthy called the meeting to order at 1:00pm.

#### **Public Comment**

No public comment.

#### **Minutes**

Kate McCarthy raised an issue with the August 19, 2025 CIC Minutes; the last sentence of the second paragraph on the OPAV Lessons Learned and Next Steps (Page 3) is incomplete. David Marvin made the motion to approve the minutes contingent on a revised version being provided by VHCB staff. Amy Mynter seconded the motion. All voted in favor of the motion. Regarding the status of the OPAV Next Steps, staff noted the process is ongoing but delayed by competing priorities, with progress expected to continue into next summer. Amy expressed support for the plan, noting the tool could be implemented within nine months but will require another round of partner feedback

### **Local Conservation Projects Policy – Karen Freeman**

Karen provided an overview of the local conservation policy, explaining that caps of \$150,000 for natural/historic/recreation projects and \$215,000 for local agricultural projects were last revised in 2008. Rising land and construction costs mean more projects now require waivers. Staff have begun exploring whether to raise caps, whether the 33% match requirement is a barrier, how to broaden acceptable match (for example, including pre-development costs), and how to define “local” versus “regional” significance. She noted that local projects make up a small portion of VHCB work but are important for community identity and geographic distribution. She relayed preliminary partner feedback which included support for raising the caps, concern about reduced funding resources and the need to take that into consideration in changing the caps or leverage requirements and a broad consensus that equity should be a lens for evaluating projects. She asked the Committee for guidance on caps, match, prioritization and significance, noting that any recommendations should align with the forthcoming Act 59 conservation plan.

During Committee discussion, David asked how pure store projects such as the East Calais store, which are owned by community trusts and don’t include natural areas, are classified. Karen replied that they are treated as historic preservation projects and must include public access. Billy cautioned against over-complicating the policy, appreciating the current simplicity, and noted that there will be recommendations coming out of the final Act 59 plan which will have a bearing on this policy. He suggested that if caps are raised, there should be clear criteria or triggers for when projects can exceed them, and he supported retaining an informal 10% target for spending on local projects to maintain geographic equity. Committee members discussed the difficulty small towns face meeting match requirements; David suggested indexing grants to community income, and that under resourced communities are not penalized. Billy proposed qualitative waiver criteria based on exceptional conservation benefits rather than just the match percentage. Ari asked how local, regional and statewide significance should be distinguished in a small state. Gus responded that projects often begin locally but grow in regional or statewide importance. Kate Wanner noted the federal Community Forest Program may lose funding in FY 2027, which could reduce available match for town forests. Gannon Osborn encouraged waiting for the final Act 59 conservation plan before making major changes.

### **Reconnecting the Greens – Vermont Agency of Natural Resources**

Jens Hilke, Charles Martin, Gunnar Nurme, and Will Duane all from the Agency of Natural Resources reported on progress toward a conserved land corridor connecting Mt Mansfield and Camel’s Hump. The corridor encompasses large forest blocks on both mountains and aims to secure land and improve infrastructure such as culverts and underpasses. They highlighted the Pinneo Forest project in Bolton, adding 260 acres to Mt Mansfield State Forest, and a 400-acre parcel in Duxbury. Collaboration includes state agencies, land trusts and conservation

organizations. Committee members asked how VHCB can prepare for future opportunities. Jens replied that timelines vary by parcel and emphasized consistent communication with partners. The presenters noted that replacing the existing culvert at Sharkeyville with a wildlife underpass would cost roughly \$30 million, and funding has not yet been secured. Kate Wanner acknowledged the long-term nature of the work and thanked the partners for their persistence.

### **Farm Project Caps – Stacy Cibula and Holly McClintock**

Stacy and Holly reviewed the memo on farm project caps. The current cap is \$550,000 per project and \$4,200 per acre. Between 2021 and 2025, roughly a quarter of farm projects exceeded the project cap and 13% exceeded the per-acre cap. Staff proposed raising the project cap to \$625,000 (possibly higher) and the per-acre cap to \$4,800. They also recommended lowering the leverage requirement for waivers from 20% to 15%, clarifying the definition of a farm transfer, adding a criterion regarding voluntary enrollment in complementary restoration programs, adding a Farm and Forest Viability Program (or similar business planning program) criterion, and expanding the definition of qualifying soils to include sugarbush and locally rated soils. Stacy asked for the Committee's guidance and approval to solicit partner feedback before bringing a final recommendation to the Board in October.

During discussion, Billy again raised the need to align any changes with Act 59. David and Amy thought raising caps was sensible given market realities; David noted the Board has the authority to waive caps anyway but would prefer the policy to function for most projects. Amy and Billy agreed that waiver criteria deserve further discussion. Stacy mentioned that small, diversified farms are becoming more common and the policy needs to accommodate them, including addressing equity and access for underserved farmers. After further comments, Billy made a motion to approve staff moving forward to solicit partner feedback on the proposed cap changes and waiver criteria, with the understanding that the policy will be revisited after the Act 59 plan is final. Amy seconded the motion. All Committee members (Amy, Billy, Ari, David and Kate) voted in favor. The motion carried.

### **Act 59 / Vermont Conservation Plan – Trey Martin**

Trey provided an update on the Act 59 conservation planning process. Since July, VHCB Staff and State agencies have held over forty public meetings and ten technical advisory committee meetings. The draft plan is organized around three objectives: centering Vermont Conservation Design, supporting conservation in communities, and strengthening statewide capacity. Each objective includes strategic pathways, such as expanding conservation in under-represented biophysical regions, safeguarding connectivity corridors, improving forest structure, integrating biodiversity with working lands, increasing equitable access to land and enterprises, and enhancing funding and workforce capacity. Trey emphasized that while Act 59 sets 30 by 30 and

50 by 50 conservation goals, it also promotes a holistic vision that includes housing and historic preservation programs.

Committee members asked how Act 59 interacts with VHCB's statutory mission. David noted that Act 59 does not supersede VHCB's enabling statute; Trey agreed and explained that the plan can recommend reviewing policies and waivers (such as cap levels in under-represented regions) but cannot mandate changes. He added that additional legislative funding will be necessary to implement many recommendations. Billy remarked that the draft plan includes numerous action items recommending VHCB revisit funding policies, and he encouraged the Committee to prepare for a significant role in implementation. Kate observed that public interest in Act 59 is high and stressed the importance of communicating that the means of achieving conservation goals are still being developed. Trey noted that a final draft of the plan is expected by June 30 and that staff will continue to gather feedback and refine recommendations.

### **Clean Water Program – Rebecca Williams and Trey Martin**

Rebecca and Trey briefed the Committee on VHCB's clean water programs in the Lake Memphremagog Basin. Through the Clean Water Service Provider (CWSP) program, funded by DEC Restoration Formula grants, VHCB targets non-regulatory projects such as stormwater treatment, floodplain and stream restoration and road best-management practices. To date, 23 project phases totaling about \$1.15 million have been funded, yielding 27 kilograms of phosphorus reductions with another 98 kilograms in the pipeline. They noted that partners are bringing high-phosphorus-efficiency projects at low cost. The Great Lakes Fisheries Commission (GLFC) program provides flexible funding for aquatic habitat restoration, partner capacity and strategic land acquisitions; VHCB has awarded \$2.7 million across 23 awards. Rebecca described a floating classroom initiative that engages students in water-quality science and local restoration projects. Kate thanked the water program staff for their work, noting that Committee members seldom see these project details. Staff said that previous sequencing issues have been addressed through better coordination and that forthcoming policy review will assess whether guidelines remain appropriate.

### **Adjournment**

Kate thanked staff and guests for their presentations and the Committee for their thoughtful discussion. With no further business, the meeting adjourned.