Closing Comment and Consolidated Synthesis

Stephen Whitaker

Preapplication RPC03-0001 — Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC)

Draft Regional Plan and Regional Future Land Use Map

To: Vermont Land Use Review Board — Act250.Board@vermont.gov

From: Stephen Whitaker, Montpelier, Vermont

Date: August 7, 2026

Preapplication deemed complete: July 8, 2026 · Comment period closes: today, August 7, 2026

This closes my written comments under this docket — eight filings since July 24, running to forty-two numbered points. I don't want to send the Board a forty-third point, or a table of contents. What follows is the idea that was underneath all of them, said plainly, without asking anyone to go back and match it to a part number or a section citation.

The idea underneath all of it

Everything in this record traces back to one dependency chain, and the chain only runs in one direction.

Start at the ground. A site's contamination has to actually be delineated — mapped, sampled, understood — before a municipal plan can responsibly describe what happens there. A plan compliant with Chapter 117 is supposed to say where development goes and at what density; it can't say that honestly for ground whose contamination footprint isn't yet known. That's not a formality. It's the difference between a plan describing a place and a plan describing a hope about a place.

Once that's settled, the plan has to actually lay out — even conceptually — where roads, water, and sewer would go before anyone can build a real infrastructure plan around it. You can't cost, finance, and schedule a pipe whose route hasn't been decided. A concept-level roads-and-utilities picture is an input a capital budget needs; it isn't something a capital budget can substitute for or invent on its own.

A town's capital budget is usually thought of as a bookkeeping document — a schedule of what gets paid for and when. It's actually something more useful than that. When a road, a sewer main, or a water line shows up on a six-year capital program with a cost and a priority attached, that's the town saying, in a form anyone can check: this is real, this is funded, this is coming. When something doesn't show up, that's just as informative — it tells you the town hasn't gotten there yet, whatever the plan's narrative language might say. That visibility is what makes a capital program a public-participation tool, not just a finance document. A resident doesn't need to master planning law to look at a capital schedule and see whether their street's deferred maintenance is funded in year two or isn't funded at all. That's a much fairer way to find out what a town actually intends than parsing a growth-area map or a plan's aspirational language for the same answer.

There's a second layer to this, and it's easy to miss. A capital schedule isn't a one-time snapshot — projects slip, financing falls through, priorities shift, almost as a matter of course. That's usually treated as a bureaucratic inconvenience. It's actually a second, ongoing participation opportunity, distinct from the first. When a scheduled project stalls, a town has a real choice: let that year's allocated money sit idle, or move a different, ready project up to use it. A visible schedule — the town's top handful of projects, what's funded, what's stalled, and why — turns that choice into something the public can see and weigh in on, rather than something that happens quietly inside a public works department. It functions less like a ledger than a dashboard: what's moving, what's stuck, and what a stall opens up for everything behind it in line.

That's four links — delineation, plan, infrastructure layout, capital budget — and every one has to hold before the next one means anything. A designation that skips ahead of that chain isn't a shortcut. It's a designation resting on a step that hasn't happened yet.

For anyone who wants the citation trail rather than the plain version: this is criterion (ii)'s "served" question, criterion (v)'s adopted-plan requirement, and criterion (vii)'s capital-program requirement, read together rather than as three separate boxes to check.

None of that chain does anyone any good if it isn't visible parcel by parcel. The map itself needs to show, for each parcel, which of these links actually hold — not just a final classification, but why: this parcel has a delineated site, a plan reference, a costed infrastructure line, and that one doesn't. Two parcels a few hundred feet apart can look identical on today's map even though one has completed every step above and the other hasn't started. Without that detail, a neighbor can't tell why their parcel was left out while the one next door made the cut, and nobody outside CVRPC can check the chain at all — they can only take the classification on faith. CVRPC already does this kind of layered, per-parcel attribute display elsewhere in its own mapping work, so showing the criteria basis parcel by parcel is a scope decision, not a technical limitation.

The last link is what makes this urgent rather than academic. A Planned Growth Area designation is, in practice, close to permanent — the regional plan isn't appealable, and PGA status opens the door to a Tier 1A process that removes Act 250 review, the one forum built to catch what a designation misses. Undesignating a parcel later, after the fact, is far harder than designating it now was. Declining to designate now costs almost nothing by comparison — a parcel that isn't ready can be added next cycle once the chain above actually holds, and actually shows. That asymmetry is the whole argument in one sentence: when a decision is nearly impossible to undo, the burden belongs on showing readiness now, visibly, not on explaining later why it should have waited.

Why it matters beyond this parcel and this plan cycle

This same logic is what should govern how the region prioritizes the harder work still ahead — traffic and transportation mitigation, flood and disaster resilience, and hardening the region's emergency communications, including backup power for dispatch and closing the dead zones in cellular coverage. None of that gets prioritized well without the same capital-budget specificity behind it: knowing what's funded, what isn't, and in what order. I don't expect the telecommunications and dispatch-hardening piece to be resolved in this plan cycle — that's next year's work — but it belongs on the same track, for the same reason.

CVRPC isn't the only regional commission working through this framework, and this isn't the last plan that will come before the Board under it. Whatever standard of documentation gets expected here — that infrastructure has to be actually budgeted, not just intended, before it can justify where growth goes — is likely to be the standard other regions build toward as their own plans come up. That's worth getting right the first time it's tested.

On public participation, going forward

The written comment period closes today, but the record doesn't close with it — CVRPC's adoption process and the Board's later consistency review both remain open. I'd encourage the Board to treat the participation gaps in my earlier filings as something to keep working on through those next stages, not something this deadline closes out. And I'd encourage anyone who hasn't weighed in yet to do so before decisions get harder to revisit. A designation is easy to grant and hard to undo; a comment is the reverse.

Requested actions

- Require, region-wide, that the dependency chain actually hold before a Planned Growth Area designation is credited: site contamination delineated, a Chapter 117-compliant municipal plan resting on that delineation, a concept-level roads/water/sewer layout in that plan, and a capital budget costing and scheduling that layout.
- Require that the map display, per parcel, which links in that chain are satisfied and which aren't — not just a final classification — so residents can see why one parcel qualified and a neighboring one didn't, using the same layered attribute display CVRPC already uses elsewhere in its own mapping work.
- Treat capital-budget specificity — an actual line item, year, and cost, not a statement of intent — as the standard for crediting "planned" infrastructure toward a growth designation.
- Weigh the asymmetry directly: because a designation is functionally permanent and non-designation is easily cured next cycle, the burden belongs on demonstrating the chain is complete now, not on justifying a delay.
- Carry the participation-process concerns raised earlier in this docket forward into CVRPC's adoption process, rather than treating them as resolved by this cycle's comment period.
- Preserve this record for the Board's later consistency review, since the same documentation questions will still be live at adoption regardless of how CVRPC's own process unfolds between now and then.

Respectfully submitted,
Stephen Whitaker

Montpelier, Vermont

August 7th