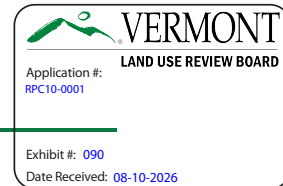


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Senate Committee on
Institutions
Senate Committee on
Health and Welfare



Date: August 9, 2026

To: Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional Commission (TRORC)

From: Senator John Benson, Orange District

Subject: Public Comment on the Proposed 2026 TRORC Regional Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed 2026 Regional Plan.

Over my nearly 50-year career as a civil engineer and during my 17 years of service on my town's selectboard, I have had many opportunities to work with TRORC. We have been particularly grateful for the assistance TRORC has provided with local road and infrastructure projects. However, I am concerned that the proposed Regional Plan takes an approach that does not reflect the views or needs of many of the people and municipalities TRORC is intended to represent.

In January, Governor Scott appointed me to represent the Orange District in the Vermont Senate. During my time in the Legislature, it became apparent that state policy had moved in a direction that many Vermonters did not support. This was reflected in the results of the last election and in the strong public opposition to elements of Act 181, including the "Road Rule" and Tier 3. I urge TRORC not to repeat that mistake by moving forward with a Regional Plan without adequately responding to the concerns being raised by residents and municipal officials.

As the senator representing eleven municipalities within the TRORC region, I have heard numerous concerns about the proposed plan and have been copied on several sets of comments submitted to TRORC. I also attended a public information meeting in Fairlee, where I was struck by the number of town planning commission members and other local officials in attendance. Nearly all the comments offered by attendees were critical of the proposed plan.

In my view, the plan contains several fundamental problems.

First, it appears to move beyond serving as a regional planning and guidance document and toward functioning as a regulatory document. Mandatory terms such as "shall" are used too frequently, particularly in the Land Use section. Language with potential regulatory consequences should be limited to circumstances in which it is expressly required by law. Otherwise, regional policies should be written as recommendations or guidance that preserve appropriate municipal discretion.

Municipalities—and, more importantly, the people who live in them—do not want the State or the regional planning commission to dictate what they may do in their communities or on their

land. This concern is consistent with the opposition that led the Legislature to reconsider portions of Act 181, including Tier 3 and the Road Rule.

If adopted as written, the Regional Plan may conflict with existing town plans and local zoning. It could also create uncertainty and invite future litigation in Act 250 proceedings over the relationship between municipal and regional plans under Criterion 10. TRORC should avoid language that unnecessarily creates such conflicts or diminishes the authority of its member municipalities.

The Legislature's rejection of the Clean Heat Standard should also cause TRORC to reconsider policies that attempt to prescribe the fuels or heating systems Vermonters may use in their homes. Vermonters are struggling with the cost of living. Young people and working families are leaving the state because they cannot afford to remain here, cannot find good-paying jobs, or cannot secure affordable housing. Vermont has some of the highest health care and education costs in the country, without consistently achieving outcomes that justify those costs.

Many of us in the Legislature are working to change Vermont's current economic direction. It is frustrating to see the proposed Regional Plan continue to advance policies that may increase costs, restrict economic opportunity, and impose additional burdens on residents, municipalities, and landowners.

Most Vermonters support responsible environmental protection. They also understand that environmental policies must be balanced with the economic and human consequences of those policies. People are more likely to support environmental goals when they and their families are on solid economic footing, have good jobs, can afford a place to live, and see opportunities in their communities.

Although the proposed plan identifies housing as a priority in certain locations, it does not place sufficient emphasis on economic growth, which is essential to Vermont's future. It also appears to impose disproportionate burdens on rural communities and on those who earn their living from the land. For generations, Vermont's farmers, foresters, loggers, producers, and related businesses have managed the working landscape and added value to its products for the benefit of us all. Their knowledge, experience, economic contributions – and their need to grow their businesses - should be supported with more flexibility in the Regional Plan.

I urge TRORC Commissioners and staff to listen carefully to the people and municipal officials they represent.

I will conclude with three additional observations:

1. The fact that state law may authorize TRORC to adopt a particular policy does not mean that TRORC is required to exercise that authority to its fullest extent. Any exercise of that authority should reflect the interests of the region's municipalities and residents rather than the priorities of a particular interest or constituency.

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2. The plan was presented for public review during July, when many people are focused on vacations, seasonal work, and summer activities. Furthermore, many residents are likely unaware of the proposed Regional Plan or the potential consequences of its policies.
 3. I respectfully request that TRORC substantially revise the plan, remove unnecessary regulatory language and mandates, resolve potential conflicts with municipal plans, and return to the fundamental purpose of providing regional guidance and coordination.

Sincerely,

Senator John Benson
Orange District