

7 August 2026

From: Topsham Planning Commission

To: Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission

Subj: Comments on TRORC Draft 2026 Regional Plan Land Use Proposal

TRORC:

The following comments are submitted in response to recent informational meetings and public hearings associated with the Draft 2026 Regional Plan.

1. The designation of forest and interconnectivity blocks seems misplaced in communities like ours. The one size fits all approach does not really work. For example, worrying about forest fragmentation really does matter in Essex Junction where development has sprawled across hundreds of acres. But in Topsham, most of us are working to slow forest encroachment into diminishing pasture lands-an important habitat component of a biodiverse VT ecosystem. Conservation of habitat thus means something different here than it does in communities under intense development pressures.
2. The TRORC mapping process utilizes GPS mapping algorithms that can only produce macro-level results-the view from 10,000 feet (miles, actually). This approach misses a great deal of very relevant data, as it does not take into account in any way the on-the-ground reality of the lands being mapped.
3. This algorithm-based, top-down approach has thwarted local input and created the impression on perceived disregard for local knowledge of our lands.
4. Local property owners are a valuable source of knowledge about land use and limitations to use based on lived experience. For example, had our community been heard, we could have told you that areas designated for housing/development include areas that we already know have major problems re: the feasibility of potable water and waste water systems, bluestone bedrock/ledge areas, and serious environmental restrictions ranging from protected wetlands to lead-laden surface soils.

The algorithm-based approach has missed this information and the results is a map of development zones that cannot feasibly be developed, despite feedback from the Town on this issue. We provide this as one example of the shortcomings of the “view from 10000 feet” and note that we see such inadequacies when it comes to the designation of other categories as well.

Going forward, we hope to work closely with TRORC on this issue, as we have (to great success thanks to your support) on passing a much-needed Town Plan, village center designation, the Topsham Community Hall Rehabilitation, the BRELLA process for that property, and the MERP implementation grant.

We recognize that this block mapping designation/mapping process is not optional, and that TRORC's role is to help our Town stay in compliance with State expectations. We would like to collaborate to incorporate local knowledge re: features of our lands, in order to produce a successful outcome to this process in Topsham.

5. Noting that people's hackles have been raised around this issue, we urge you to reconsider the use of the words "shall" and "must." Recognizing that this plan will likely not satisfy everyone, we might see less pushback against the text itself with words like "encourage" and "should" used where possible.

On behalf of the Topsham Planning Commission

James Clark

Chair Topsham Planning Commission