

VEIC Study Review Synthesis
Chapter 11 – Community Planning and Municipal Engagement
May 11, 2012

Summary of Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of the VEIC study focuses on the impact of land use decisions on energy consumption and explores ways in which community involvement can influence those decisions. The study highlights areas where the state has made progress in achieving “Smart Growth” principles, and also reviews existing state statute (RSA 9-A and 9-B) that calls for broader statewide planning. The recommendations include changes to existing legislation to clarify the intent of the statutes and to more broadly encompass existing efforts such as recommendations from the NH Climate Action Plan. The chapter encourages the state to provide more technical resources to local communities and work more collaboratively with the non-profit sector towards these ends.

Chapter Teams Findings

Top Priorities for Early Action.

The inability of the state to complete the statewide plan mandated by RSA 9-A is primarily due to the lack of dedicated funding, and therefore staff, for this task. While not a specific recommendation in the VEIC report, planning at the state level is important and the top priority in this area should be to secure the funding stream to get it done.

Priorities for Medium or Long-Term Action.

Recommendation 11.1 suggests amending RSAs 9-A and 9-B references to ‘Smart Growth’ to reference a broader sustainability and energy efficiency effort. The review team felt that such action is not a priority at this time, though should be considered in the longer term.

Areas for Further Consideration

Beyond the recommendations above, the Chapter review team recommends the EESE Board re-visit the recommendations of this chapter in two to three years after the current efforts described below have had an opportunity to have an impact on the community planning and municipal engagement landscape.

Background

The review team felt that no specific action by the EESE Board on the chapter recommendations is needed at this time due to a series of actions underway within the state since the development of this study. Despite the lack of a statewide plan, much progress has been made in the area of sustainable development in New Hampshire in the past year. Specifically, three grant funded actions are helping to address areas of action identified in the report.

First, the Office of Energy and Planning, as a direct result of the VEIC Study, has commissioned a *Cost of Sprawl Study* in which the vendor will develop a “cost of sprawl” tool to help municipalities estimate the costs associated with their land use decisions, develop case studies to compare economic outcomes associated to development patterns, and provide outreach to train the RPCs and municipalities to use the new tool.

Second, the RPCs were awarded a HUD Community Challenge Grant for the NH Sustainable Communities Initiative (A Granite State Future). The HUD program encourages regional planning efforts that mix housing, land-use, economic and workforce development, transportation, and infrastructure. The SCI is designed to help the state to create coordinated, sustainable regional plans, establish a consistent planning and policy framework, and coordinate local plans into a statewide strategy.

And lastly, the NH Housing Finance Authority was awarded a \$1 million HUD grant to establish the NH Community Planning Grant Program that will offer competitive matching grants for New Hampshire communities to conduct work on local regulations that will foster sustainable community development. It is anticipated the work done under this grant program will, among other things, result in improved coordination of energy building codes and zoning regulations, location of housing near employment and transportation centers.

Taken together, these three initiatives provide the tools (OEP study), the outreach (SCI), and the funding (CPG) to move the state forward with coordinated planning that is designed to better support all of NH’s citizens and move the state in the direction of improved use of our limited land resources which will ultimately result in lower energy use. Additionally, the existing EESE board Outreach and Education Committee continues to identify and work on efforts to improve communications among all stakeholder groups, including municipalities.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Chapter 11 review team that the EESE board put limited effort toward implementing the recommendations in this chapter in the coming year or two and to allow these initiatives to be implemented. Once up and running the EESE board can better evaluate specific steps needed, either regulatory or legislative, to continue to foster improvements in community planning and municipal engagement.