



NORTHWEST REGIONAL PLAN

2026 - 2034

Adopted by the Board of Regional Commissioners: Month __, 2026

Effective: Month __, 2026

DRAFT

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ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE: POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, CHILD CARE, WORKFORCE & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

GOALS

1. Make workforce training and post-secondary education available to increase employment rates, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills.
2. Ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care and integrate child care needs into the planning process including child care financing, infrastructure, business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development.
3. Develop and maintain a high-quality, affordable telecommunications infrastructure that provides the most efficient and effective as well as the least obtrusive system possible.
4. Ensure the availability of broadband access in order to increase economic opportunity and support economic diversity.

ASSETS AND VALUES

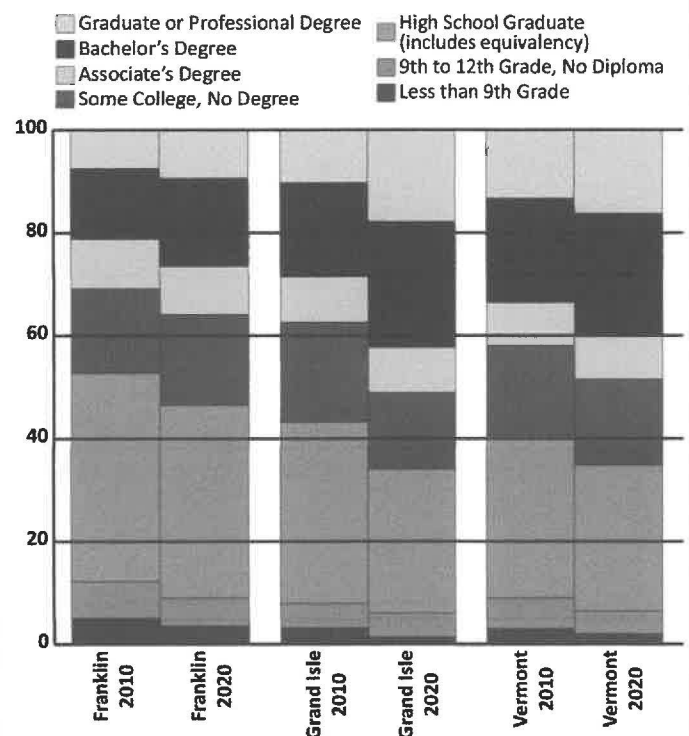
Education Levels

Students who never complete high school have a large impact on the region's long-term economic outlook. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the median income of persons ages 25 through 34 who had not completed high school was roughly \$26,000.

Grand Isle County residents have educational attainment levels similar to the state as a whole. Compared to the state, Franklin County has a higher percentage of residents who have completed less than the ninth grade (though that percentage has dropped over the past decade) as well as a lower percentage of residents with a graduate/professional or bachelor's degree (Figure 1).

Educational attainment varies significantly by race and ethnicity. Accurate regionally specific data is not available, but statewide data shows a disparity in

**FIGURE 1: Educational Attainment -
Residents Ages 25+
Franklin & Grand Isle Counties, VT**



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census & 2016 - 2020 American Community Surveys

Vermont State University campuses, and St. Michael’s College in Colchester, along with nearby Canadian institutions such as McGill University in Montreal. In addition, numerous accredited online colleges and universities are available to the region’s residents. Online educational opportunities provide an alternative for students who cannot attend classes in the traditional campus and classroom environments. Ensuring that the region’s residents have access to such educational opportunities is essential to the economic health and prosperity of northwestern Vermont.

Child Care

Quality child care services provide important benefits to the region by contributing to early- childhood development and enhancing children’s social skills. Children who receive quality child care are more likely to have economically productive careers as adults. (see Table 4 for data on overall need for services). Additionally, child care services enable parents of young children to work, which reduces employers’ recruiting and training costs for new employees following turnover due to parents’ inability to obtain adequate child care.

According to the Vermont Department of Children and Families’ 2024 market rate report, the average cost for full-time center-based care in the St. Albans district is \$360.23 per week for infants and \$296.55 per week for preschoolers, lower than the statewide averages. Even with recent changes to child care subsidies and payment level to providers, there is a gap between affordability and cost of care, especially for children younger than age three.

The number of child care providers in the region changes regularly, but there is a consistent gap between child care that is needed and child care that is available. In 2021, data from Let’s Grow Kids estimated that an additional 1,000 children could be served if care was available. This need is especially true for infants and toddlers, since not all child care providers serve that age group (Table 4).

TABLE 4: Estimated Need and Supply of Child-Care Services in the Region

	Franklin County	Grand Isle County
Number of Children Birth to 12 Years	6,136	689
Number of Children Who Require Regulated Child-Care (estimated)	3,988	448
Number of Children Five Years Old or Younger	3,007	319
Proportion of Licensed Providers Serving Infants and Toddlers	64%	50%

SOURCE: VT Agency of Human Services

BROADBAND

Information technology is integral to fulfilling the economic needs of residents and businesses in the region. Telecommunications is the communication of information through various media. Information is transmitted

in numerous formats (e.g., voice, data, graphics, images, and video) over various media (e.g., copper wires, fiber-optic cable, air, and space). While this section focuses on broadband, it is important to note the region still has large geographic areas where cell phone service is unavailable or inadequate.

Broadband technology is a necessary component of the region's economic development. Broadband services can help increase residents' access to educational opportunities and resources, provide an interactive online marketplace for consumers, expand the customer base for businesses, facilitate access to higher-skilled employment opportunities for residents, enhance medical capabilities for health-care providers, provide access to health resources for the public, and contribute to increased productivity in the workplace. In addition, broadband services promote a sense of community through various online forums and encourage civic participation. Civic organizations can provide services to a greater portion of the communities they serve and create opportunities for new services.

The federal standard for broadband speed is 25/3 megabits per second (Mbps) of download/upload speeds, while the State Telecommunications Plan 2021 calls to increase the standard to 100/100 Mbps. The Vermont Department of Public Service has an estimate of the proportion of every town and city's buildings served by five tiers of internet service measured in Mbps of download/upload speeds. It should be noted that the actual speeds per premise are often below the advertised rate. Table 5 summarizes the five tiers of service and the number of premises served by each level within the region, as well as the underserved. (VT Department of Public Service, November 2022)

Existing types of broadband services in the region include cable, DSL, fiber-optic, satellite, mobile wireless, and fixed-point wireless. Broadband companies serving the region are Comcast Communications LLC, Consolidated Communications, DirectTV (600 MHz), FirstLight, Franklin Telephone, GlobalNet, Hughes Network Systems, Starlink, AT&T Mobility, Verizon Wireless, Sprint Nextel, T-Mobile, Mansfield Community Fiber, Viasat, and VTel Wireless. Coverage gaps can be found in nearly all municipalities. The most current view of broadband availability may be found at <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/broadband-availability>.

In August 2020, NRPC assisted Enosburgh Town, Fairfax, and Montgomery in the creation of the Northwest Communications Union District and then provided technical and administrative support to the organization during the first two years. The Northwest CUD (dba Northwest FiberWorx) now encompasses 21 municipalities

TABLE 5: Five Tiers of Internet Service

Internet Connectivity 2022	Service Locations Franklin County	Percent Served or Better	Service Locations Grand Isle County	Percent Served or Better
100/100 Mbps or Greater	3,149	13.7%	5	0.1%
100/20 Mbps	17,897	77.7%	3,808	59.4%
25/3 Mbps	18,250	79.29%	4,421	69.0%
25/3 Mbps (includes wireless)	18,938	82.2%	4,676	72.9%
4/1 Mbps	22,740	98.7%	6,248	97.5%
Lacking 4/1 Mbps (underserved)	295	1.3%	163	2.5%

SOURCE: VT Department of Public Service, November 2022

in the region plus Milton in Chittenden County. Currently, utilizing state and federal broadband funding sources, they are active in planning and designing a community-based fiber-optic network that will provide universal access to all homes and businesses in the region (<https://www.nwfiberworx.com>). The focus is on unserved and underserved areas. The first phase began construction in 2024.

GOALS AND POLICIES

- 1. Make workforce training and post-secondary education available to increase employment rates, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills.**
 - a. Support efforts by the regional technical centers and others to provide training that is based on employer-defined skill standards and essential academic learning requirements.
 - b. Promote efforts to provide individuals with the skills, knowledge, and abilities required to improve economic well-being and respond to changing workforce needs.
- 2. Ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care, and integrate child care needs into the planning process including child care financing, infrastructure, business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development.**
 - a. Municipal plans should include the future need for and supply of child care services, assess whether local barriers exist for the provision of needed services, and develop action programs to reduce any local barriers.
 - b. Municipal land-use and development regulations should authorize child care services in appropriate locations convenient to households and employers.
 - c. Employers, schools, and community organizations should collaborate to ensure that affordable, quality child care services are available to meet the different needs of households.
- 3. Develop and maintain a high-quality, affordable telecommunications infrastructure that provides the most efficient and effective as well as the least obtrusive system possible.**
 - a. Support FiberWorx, the Northwest region's Communication Union District, in its effort to complete last mile build-out of broadband infrastructure in the region in unserved and underserved areas.
 - b. Promote Internet provider programs that offer reduced-cost broadband plans for families who qualify for the free or reduced-cost lunch program. Advocate for the expansion of these programs to more Internet providers.
 - c. Support state agency plans to strategically improve infrastructure that supports improved cellular service coverage in the region.
 - d. Ensure that the telecommunications system and related infrastructure fit within the character of the area as defined by the local and regional plans.
 - e. Consolidation of new telecommunications facilities on existing sites is preferred over the development of new sites. New telecommunications equipment and towers shall be sited in the least obtrusive and least ecologically sensitive areas possible.
- 4. Ensure the availability of broadband access in order to increase economic opportunity and support economic diversity.**

- a. Support the development of a telecommunications infrastructure that enhances employment and business opportunities, high-quality education, lifelong learning opportunities and telehealth.
- b. Promote affordable, universal access to high-speed broadband and emerging telecommunications technologies.
- c. Identify and inventory specific technology infrastructure needs, such as telecommuting hubs and Wi-Fi hotspots.

ENERGY

GOALS

1. **Ensure all residents have equitable access to the benefits and an equitable share of the burdens of the energy transition.**
2. **Use demand-side management to handle the expected doubling of electric energy demand in the Northwest region by 2050.**
3. **Reduce annual regional fuel needs and fuel bills for heating structures and foster the transition from nonrenewable fuel sources to renewable fuel sources.**
4. **Hold vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita to 2011 levels through reducing the share of single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) commuter trips, increasing the share of pedestrian and bicycle commute trips and public transit ridership, and focusing regional development in or near downtowns, existing growth centers and village centers and areas.**
5. **Increase region-based passenger rail trips and rail freight tonnage in the region by 2050.**
6. **Increase the share of renewable energy in transportation by increasing the use of renewable and less carbon-intensive fuels.**
7. **Increase the renewable energy generation capacity in the Northwest region with new solar, wind, and hydro generation capacity by 2050.**

REGIONAL ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In 2024, NRPC completed an update to the 2017 Northwest Regional Energy Plan, a pilot project funded by the Vermont Department of Public Service. The energy element of this regional plan consists of this energy section and the full Northwest Regional Energy Plan, included by reference and available at www.nrpcvt.com. While the energy chapter is a high-level overview of NRPC's energy goals and policies, the energy plan takes a comprehensive and detailed look at the region's energy context. The regional energy plan meets the standards required for an enhanced energy plan and therefore gives NRPC increased deference in Act 248 proceedings.

CURRENT ENERGY USE AND GENERATION

NRPC has been tracking and analyzing energy generation and consumption data since the creation of the region's enhanced energy plan in 2017. The COVID-19 pandemic made accurate data collection difficult, so trends around energy usage and other important data points in the relevant years might be distorted. Despite the complications with data, a few trends have remained clear. Residential electricity use has increased, a trend most likely caused by the increasing use of technology like electric heat pumps to heat and cool homes, electric cars, and other electrification technologies that allow residents to move away from fossil fuels and instead use electricity for more of their energy needs. In generation trends, solar installations have been increasing, both as commercial projects and smaller, home-based projects. Given environmental concerns with new hydro projects and the incompatibility of industrial wind with regional constraints, solar has been the primary form of new renewable energy generation in the region within the past five years.