

PLAN FOR THE NORTHWEST REGION

2015 - 2023



Photo by: Steve Ratte

Serving the Municipalities of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties



Adopted by the Board of Regional Commissioners

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS

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). In the Northwest region, telecommunications incorporates an array of technologies including wireless communications facilities as well as services such as landline telephone, digital subscriber line (DSL), cable, broadband and satellite. Telecommunications occupies an important share of the region's infrastructure and is vital in supporting the present and future economy of Vermont.

Broadband and Wireless Technology

Broadband is a telecommunications technology that delivers a range of high-speed Internet services. 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.

Existing broadband services in the region include DSL, cable, satellite, mobile wireless and fixed-point wireless. Broadband companies serving the area include Comcast, FairPoint Communications, GlobalNet, GAW, Hughes Network Systems, StarBand, AT&T Mobility, Verizon Wireless, Sprint Nextel and WildBlue. The majority of the region has broadband coverage with speeds at or exceeding 768 Kbps download/200 Kbps upload. Approximately 73% of the region had broadband service as of December 31, 2011, according to the Vermont Broadband Mapping Initiative. The coverage gaps are concentrated in the eastern portion of Franklin County and include parts of Bakersfield, Berkshire, Fletcher, Sheldon, Richford and Montgomery. The most current view of broadband availability by census block may be found at www.BroadbandVT.org.

In 2012, the NRPC participated in the creation of the statewide Broadband Technology Plan. A Regional Technology Planning Team assessed where promising opportunities are available to further develop broadband technology adoption and use. The team used the Vermont Telecommunications Plan along with local and regional knowledge to develop strategies and actions for integrated use of broadband technology across the following sectors: business, education, energy/utilities, health care, human services, libraries, media and municipal government/emergency services. The plan is available at www.nrpcvt.com/Broadband.html.

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 Franklin-Grand Isle Workforce Investment Board and regional technical centers 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.**
 - 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. 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.
 - b. Identify and inventory specific technology infrastructure needs, such as telecommuting hubs and Wi-Fi hotspots.
- 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 high-quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.
 - b. 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.
 - c. Promote universal access to high-speed broadband and emerging telecommunications technologies.
 - 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. Target higher broadband speeds for village centers, downtowns and growth centers to encourage development.