

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board
POLICY POSITION
FUNDING OF LOCAL CONSERVATION PROJECTS

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board designates a portion of its funds for locally significant conservation projects for the purposes of outdoor public recreation, natural area protection, historic preservation, agricultural land preservation, and the maintenance of a community's scenic integrity or definition of its identity. Municipalities and 501(c)(3) conservation organizations are eligible to apply for funds to complete conservation projects that may have tremendous local significance but which are not competitive with other conservation projects of statewide significance, such as Long Trail protection, access to Lake Champlain, farmland conservation projects approved by the Board's Agricultural Advisory Committee, or the conservation of endangered species habitat.

Funds granted under this program shall ordinarily be used for the acquisition of land, interests in land, or historic sites and those costs associated with the acquisition as approved by VHCB staff. Funding is not available for the construction of buildings or recreational facilities. Funding for rehabilitation of buildings is limited to those eligible under the VHCB Policy on Historic Preservation.

The Board may fund a variety of conservation projects, such as land or easement acquisition to provide access to water for swimming and boating, to provide trails or greenways, to protect or expand town parks and town forests, to purchase or rehabilitate a building of historic importance, and to conserve agricultural lands and natural areas. Priority shall be given to projects with at least two of the following conservation purposes: outdoor public recreation, natural area protection, historic preservation, and agricultural land preservation.

All projects seeking funding under this policy must demonstrate municipal support in the form of a letter of endorsement from the selectboard(s) of the town or towns where the project is located.

Projects submitted that provide access to or conserve an area of statewide significance (as determined by the VHCB using input from the Natural Heritage Program, Department of Forest Parks and Recreation, Division for Historic Preservation and others) may be eligible for regular VHCB project funding which does not necessarily require local matching funds and is not subject to the per project funding cap described below.

The purchase price of all property acquired shall be supported by an appraisal reviewed and approved by VHCB staff. Prior to disbursement of VHCB funds, the grantee shall not acquire title to the property or incur capital expenses for which it will seek reimbursement from VHCB funds, without first obtaining written approval of VHCB staff.

All property purchased by a grantee using VHCB funds shall be protected in perpetuity using conservation easements held by VHCB or other legal mechanisms approved by the Board. In all cases, the management of the property and stewardship of the easement shall be the responsibility of the owner implemented in accordance with standards approved by VHCB staff.

These local projects shall be considered by the Board at its regularly scheduled meetings, and applicants shall use the Local Conservation Project application and policy statements (Local Conservation Projects, Public Outdoor Recreation, Natural Areas, Historic Preservation, Conservation of Agricultural Land) in applying for funding. All conservation projects shall be reviewed using existing Board policy and shall be ranked by the Board in terms of need, impact and quality.

FUNDING CAPS FOR ALL LOCAL CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Applicants for local conservation projects may request a grant of up to \$150,000 for non-farm projects and up to \$215,000 for farm projects, plus associated costs, in VHCB funds and shall demonstrate a commitment of at least 33 percent of the total project costs from other sources. For local farm projects, per acre caps as described in the VHCB Policy on Funding Conservation of Agricultural Land will apply. Project match may include cash, in-kind services, and donations of land and easements that further the conservation goals of the project. Priority may be given to those projects that exceed this match requirement or that include municipal funds or cash raised privately from individuals residing in the community. Applicants shall demonstrate that they have sought out and applied for other available funding for which they may be eligible.

For local projects with exceptionally high acquisition costs and significant leverage devoted to those acquisition costs, applicants may request that the Board waive the above caps (including per acre caps for local farm projects) and fund the project at a higher level. Similarly, for exceptionally expensive or complex local projects associated costs applicable to statewide projects may be requested and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

While often submitted as local applications, projects involving historic building acquisition or rehabilitation are not typically recommended for funding above \$100,000. Nevertheless, historic projects that involve exceptional “outstanding historic resources,” anticipate greater than usual public use and exposure, and bring significantly higher leverage to the historic rehabilitation/acquisition component of the undertaking may be recommended for a higher level of funding.

FUNDING OF LOCALLY IMPORTANT FARM PROJECTS

Local Conservation project funds may be used for the protection of locally important farms that help maintain the essential characteristics of the Vermont countryside, provided that the property to be protected is being actively farmed or has a sound plan for getting into operation. The Board will evaluate these farms based on soils, infrastructure, and management of the soil and water resource. Priority shall be given to those projects that have at least two conservation purposes or that demonstrate an innovative farming operation offering benefits to the broader Vermont agricultural community. All of the foregoing local project policies shall pertain to these locally important farm projects, including the match requirement and the requirement for municipal endorsement.