

**Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
Organizational Grant Committee**

MINUTES

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

Zoom Meeting

Organizational Grant Board Committee Members: Neil Mickenberg, Emily Wadhams, Maura Collins, Billy Coster (designee of Julie Moore; Secretary of ANR), Tom Yahn

VHCB Staff: Gus Seelig, Anne Duffy, Marcy Christian, Martin Hahn, Karen Freeman, Jenny Hyslop, Larry Mires, Jennifer Hollar

Neil Mickenberg called the meeting to order at 9:05 am. Gus Seelig explained that since the Board approved the staff's proposal to streamline the organizational grant application this year, the review process has been streamlined as well. He explained that staff have had very close contact with partners this year; meeting with leadership staff several times a month during the pandemic. In addition, each executive director participated in a phone call in which common challenges and themes were discussed.

Jenny Hyslop provided an overview of trends and observation for the housing organizations. She explained that staff will continue regular check-ins and provide opportunities for partner organizations to get together to work on a variety of topics. She expressed admiration for the hard work of our partners in handling the challenges of the pandemic and taking on additional project work due to the availability of Coronavirus Relief Funds. There was also good news that the first two housing organizations have had their PPP loans converted to grants. Gatherings of executive directors, finance, and property managers have been ongoing and an additional group dealing with fundraising and public relations has been recently added to the mix. Diversity and equity issues continue to be a concern and organizations are addressing these issues in a variety of ways. NeighborWorks America has funding available to help with racial justice efforts.

Martin explained that there are two housing organizations that will receive the highest level of capacity support from VHCB over the next. Both organizations are benefiting from technical assistance support from Connie Snow.

Emily asked about the pipeline for the housing organizations and Martin explained that although there are more projects than resources, some projects just aren't ready at this point. There was a discussion about the likelihood of another federal stimulus package that could continue to help with rent funding. People that are close to the edge are closer than ever right now. People need all types of assistance. The housing network in the state is in good shape considering everything that has happened this year but does need more help. Tom asked how programs were communicating the availability of money/resources and whether issue of not having a statewide network hurts this process. Jen pointed out that AHS is having a meeting in the next week bringing together stakeholders to identify holes in the social service delivery system. Maura brought up the idea of the SASH model as a potential system for the homelessness response. She also wondered about Connie Snow's capacity since she had done work with so many of the housing organizations.

Martin explained that she is currently only working with two organizations. Polly Nichols and Amy Wright are working with ACCT on a Mobile Home Portfolio plan as well. All of this work is being funded by VHCB technical assistance money. Maura acknowledged the positive changes at Rural Edge and the work that VHCB staff did to help with this organization over the past several years. Neil was pleased that Rural Edge is doing so well.

There was a board discussion of the VCLF funding. Gus explained that the award would now be split between housing and conservation to better represent the work that they do around the state. The funding chart was reviewed.

Karen Freeman discussed the conservation organizations with board members. She reported that our partners have done an amazing job dealing with all of the challenges of the past year. During the pandemic use of outdoor recreation resources has dramatically increased around the state and infrastructure such as parking lots have been above capacity. Emily asked about the stewardship implications and Karen noted that Mark Martin works closely with our partners to deal with issues that have arisen in response to increased use of these properties has a stewardship subgroup that has been meeting. Support for the conservation network has included check-ins with executive directors and other key staff, zoom gatherings of the larger group of partners as well as monthly gatherings for the smaller organizations. Many of the organizations are beginning conversations about diversity and inclusion and how it informs their work.

Since many of our conservation groups rely heavily on fundraising, they have had to pivot their efforts this year with the pandemic. They have had to become quite creative since they have not been able to hold in-person events. CTA had a very successful virtual Race to the Top; in part due to sponsors, they secured to support the event. Partner organizations are coming up with new ways to demonstrate the value of their work to users of conserved trails and lands available to the public. With increased use of outdoor resources and conservation seen as being in-service to the public and key to pandemic recovery, partners are finding this a time to more deeply engage with the community and potential donors.

Karen reported that the project pipeline is robust. Closing projects has been more difficult this year with access to town offices limited and funding streams delayed, particularly for state water quality-related funds. VLT has reduced its staff by 20% and reorganized positions which has affected legal work for many of their projects. There was a discussion about VLT's capacity and Gus explained that this is an issue that we will continue to monitor.

Technical assistance continues to be very helpful to these organizations. Cross Vermont Trail Association is receiving Technical Assistance funding to help with an organizational strategic planning process that will include their staffing model and financial sustainability. Several organizations are looking for help finding trainers to facilitate diversity work. Some of our conservation organizations are concerned with the number of appraisers retiring around the state. Last year VHCB sponsored a training to expand the pool of appraisers eligible to do NRCS farm appraisals and offering a training for conservation easement appraisers may be another way to support our partners. Billy asked about Vermont River Conservancy and their recent staffing changes. This situation may be another opportunity for technical assistance.

Billy asked about VCLF. While he respects the organization and its work, he wondered about its actual need. Karen explained that VCLF has provided critical capital to food, agriculture and working landscape enterprises as well as historic preservation projects. Gus spoke to this issue pointed out that VCLF has been effective in helping us to pursue our housing and conservation mission around the state and that's an important consideration. We felt that this wasn't the year to cut them since we had said that organizations would be level funded. Billy asked if support for VCLF might be better couched as technical assistance funding. Maura said she's asked similar questions in the past. Neil noted the importance of VCLF's work and stated his preference for continuing to fund VCLF. We will continue to look at this issue going forward. Maura suggested that the committee meet again in the spring to discuss this issue again.

Martin had one correction and one addition to the standard conditions for both housing and conservation. Karen recommended that a special condition be added to both the UVLT and TPL awards.

Recommended Changes to Special & Standard Conditions:

1. For Standard Condition #1, strike the word revised
2. Finally we recommend one special condition which applies to all grants:

Prior to the first disbursement, grantee will comply with any outstanding 2020 Organizational grant conditions.

3. There are also three housing organizations, which have special conditions, which are spelled out in the housing memo.
4. Twin Pines Housing Trust, Upper Valley Land Trust and Trust for Public Land may only use VHCB funds for activities associated with Vermont projects.

Maura made the motion to accept staff recommendations for funding and changes to the Standard and Special Conditions. Emily seconded the motion. Board members thanked the staff for their good work and Martin thanked Jenny for her wonderful work with partners over the past year. All voted in favor of the motion.

Roll Call

Billy - Yes

Tom - Yes

Emily - Yes

Maura - Yes

Neil - Yes

All voted in favor of the motion.

There was no other business.

Respectfully submitted,

Marcy Christian