Franklin County NRCD Board of Supervisors Meeting Minutes **October 29, 2026**
Strategic Planning Meeting

In Attendance: Lauren Weston (District Manager), Vicky Drew (Chair), Karyn Rocheleau (Supervisor), Molly Magnan (Treasurer)

Conducted at 431 Franklin Park West, Suite 100a, St. Albans, and recorded via Zoom.

Minutes prepared from the meeting recording by Orenna Brand.

The written minutes are a synopsis of the discussion at the meeting. Motions are as stated. Minutes will be subject to correction by the Board. Changes, if any, will be recorded in the minutes of the next meeting of the Board.

Minutes:

3:02: Recording begins. Vicky Drew and Karyn Rocheleau present; Board waits for Molly Magnan to establish quorum.

3:03: Lauren Weston presents. Goal of meeting: get everyone on the same page about what the District has been doing so the Board can make a more informed decision about what to do next. Presentation begins with a look back at financials.

- Grant proposals submitted per fiscal year and success rate:
    - Lower success rate reflects pursuing different funders, more competition, and counting grants the District helps partners write, e.g., Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi (ANM), Franklin Watershed Committee (FWC).
    - District assists the Farmers Watershed Alliance (FWA) occasionally; FWA now has two staff.
- Most funding is restricted; the only unrestricted sources are Core funding and sales. Core funding carries many requirements and deliverables, so not totally unrestricted.
- Three types of grant payment: cost reimbursable, task completion payments, and deliverable-based payments:
    - Cost-reimbursable: District has historically used a billable rate rather than billing directly from payroll. District Manager is working with consultant Dave Dore to apply indirect costs correctly, so the District could eventually clear an audit.
    - Funders have accepted the current approach; this is a move toward best practice.
- Federal funding:
    - Last year, approximately $476k of $2.3 million in income (about 20%) was federal.
    - $1 million in federal funds triggers a federal audit. A pending FEMA application for the Montgomery flood work (approx. $1 million) could reach that threshold if funded.
    - New accounting system now clearly tracks federal vs. state funds.
- Lauren Weston confirmed the District can accept tax-deductible donations as a division of state government, should the Board choose to pursue that.
- Total income has increased exponentially over the last several years, much of it pass-through for projects. Expenses have increased steadily (more linear than exponential).
- Molly Magnan joins; quorum present.

- Board asks about the $56k in "other fringe" expenses.
    - The $56k is the $500/month benefit stipend each employee receives (for dental, vision, copays, etc.). Health care line ($46k) is premiums only and covers just six months of the year.
    - Background: the District previously paid a $700/month stipend for employees to buy marketplace insurance. After federal marketplace subsidy rules changed, the District moved to paying premiums for District health insurance. The $500 stipend was kept so the change would not feel like lost income to staff.
    - This fiscal year, health care costs will reflect a full year (likely a little over $90k). The District has eight full-time employees.
    - Premiums are expected to rise about 4.5% (approx. $50/month). The Board will need to decide how much of future increases the District absorbs vs. staff.
    - District premiums are about 25-26% below the marketplace through the Blue Edge Captive Plan, with a possible surplus refund at year end.
    - Discussion of group purchasing to lower costs:
        - Districts cannot currently buy insurance together as organized; NRCC would likely need to lead that.
        - Common Good Vermont is investigating group plans for its members.
        - Karyn Rocheleau shared about the hospital buying co-op model and will ask about it at an upcoming hospital meeting.
        - Vicky Drew asked Lauren Weston to share notes from health insurance discussions so the Board can be confident the District is on the most cost-effective path.
- Other line items reviewed, including contractual and supplies expenses.
    - Heavy engineering and construction year.
    - Bookkeeping costs lower after moving bookkeeping in-house to an upgraded version of QuickBooks (higher software cost, lower bookkeeper cost).
    - Office supplies higher in FY25 due to the office move.
    - Dues and subscriptions increased (approx. $18k to $21k) because Comcast internet and phones were recoded there from advertising/website. Also includes VACD dues and a subscription to the St. Albans Messenger to track press coverage.
    - Net income lower than prior years mainly due to approx. $50k in added health insurance costs; also rent payments began between FY24 and FY25.
- Staff time by program area should be taken with a grain of salt, since ag and education are not always coded the same way:
    - Administration time is coded separately and is fairly accurate. Lauren Weston's administrative hours come on top of her billable hours; Board notes this as an ongoing concern.
    - District has consistently funded about three full-time ag positions, about three natural resources positions, and about two positions between administration and education.
- Water quality monitoring: other partners do this work and the District does not need to return to it unless asked. The District's next AmeriCorps member will assist the Franklin Watershed Committee with monitoring next year.

3:26: Approval of the previous meeting minutes deferred to the next regular board meeting, since only the strategic planning portion of this meeting was warned. Orenna Brand is now preparing minutes and running weekly payroll.

3:27: Review of metrics the District is required to report to NRCC.

- Lauren Weston noted the District collects more data than it reports.
- Vicky Drew suggested the Board choose from existing metrics for the strategic plan rather than asking staff to collect new data, but noted one missing metric: phosphorus reduction.
    - Would like to know what share of the Missisquoi Bay TMDL reductions is credited to District work, compared with other partners.
    - The Clean Water Service Provider (CWSP) just sent its first report on this; Lauren Weston will forward it to all Board members.
    - Lauren Weston can provide phosphorus numbers for natural resources projects and will think further about how to report the ag work.
    - Outcome metrics (phosphorus reductions, soil health) would be strong for the strategic plan and for making the case to the legislature for increased District base funding.
    - Soil health data from the new NRCS CEMA 216 work could be reported, framed as work the District facilitates as part of the partnership.
- Areas the District does not focus on: water quality monitoring, equipment rental, stormwater (partners do it; heavily regulatory; lower return on investment), wetlands, roads, hydroseeding.
- Areas of strength: tree planting and education/outreach numbers.
- Vicky Drew sees a significant opportunity for wetland restoration in Franklin County. Lauren Weston agrees but suggests waiting until the controversy over the new state wetland maps settles.

3:38: Organizational chart reviewed.

- Lauren Weston is the only official supervisor; senior staff act as content leads. Orenna Brand to be shown beside the District Manager on the chart.
- Staff member Dorothy has changed her last name from Kinney-Landis to Abraham.
- Staff now specialize in ag or natural resources, since ag requires full-time focus to stay current.
- Staff retention is strong; staff tenure ranges from about 1.5 to 5 years.
- Brief discussion of changing gender makeup among District staff, District managers, the Board, and the ag field; Board noted the importance of continuing to serve all members of the community.

3:47: Review of the Conservation Action Plan (CAP) and current strategic plan

- CAP covers needs for soil, water, air, plants, animals, energy, and humans. The “priorities for addressing conservation needs” in each section are where the most work went.
- Board could use it as a guide, choosing the top one to four priorities per section rather than pursuing every item.
- Karyn Rocheleau noted it needs baseline numbers and targets for its metrics.
- Need to define the District’s role vs. partners’ roles.
- Suggested additions: Farm First and Cold Hollow to Canada.

- Vicky Drew requested that future strategic plan progress reports number each goal and list what was actually done to meet it, rather than restating the goal. Lauren Weston will aim to do this, likely in January.

3:54: Agriculture program overview.

- Nutrient management plans (NMPs): a core service that keeps farms in compliance and eligible for programs.
    - Now required for LFOs, MFOs, and CSFOs; farms with over 50 acres of annual cropland are at least a CSFO.
    - Staff help farmers correct field maps with FSA and NRCS, collect soil and manure samples, and update plans annually for farms they work closely with. Larger farms often use private consultants.
- Staff help farmers with grant applications and with reporting to funders to receive payment.
- Online version of the Ag Guide to Assistance launched last week with test feedback from partners.
- District hosts regional Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership meetings to coordinate service providers. Vicky Drew noted she founded the statewide partnership.
- Pay for Performance (PFP) program:
    - State program in which VACD contracts Districts as service providers. Franklin has 27 of the 47 farms enrolled statewide.
    - Scores each field based on soil, slope, and proximity to water; the state pays for qualifying scores (previous cap of $50,000/farm per year).
    - Provides incentive to keep up conservation practices (e.g., cover crops) and involves field verification.
    - Fits dairy farms well; less suited to small diversified and vegetable farms.
- Farmers Watershed Alliance (FWA):
    - District takes notes at FWA's monthly board meetings, now held at the District office. Being in the room makes staff better advocates for farmers.
    - FWA is currently focused on precision agriculture and education/outreach, and hosted the recent State of Farming film screening.
- Lauren Weston notes for the record that Molly Magnan has left and quorum is lost.
- Precision agriculture: partnership with Scott Magnan on GPS-based application and record keeping; Dorothy Abraham has led this work. An estimated one-third of remaining Franklin County dairies use precision ag in some way.
- Soil health:
    - District received another Lake Champlain Basin Program grant to rerun its soil health training for technical assistance providers; about 16 webinars are online and will be rerun with Q&A this winter.
    - UVM Extension cohort program with seven farms has ended.
    - Now helping farmers take soil health tests under NRCS CEMA 216; UVM opened a new soil health lab this year.
- District hosts the statewide Signs of Conservation program; it has not been a recent priority.
- Future ag opportunity for strategic planning: the District currently has no funds to give farmers directly. Board discussed pros and cons, including the staff capacity needed to administer such funds.

4:27: Break.

4:31: Natural resources program overview.

- Floodplain restoration and strategic wood addition to reconnect straightened, incised streams to their floodplains.
- Berkshire dam removal completed last year.
- Streamwise assessments for landowners.
- Limited water quality sampling, tied to project implementation.
- Staff are building smaller projects in-house, including a rain garden and an open-top culvert at Lake Carmi.
- Lake Carmi State Park wetland restoration is in final design, with implementation hoped for next year.
- Project management covers project development, phosphorus calculations, grant writing, design (in-house or engineer), implementation (in-house or contractor), and now verification or operations and maintenance.
- Funding comes mainly from the Clean Water Service Provider (Northwest Regional Planning Commission), the Lake Champlain Basin Program, and VACD/NRCC.
    - Basin Water Quality Councils (including Districts, watershed groups, municipal representatives, and land trusts) advise the CWSP; NRPC has final say.
    - Lauren Weston noted the CWSP model has been duplicative but has brought more clarity from DEC; the local CWSP administrator is a strong advocate for District projects.
- Events and outreach:
    - Outreach channels: email list, website, social media, Front Porch Forum, and paid Facebook ads (effective and inexpensive). Flyers have been discontinued.
    - Standardized event template and an accessible brand kit for consistent event promotion.
    - Recent events: vernal pool workshop, riparian buffer plant sourcing event at the Intervale Conservation Nursery, and the fishing festival.
- Partner support and habitat work:
    - Montgomery flood study completed so the town can update its hazard mitigation plan; District continues to pursue projects from it.
    - Final design funded for the Enosburg Falls culvert downstream of the dam removal (a fish passage barrier); seeking implementation funding.
    - Supported the Montgomery Conservation Commission's town forest bridge grant.
    - Strategic wood addition planned with Cold Hollow to Canada in Montgomery.
    - Five staff completed chainsaw training. Lauren Weston will ask Board members for woodland practice sites; permitted in-stream work window is July 1-October 1.
    - Tree planting with follow-up maintenance; tree tubes are removed after three to four years now that maintenance funding exists.
- Tactical basin planning and priorities:
    - Vicky Drew: the strategic plan should target the majority of District work to priority areas in the tactical basin plans, while leaving room for worthwhile projects outside them.

    - Lauren Weston agrees: be strategic, and document the reason when a project is not a priority.
    - Reviewed phosphorus TMDL progress by lake segment; Missisquoi Bay and St. Albans Bay remain well above targets.
- Forestry:
    - Maple: District is still defining its role; maple remains economically viable and many producers are also dairy farmers.
    - District owns two skidder bridges loaned to loggers for temporary stream crossings.
- Lauren Weston prefers practices that are self-sustaining over those requiring heavy maintenance, which is one reason the District does little stormwater work.
- Growing interest in flood resilience; wetland and shoreline restoration and climate change are future considerations.
- Staff engineer discussion:
    - A licensed professional engineer (PE) on staff could get projects done faster and likely for less.
    - Grants could cover the position with the current project pipeline, though funding could change.
    - Possible option: a later-career or recently retired engineer, possibly part-time.
- Possible new areas (roads, wastewater, drinking water, endangered species, recreation, forestry, stormwater, invasive species):
    - Vicky Drew: would require an outward-facing survey of partners; invasive species control needs a more strategic statewide approach and has little funding.

5:16: Community engagement and internal organizational capacity.

- Community engagement: District history, tree sale, locally led conservation, legislative advocacy, press coverage, and making work accessible to the whole community.
- Internal organizational capacity is where the District has made the most progress in the last three years (staff benefits, retention, office space).

5:19: Recording ends (no formal adjournment).