

—Slug:.....COMM-0860.guil.planning\_grant  
—Contributor.....Lily Hohn  
—Contributor email.....  
—For section..... News  
—Format..... News - byline and dateline  
—Dateline..... Guilford  
—Article Number:..... 43441



**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 How did Guilford win, then lose, a \$30,000 state grant?

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Concerns about whether zoning bylaws would be an  
3 inevitable outcome of a municipal planning grant led to the state  
4 rescinding the offer

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 In January, Vermont’s Department of Housing and  
7 Community Development (DHCD) announced the awarding of  
8 just over \$1 million in municipal planning grants across 47 cities,  
9 towns, and villages.

10 Intended to “support local planning and community  
11 revitalization initiatives,” these grants provide state funding for

12 updating zoning bylaws and town plans, conducting feasibility  
13 studies, and planning for infrastructure and development.

14 The recipients included the town of Guilford, which was  
15 awarded \$30,000 to explore and develop its first land-use  
16 bylaws, and the DHCD characterized it as a model project.

17 But that grant was ultimately rescinded.

18 What went wrong?

## 19 **Continuing conversations**

20 According to Jenni Lavoie, DHCD's administrative  
21 services manager for community planning and revitalization and  
22 administrator of the state's Municipal Planning Grant Program for  
23 the last 10 years, the decision came after Guilford requested to  
24 remove the bylaw development component from its proposed  
25 project.

26 "Because the grant was awarded specifically to support  
27 the creation of bylaws, the [DHCD] could not fund a project that  
28 no longer included that work," she says.

29 Regional planning commissions often assist members of  
30 local planning commissions in crafting these grant proposals,  
31 especially in sparsely populated rural towns like Guilford. In this  
32 case, Jeannette Tokarz, chair of the town's planning commission,  
33 wrote the application for the grant in conjunction with the  
34 Windham Regional Commission (WRC).

35 Community outreach by the planning commission in  
36 recent years had generated the goal of continuing conversations  
37 about what Guilford residents most valued and how they might  
38 best protect and preserve those aspects of the town.

39 Tokarz was looking for structured ways to do so when  
40 she first learned of the opportunity to apply for a municipal  
41 planning grant and found that materials on the DHCD's website  
42 for the program emphasized community engagement.

43 "In my mind, perhaps erroneously," she says, "this was  
44 really all about community engagement."

45 Per the Guilford Town Plan, residents “envision a town  
46 that maintains its rural character, protects its natural resources,  
47 and provides viable living, education, and economic  
48 opportunities to sustain [them] well into the 21st century.”

49 The question of how Guilford might implement this  
50 vision has guided Tokarz’s work as the town’s Planning  
51 Commission chair since she first assumed the position.

52 In a presentation hosted by the commission in 2023,  
53 Matt Bachler, senior planner of the Windham Regional  
54 Commission, discussed regulatory tools that could enable  
55 Guilford to realize that vision.

56 Zoning regulations, he explained, are the most common  
57 tool used to regulate land use and development in Vermont —  
58 more than 80% of Vermont towns have zoning bylaws to regulate  
59 land use. Guilford is not among them.

60 Though zoning was used in the early 20th century  
61 largely to separate land for industrial use from residential  
62 properties, Bachler asserted that modern technology tends to  
63 make this incompatibility of uses a bit of a moot point. In the  
64 present day, he said, zoning is more often used to preserve  
65 character, with a focus on aesthetics and landscaping.

66 In the eyes of the planning commission, a municipal  
67 planning grant would offer the opportunity to expand upon  
68 community dialogue and further explore the preservation of  
69 Guilford’s character through land use regulation.

70 The grant funds would cover the costs of technical  
71 assistance from professional planners at the Windham Regional  
72 Commission as well as the various steps in the process of  
73 bringing any bylaws to a vote should they be proposed during the  
74 project. Per state statute, these steps include mandatory public  
75 hearings to be held by the Selectboard and the Planning  
76 Commission prior to voting, as well as a written report to be  
77 produced by the town planning commission.

78 Regional planning commissions commonly assist  
79 members of local planning commissions in crafting these grant

80 proposals, especially in towns of Guilford's size, and Bachler  
81 assisted Tokarz.

82 In accordance with the application process, Tokarz  
83 informed the Guilford Selectboard of the grant program and  
84 application at the board's Feb. 10, 2025 meeting, and the  
85 Selectboard voted unanimously to approve the application  
86 submission March 10, 2025.

## 87 **Close, but not close enough**

88 The grant was not awarded on the town's first try, but  
89 Tokarz received helpful feedback to improve the application for a  
90 future round. She again worked with WRC to integrate the  
91 feedback and revise the application for resubmission.

92 The approval for submission of the revised application  
93 was brought before the Selectboard Oct. 27, 2025.

94 The project proposed developing what could become the  
95 town's first zoning bylaw by defining a process that would  
96 incorporate a variety of outreach to residents.

97 At this time, Selectboard members Chip Carter and Tara  
98 Cheney expressed reservations, wondering why state funding  
99 would be needed for community engagement and whether the  
100 grant would obligate the town to adopt zoning bylaws.

101 Tokarz explained that the funding would cover the cost  
102 of technical assistance from professional planners and that to her  
103 knowledge, the grant could not obligate the town to adopt  
104 bylaws.

105 The Selectboard remained divided on the issue.

106 "I would have liked to have had the grant [application] to  
107 read tonight, to see what the verbiage is," said Cheney. "I feel like  
108 we should have more conversation about this for questions  
109 instead of [having] a motion to vote."

110 However, the Nov. 3, 2025 deadline for submission of  
111 the grant application preceded the board's next meeting,  
112 requiring that a decision be made there and then. Ultimately, the  
113 selectboard voted 3-1 to approve the application submission with

114 the contingency that the grant carry no obligation to create and  
115 adopt bylaws.

116 This time around, the application was not only successful  
117 but “essentially tied for first place” among five successful  
118 applications in the Windham region, according to Jenni Lavoie,  
119 administrative services manager for community planning and  
120 revitalization at the DHCD and administrator of Vermont’s  
121 Municipal Planning Grant program for the last 10 years.

122 “Reviewers specifically commented on Guilford  
123 developing their first bylaw, the extensive public outreach  
124 proposed, and the fact that Guilford was utilizing our program’s  
125 brand-new no-required-match by the town for developing their  
126 first bylaw,” she said, meaning that the town would not have to  
127 contribute to (“match”) funding the effort.

128 “Our department was excited [by] the opportunity to  
129 showcase this project and award as a potential model for other  
130 communities,” Lavoie said.

131 But when it came time for the Guilford Selectboard to  
132 accept the awarded grant, opinions were once again mixed.

133 Selectboard member Sheila Morse commended Tokarz.  
134 “I know that these municipal planning grants are few and far  
135 between, and we finally got one,” she said. “Kudos to you for  
136 getting to this point.”

137 Other members found the grant language and  
138 breakdown of the budget offputting.

139 As written, the budget allocated \$7,000 for meetings and  
140 public workshops. The remaining \$23,000 would be devoted to  
141 preparing, drafting, and publicly presenting zoning bylaws and a  
142 zoning map, with public hearings to be held by the Selectboard  
143 and planning commission and WRC serving as consultant.

144 “I really feel like I didn’t get the information that [the  
145 grant] was to talk about zoning, and then we have \$23,000 that’s  
146 basically about zoning and then let’s vote on it. Am I wrong  
147 here?” asked Cheney.

148 Tokarz said that while she had done all of the narrative  
149 work of the grant in consultation with WRC, the budget  
150 document had been put together by WRC staff.

151 “It’s disappointing that it doesn’t reflect the way that we  
152 conceive of this process moving forward,” said Tokarz. However,  
153 “that budget was never intended to be the road map we would  
154 follow. That budget was to justify the amount of money we were  
155 requesting from the state.”

156 “What I’d like to do,” Tokarz said, “is meet with our  
157 consultant, go through this budget [...] and rework the language  
158 and the vision and come back to the Selectboard.”

159 The board agreed and unanimously passed a motion to  
160 amend the grant’s language to better emphasize community  
161 engagement, input, and education and to hold a special meeting  
162 to vote on whether to accept the grant prior to Jan. 24, the  
163 deadline to do so.

164 However, as Town Administrator Erika Elder learned  
165 when she reached out to Lavoie regarding the changes, the grant  
166 application could not be amended. The Selectboard would have  
167 to vote on the grant as written.

168 The vote, however, turned out to be a non-issue. In fact,  
169 the request to remove the bylaw development component was  
170 enough to cause the state to lose faith in the proposed project.

171 At a special meeting held for the purpose of voting on  
172 Jan. 23, Lavoie informed the Selectboard of the state’s decision to  
173 rescind the grant.

174 “We no longer have confidence that this grant award will  
175 lead to a successful outcome and would be a good use of  
176 taxpayer funds,” she said.

177 “Because the grant was awarded specifically to support  
178 the creation of bylaws, the [DHCD] could not fund a project that  
179 no longer included that work,” Lavoie told *The Commons*. She  
180 notes that rescinding this kind of grant is uncommon but declined  
181 to comment further on precedent.

## What happens next?

Tokarz said Guilford’s planning commission wants to move forward in a dialogue around land-use planning at a time when Vermont is undergoing a sea change in its regulatory framework, she says.

Recent years have seen the passing of several significant pieces of legislation regarding land-use planning in efforts to meet housing demands and realize the state’s vision of, per state statute, “an ecologically functional landscape that sustains biodiversity, maintains landscape connectivity, supports watershed health, promotes climate resilience, supports working farms and forests, provides opportunities for recreation and appreciation of the natural world, and supports the historic settlement pattern of compact villages surrounded by rural lands and natural areas.”

These pieces of legislation include the HOME Act in 2023, and Act 181 in 2024, the latter of which is considered one of the most significant — and controversial — overhauls to date of Act 250, which has served as the centerpiece of state land-use regulation in Vermont since its passing in 1970.

Though Guilford is not currently facing extreme development pressure, Bachler notes that it is often not possible to put measures in place once development is underway.

He added that towns that lack zoning, like Guilford, tend to have less ability to align future development to their community goals outlined in their respective town plans.

And for the state’s part, Lavoie encouraged Guilford to apply again for this or other eligible projects once a consensus can be reached about the best path forward for the town.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

211 Lily Hohn has served *The Commons* as a journalism  
212 intern from Greenfield Community College.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

213 0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

214

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

215

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

216

####END LOGLINE####