

## State developing guidelines for Vermont Yankee grant money

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BRATTLEBORO -- The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development is in the beginning phases of developing guidelines for the distribution of money granted to Windham County via an agreement with the operator of Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant in Vernon.

In August 2013, Entergy announced it was closing its power plant at the end of 2014. In a far-reaching agreement with the state, Entergy agreed to contribute \$10 million over five years for economic development in Windham County. In addition, Entergy released more than \$5 million it was holding in escrow for the state's Clean Energy Development Fund, half of which is dedicated to the county. When the Public Service Board issued a certificate of public good for operation of the plant to the end of 2014, Entergy delivered a \$2 million check to the state. Lawrence Miller, the commissioner of ACCD, told the Legislature he would like to see \$500,000 of that money released to Windham County before the end of the year.

"The Agency of Commerce and Community Development has been given authority to develop and implement a process to accept and review proposals for the utilization of these funds and make recommendations to the Governor for final approval," wrote Lucy Leriche, the Deputy Secretary of ACCD, in an email. "We are working through the details of the application, review, approval, and monitoring/reporting processes and will be inviting applications as soon as this work is complete."

Leriche noted that they expect to accept the first round of proposals in early July, but also noted that applicants shouldn't apply for any funds until the application materials have been finalized and released.

"We expect to fund various types of proposals that have a direct impact on job retention and job creation within Windham County," she wrote. "So get creative and watch for additional information soon. We look forward to working with you to make the post-VY transition as smooth as possible for Windham County and the state of Vermont."

Leriche told the Reformer that the grant application process has been held up by a motion to amend the agreement reached between the state and Entergy, but on Thursday, the Public Service Board denied New England Coalition's motion. NEC now has 30 days to appeal the PSB's decision.

"We are not in a position to be granting funds on a memorandum of agreement that is still going through the legal process," said Leriche. "But we wanted to let people know that we are setting up a grant application process."

She said a team has been set up to develop the guidelines so that once all legal issues have been resolved, ACCD can immediately begin to solicit application. In addition, said Leriche, the Vermont Employment Growth Incentive board might be involved in reviewing the applications, as will be other agencies in the government, including perhaps the Department of Labor, the Department of Public Service and the Agency of Transportation.

"We want to make sure that the process is thorough, fair, transparent and effective."

What has been central to the process, said Leriche, is the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy created by the Southeastern Vermont Economic Development Strategies.

"We will be looking at the goals of the SeVEDS process and the CEDS document and using that as a guide, while also trying to balance the other goals of making sure the dollars are spent wisely," said Leriche. "Obviously, the region's interests are what this is all about. The very basis of this entire process will be built around the voices of Windham County and the goals identified in the CEDS. That is the foundation we are building the grant criteria on."

Kate O'Connor, the executive director of the Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Brattleboro Selectboard, said that during a recent meeting with the governor, the board was assured that the people involved in approving grant applications have an understanding of what's happening economically in Windham County.

"The CEDs process worked and the programs and proposals that came through the process I assume will be considered," said O'Connor.

Ann Manwaring, who represents Wilmington and Halifax and is a member of the House Appropriations Committee, said that the vital projects outlined in the CEDS should be eligible for grant funding.

"I hope this process gets going quickly. If the money is meant to create jobs, let's spend some money and get them created," she said.

"There is a framework that exists that should guide the use and leveraging of whatever funding comes to the region," Chris Campany, the executive director of the Windham Regional Commission. "The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy produced by SeVEDS lays out what the current economic conditions and past trends have been and strategies to address how to reverse those trends."

Laura Sibilia, the director of economic development for the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and the primary contact for the SeVEDS board of directors, said she is relieved the program is getting underway.

"We have a number urgent projects that the region has developed over many years," she said. "We're ready to continue working in partnership with the administration and the Agency of Commerce."

Sibilia said Windham County has a leg up on other communities that are facing the decommissioning of a nuclear power plant.

"As far as I know, there is not another community where they have gone through a pre-planning process to mitigate the economic impacts. We have done it and we've done it because of the foresight of the governor and the ACCD who have been invested in SeVEDS since 2011.

The CEDS outlined 52 projects that SeVEDS considered viable. A group of five corporate executive officers, not affiliated with SeVEDs reviewed the list and broke out 12 as vital projects, said Sibilia.

Those projects include creating a job board for employers in Windham and Bennington counties; building a more sustainable childcare system in the region; extending electric, water and sewer to new industrial sites near Exit 1 in Brattleboro; purchasing and renovating 10 vacant buildings in downtown Wilmington;

developing "last mile" high-speed Internet connections; and creating a machine apprenticeship program.

Leriche said Gov. Peter Shumlin has been quite clear about how the money should be disbursed.

"He wants to see the most impactful investment of these dollars as possible. He wants jobs created. We need to spend the money well and wisely and get a good return on our investments."

While the process that led to the development of the CEDS was a very transparent process, said Campany, there have been some concerns that agriculture and the arts community didn't receive the recognition of their importance to the region.

"The Windham Regional Commission recognizes that the arts and agriculture are fundamental to the economy and quality of life here, but we also recognize we are going to lose a lot of high-paying jobs that support the arts and local food. It's not an either/or proposition. We need to work on having a very diverse local economy."

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