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(MONDAY, Nov. 21) – Senator Patrick Leahy (D), Senator Bernie Sanders (I) and Congressman Peter Welch (D) announced Monday that the Northwest Regional Planning Commission and the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission will receive economic development planning grants totaling more than a million dollars from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The two grants are among only a few dozen regional planning projects approved by HUD nationwide.

The Northwest Regional Planning Commission, based in St. Albans and serving Franklin and Grand Isle Counties, will receive \$480,000 to develop a plan to boost community health initiatives and encourage economic vitality in the region. The commission serves 23 municipalities by helping citizens, non-profits and other local organizations with issues related to zoning, state and federal regulations, grant preparation, mapping and demographic data collection, and other local priorities and projects.

The Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) will receive \$540,000 to address issues related to housing, transportation, public utilities, natural resources and energy use in the 40 Vermont towns served by the commission and by the Southern Windsor County

Regional Planning Commission. The aim of the projects funded by the grant will be to reduce energy use and foster economic opportunities in the region

Peter Gregory of TRORC welcomed the news: “The resiliency of this region continually gets tested as natural disasters hit, energy prices climb, safe and affordable housing becomes more challenging to find, and the economy transitions. This funding will enable many stakeholders to have the opportunity to develop a framework that allows for a strengthening of our physical and social wellbeing for the long term. We are very pleased to have been recognized nationally as an important area in which to invest.”

These organizations are two of 11 commissions serving Vermont cities and towns. Leahy, a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and of its HUD subcommittee, worked to ensure that HUD included a rural set-aside in the budget for the Sustainable Housing and Communities program, allowing Vermont organizations to compete for federal funds.

In an earlier letter of support for TRORC’s application, the lawmakers said the roadmap the grant will make possible “will help guide local, regional, and state policymaking to support smart growth as well as invest in a sustainable future for the people of Vermont.”

Key partners in fulfilling the work funded by the grants include Housing Vermont, the Vermont Natural Resources Council, Champlain College, the Vermont Economic Development Authority, the Upper Valley Housing Coalition, and the Upper Valley Land Trust.