

# Better Places Program Guide

## Program Description

The Better Places program provides “placemaking” grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000 that improve the vitality of [state designated downtowns, village centers, new town centers, or neighborhood development areas](#). The Better Places partnership is a place-based economic development program that:

- Revitalizes and improves public spaces in support of local economic and community development efforts
- Empowers residents to play an active role in shaping their communities, building social capital, and local pride
- Supports local COVID-19 response and recovery efforts
- Advances “quick build” projects that boost confidence, builds partnerships and sparks momentum
- Improves public health, reduces social isolation, and increases physical activity
- Stimulates the creative economy and supports public art projects

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*“Placemaking” efforts are projects and investments that improve the livability and the appeal of communities, which helps make places more walkable and bikeable, supports local businesses, builds social capital, and strengthens community identity.*

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## Program Partners

The program is funded and supported by the Vermont Community Foundation, Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), Vermont Arts Council, National Life Group Foundation, and the Preservation Trust of Vermont. The program relies on the expertise and generous support of the Better Places Partners that include AARP Vermont, Local Motion, Vermont Department of Health, Vermont Agency of Transportation, and Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets.

## Program Timeline

- Notice of funds – December 9, 2020
- Grants Due – on January 22, 2021 at 4pm
- Application review period – until February 12, 2021
- Grant Awards announcement – week of February 15, 2021
- Project completed – August 31, 2021

## Eligible Applicants

Municipalities, local community groups, and nonprofit entities with documented municipal support may apply. Municipalities must partner with community groups and have a plan to involve the broader public. Nonprofits and community-based organizations must have permission from the property owners (city/town or private owner) where the project is proposed. Nonprofits must be registered with the Vermont Secretary of State. Community groups may use a fiscal sponsor and must abide by Vermont Community Foundation’s [fiscal sponsor agreement](#).

## Eligible Location

Projects must be located in a [state designated downtowns, village centers, new town centers, or neighborhood development areas](#). To determine if your community has a state designation, visit the [Vermont Planning Atlas](#).

Projects must have proper site control secured prior to applying. Site control must be in the form of a signed legally binding agreement authorizing grant use from the owner of the project location (i.e. one of the following - municipal owned property with selectboard or city council approval and/or resolution, private lease or ownership of the property or building, or MOU granting permission from the property owner, etc.).

For projects proposed in the State (VTrans) ROW, applicants must provide a letter of support or similar communication from their applicable [VTrans District Office](#) demonstrating that the district is aware of and in support of the proposed project, as well as communication from the [VTrans Permitting Services](#) unit demonstrating where the applicant stands in the highway access permit, also called a Section 1111 permit, which is required by State Statute for all work within the State Highway Right-of-Way. A traffic control plan may be required as part of the Section 1111 permit stipulations. In addition, the project will need to be in compliance with [VTrans demonstration projects guidance document](#), application, and permitting process.

## Eligible Projects

Placemaking projects range from temporary improvements to more permanent projects, but success is contingent upon being part of a larger ongoing community process and strong partnerships. Examples of projects that fit this description are described below.

- **Projects that create, activate/program, or permanently improve public spaces, including, but not limited to:**
  - Gathering spaces (parks, village greens, libraries, schools, community centers, town halls, and other public spaces)
  - Streetscape improvements and beautification
  - Access to public amenities (e.g., riverwalks, trails, greenways)
  - Pop-up parks, pocket parks, and public parklets
  - Pop-up retail/incubator/market space (community or nonprofit)
  - Activation of vacant properties and storefronts
  - Creating or enhancing farmers' markets, community gardens, and access to healthy food
  - Alley improvements and activation
  - Bike paths and walkability improvements
  - Public art that engages the community
  - Activating community performing art spaces
  - Winter placemaking activities (ice rinks, community fire pits, lighting installations, etc.)
  - Relevance to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, including public space adaptations to ensure proper physical distancing and meeting public health and safety standards

Competitive applications will demonstrate how the project will restart community life and accelerate economic and community recovery during and post pandemic. Projects must demonstrate that they will create, activate (programming), or revitalize a public space that is open and accessible to all people with no charge for admission.

Projects should improve access, if possible and not remove or reduce access for people with disabilities. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted on July 26, 1990, is a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals on the basis of disability.

## Ineligible Activities

All grant funds must be used in compliance with applicable federal and state laws and regulations. In addition, funded projects must adhere to [Vermont's COVID-19 State of Emergency and Governor's Scott's Executive Order](#) to ensure proper public health and safety. The following are not eligible uses for Better Places program funds:

- Activities or investments held outside a state-designated downtown, village center, new town center, or neighborhood development area.
- Acquisition of land, buildings, or rights-of-way
- Operational or administrative expenses incurred prior to the grant award including costs that may be incurred to prepare the grant application
- General organizational support, annual appeals, or fundraising drives
- Planning or design only related activities
- Established festivals and entertainment series
- Events or performances without evidence of strong community support and engagement
- Partisan, political, election or religious related activities
- Use of funds for or to promote a single for-profit entity and/or its products or services
- Discrimination against person on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, ancestry, creed, pregnancy, marital, parental status, familial status, sexual orientation, status as a veteran, physical, mental, emotional or learning disability, or any other characteristic protected by federal, state, or local law
- Eligibility of activities is ultimately at the discretion of the Better Places program partners

### Project Budget and Funding

Eligible projects must have a minimum grant award of \$5,000, up to a maximum grant award of \$20,000. A detailed budget must be included in the application. Budgets should identify total project cost, grant funding request, and any other funding sources outside of the requested grant dollars.

At least 80% of the total Better Places project budget must be used to fund capital costs and implementation. For example, for a project with a total project cost of \$20,000, only \$4,000 or less can be used for non-capital cost (design services, artist design fee, technical support, marketing and communication, etc.). Artist fabrication and design-build projects are considered as part of the implementation cost and may exceed the 20% budget threshold.

No local match is required, however, projects that leveraged additional private or public investment, in-kind support, and or other community resources will be more competitive.

Project applicants must indicate whether additional funds have been pledged and committed to the project at the time of application. These can include funds provided by a project stakeholder, e.g., a local government, a non-profit entity, private source, or other state or federal agencies, which are committed to the project scope of work at the time of application. If a project does not have additional pledged funds at the time of application, it is still eligible to apply.

### Application Review Process

Applications will be reviewed by the Better Places partners with expertise in community and economic development, philanthropy, public health, placemaking, public art, transportation, community design, and urban planning. Only complete applications will be accepted. Applications that are not clear, compelling, or well defined will not be funded. In addition, geographic and project diversity will be considered to ensure wide-ranging projects occur across the state.

### Evaluation Criteria and Program Priorities

The review team will use the following evaluation criteria and program priorities to make funding decisions.

- A defined and focused placemaking project with an explanation of how the project will attract people to the public space in a COVID-safe way
- Community need and the project potential to advance local COVID-19 response and recovery efforts

- Overall impact of the project on community revitalization and larger community planning/development efforts
- Engages and serves community members and partners in an equitable and inclusive process connecting with diverse socioeconomic groups, under-served, and under-represented populations in the community.
- Community and organization's capacity, support, and readiness to manage and implement a community-driven placemaking project within six months.
- Leveraging additional private and/or public investment, in-kind support, and or other community resources
- A diverse project team, with strong community partnerships, and partnering organizations working together to help advance this project. Applications should include letters of support from project partners, including local organizations, businesses, and/or community leaders.
- A commitment and plan for long term maintenance and management, if applicable.

### **Preference will be given to projects that demonstrate one or more of the following program priorities:**

- Supports and furthers place-based, resident-led, economic and community development efforts
- Spurs entrepreneurship, business development, and job growth
- Improves public health, reduces social isolation, and builds social capital
- Stimulates the creative economy and/or supports public art that integrates artists and designers in the creation and development of local projects
- Improves safe and efficient multimodal (bicycle/pedestrian/transit) connectivity for all users
- Creates opportunities for intergenerational activities and supports age-friendly community-based projects
- Increases access to healthy food and/or community-driven local food markets in partnership with local producers

### **Grant Terms and Conditions**

Projects with multiple funding sources must demonstrate that they can secure all funding needed to begin the project as proposed. All projects must commence within three (3) months of signing a grant agreement and be complete within six (6) months or by August 31, 2021. In addition:

- Project applicants must be prepared and authorized to execute a form of grant agreement provided by Vermont Community Foundation to receive grant funds.
- DHCD and the Better Places partners will provide project support to those awarded through technical, placemaking, and marketing assistance.
- Grant disbursements may be negotiated on an individual basis depending on the needs of the project and community.
- The Vermont Community Foundation and DHCD reserve the right to not fund any projects, or award less than the amount requested, based on the availability of funds.
- Projects may use a fiscal sponsor to accept Better Places funds. The entity that acts as the fiscal sponsor will be considered by the Vermont Community Foundation as the program applicant and must abide by the [fiscal sponsor agreement](#). As the applicant/grantee, the fiscal sponsor must sign the grant agreement for the grant funds to be released. Any understanding or agreement between the fiscal sponsor and the entity managing the project is between those organizations alone; the only agreements Vermont Community Foundation have will be with the fiscal sponsor, as the program applicant.

- If an applicant does not own the land or building on which its project will take place, additional documentation will be required, including an explanation for why the property owner is not the applicant. Site control must be in the form of a signed legally binding agreement authorizing grant use from the owner of the project location (i.e. one of the following - municipal owned property with selectboard or city council approval, private lease or ownership of the property or building, or MOU granting permission from the property owner, etc.).
- If an applicant does not own the building in which its project will take place, there must be a lease in place with a minimum 6-month term or for the duration of the project.
- Projects must list all local and state permits needed and their status in relation to the project.
- Projects must adhere to [Vermont's COVID-19 State of Emergency and Governor's Scott's Executive Order](#) to ensure proper public health and safety.
- No municipality or nonprofit organization shall receive more than one grant in a calendar year.
- All project outreach and public communications must acknowledge funding from the Better Places Program, administered by Vermont Community Foundation and DHCD.
- The Vermont Community Foundation, DHCD, and the Better Places Partners reserve the right to use project photos, grant information, and program materials for marketing and promotion.

## Grant Awards and Agreement

The Vermont Community Foundation and DHCD will notify applicants of their grant award and initiate a grant agreement. Applicants must:

1. Provide necessary materials for fund disbursement (grant agreement)
2. Provide updates on project progress as requested by DHCD and VCF
3. Provide necessary close-out materials after project is completed (report, budget, expenditures, metrics, and photos).
4. Participate in future opportunities to share best practices and lessons learned with Better Places partners and local communities.

## Close-Out Requirements

- Within 30 days of project completion, the grantee must submit before and after photo(s) of the project, a project close-out report as required by the grant agreement.
- Projects located in the state right of way must comply with VTrans' evaluation, close out, and clean-up process as detailed in [the Demonstration Project Guidance Document](#).
- Better Places is made possible by Vermont Community Foundation, DHCD, and partner funds. Financial records must be maintained and provided for inspection upon the request by the grantor.

## Program Manager Contacts

For questions regarding the Better Places Program, contact:

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