

INFRASTRUCTURE: EDUCATION, LIBRARIES & RECREATION FACILITIES

GOALS

1. Provide high-quality educational and vocational opportunities that meet the needs of our population,
2. regardless of age or economic status.
3. Ensure the region has a network of high-quality, publicly accessible and free community libraries.
4. Offer high-quality, sustainable recreational land, facilities, and programs that meet the recreational needs of current and future generations.

Strong educational and recreational facilities are key to ensuring our region's people are healthy and that its communities are vibrant. Franklin and Grand Isle Counties are fortunate to have successful schools, healthy and community-supported libraries, and a location between two of Vermont's greatest recreational assets: Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains. Still, efforts must be made to maintain existing assets and further grow the region's infrastructure to ensure that all citizens have access to educational (Table 1) and recreational opportunities.

ASSETS AND VALUES

Education

The region's schools strive to provide high-quality education to all students. They aim to prepare students for the workforce, raise test proficiency ratings, and reduce the economic achievement gap while operating under declining (or unpredictable) school enrollment levels, increased costs per pupil, and budgetary constraints.

TABLE 1: At a Glance - Education

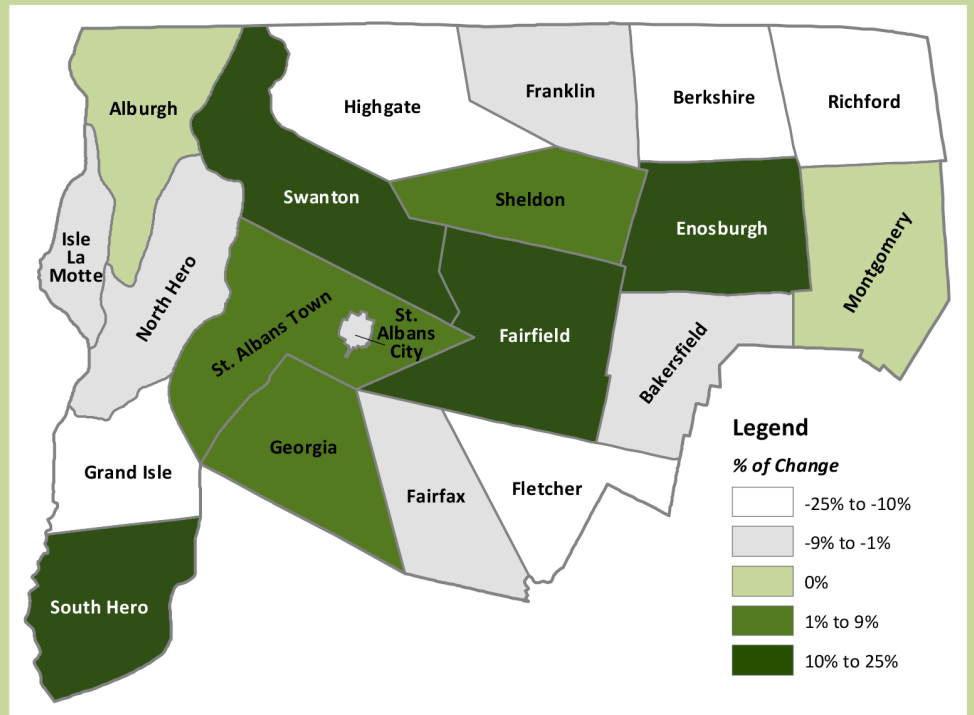
- There are five supervisory unions in the region, which include:
19 elementary schools
4 junior high/middle schools
5 high schools
2 technical/career centers
- There were approximately 8,800 students enrolled in the region's schools for the 2021-2022 school year.
- 12 of the region's 23 municipalities provide tuition for grades 9–12 and 3 municipalities do so for grades 7–8 because there is neither a high school in the community nor a designated high school.

The State of Vermont uses standardized testing as a school accountability tool, mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These standardized tests help schools measure both individual student progress and how schools compare against each other. One key measure is the difference between the results of students who qualify for free lunch or reduced-cost lunch with the results of students who do not. In the 2020–2021 eighth-grade math test, the gap between the number of low-income students achieving at or above proficiency versus those who were not was 25.3%. Similarly, in eighth-grade language arts, the average difference in achieving at or above proficiency was 25.4% (Vermont Agency of Education, 2021). Closing this gap is

important to ensure that students from lower-income families have equal opportunities to succeed in school and future careers. The overall percentage of students achieving proficiency or above was much lower in 2021 than in previous years; this result is attributable due to the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system, including the closure of schools for much of spring 2020. In 2024, overall proficiency rates have remained low but comparable to national averages; 29% of eighth graders were proficient in both reading and math.

Region-wide K–12 school enrollment has declined since the mid-2000s, and the majority of schools are facing declining enrollment. However, some schools, mainly in western and central Franklin County, are experiencing growth in enrollment compared to recent years. From the 2014–2015 school year to the 2021–2022 school year, Franklin County had a 1.8% increase and Grand Isle County had a 3.2% reduction in public school K-12 enrollment. Statewide there was a 5% reduction in enrollment during the same period. Enrollment numbers do not include high school students who attend school outside of the region or outside of the state.

MAP 1: Change in Elementary School Enrollment 2015-2022



SOURCE: Vermont Agency of Education - <https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/vermont-education-dashboard/vermont-education-dashboard-enrollment>

Because of the size differences among regional schools and the way education funding is structured by Act 68, it is difficult to equitably compare per-pupil costs on a regional basis. Adjusting for inflation, some schools have seen increases in cost per equalized pupil since 2012, while others have not, but there does not appear to be a discernible trend explaining these changes.

Secondary, postsecondary, and adult technical education courses are provided through regional career centers, comprehensive high schools, and colleges. The Northwest region hosts two career and technical education centers: Cold Hollow Career Center at Enosburgh High School and Northwest Career and Technical Center at Bellows Free Academy high school in St. Albans.

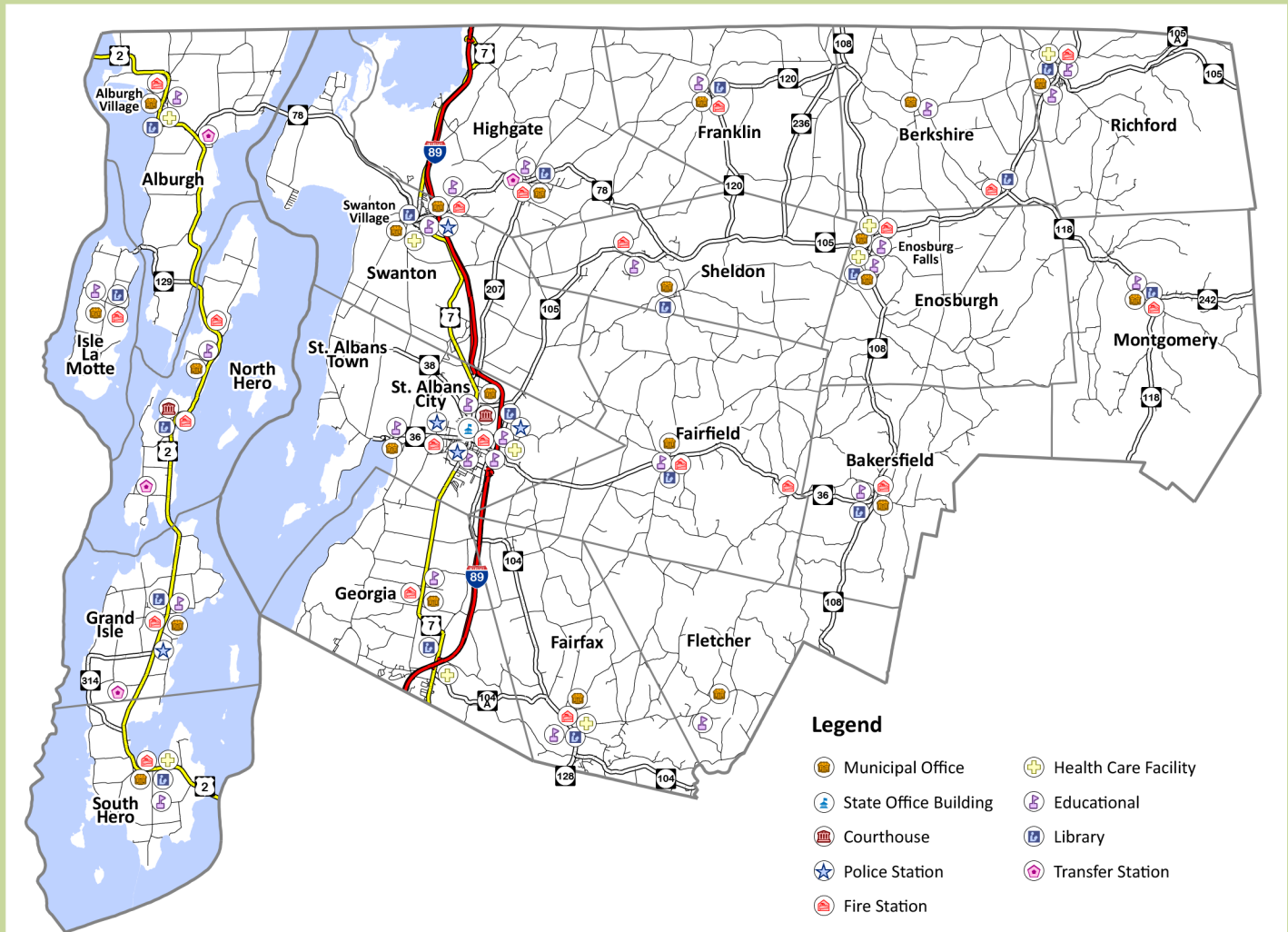
Libraries

Library facilities are well distributed across the region. Only two towns in the region do not have a library: Berkshire and Fletcher. St. Albans Free Library serves both the City and the Town of St. Albans. Most public

libraries are heavily dependent on local support. Municipal taxes provide the majority of funding for libraries, with almost two-thirds receiving at least 90% of their total income from this source. Volunteers contribute substantially to staffing many town libraries. For example, the library in Isle La Motte is operated entirely by volunteers.

Internet access has vastly increased the resources available to rural libraries. All 17 libraries in the region have Internet access and 7 libraries have public Wi-Fi hotspots that allow for access outside of library hours (Vermont Department of Libraries, Vermont Public Library Statistics, FY 2021 Annual Report; Vermont Department of Public Service WiFi Hotspot Map). The interlibrary loan system is accessible to all libraries, enabling borrowers to obtain materials from all libraries in Vermont and, through the state's Department of Libraries, from most libraries across the country. The region is also uniquely served by the Franklin Grand Isle Bookmobile, a nonprofit local library that provides literacy activities, educational programming, and library services to children and adults.

MAP 2: Northwest Region Facilities



SOURCE: Vermont Enhanced 911 Board - <https://e911.vermont.gov/maps-and-gis-data>

Publicly owned lands cover more than 19,677 acres, 4.3% of the total land area in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. The state owns more than half of this acreage, managing over 47 parcels ranging in size from the 1,766-acre Fairfield Swamp Wildlife Management Area to small, one-acre fishing access areas. The federally owned Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, which covers 6,470 acres, represents a very significant portion of the remaining public lands.

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In addition to undeveloped forests, wetlands, and open lands, nearly every municipality in the region offers some recreational sites open to the public. Indoor recreation facilities serving the region include the Collins Perley Sports & Fitness Center in St. Albans Town and the Highgate Recreational Facility.

Hard'ack Recreation Area, owned by St. Albans City and located in St. Albans Town provides the only downhill skiing opportunity in the region, with a tow rope, snowmaking, and lighted trails. This recreation area was improved with a new lodge and, in 2022 a four-season community pool was added. Although not located within the region, Jay Peak Resort and Smugglers' Notch Resort are both located immediately adjacent to the region and are enjoyed by regional residents. These resorts provide a wide variety of winter recreational options (downhill skiing and snowboarding, cross-country skiing, ice skating, etc.).

The region could benefit from additional private gyms and fitness centers. The St. Albans-Swanton area is served by at least three private gyms. However, the remainder of Franklin County and Grand Isle County have no private gyms, although there are some private fitness class opportunities.

Franklin County is home to two significant outdoor recreation assets: the Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail (MVRT) and the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail (LVRT), two multi-use trails that span the region on more than 125 miles of decommissioned railroad beds. The MVRT spans from St. Albans Town to Richford. The LVRT spans from Swanton south to Fletcher within the region, and then continues east to provide a connection to St. Johnsbury. Grand Isle County is a major bike recreation destination highlighted by the Island Line on road bike trails and a seasonal bike ferry connection to Colchester and the Burlington bike path. Communities throughout the region have sidewalks that provide additional opportunities for physical activity and for students to walk to school. See the transportation chapter for more details.

GOALS AND POLICIES

- 1. Provide high-quality educational and vocational opportunities that meet the needs of our population, regardless of age or economic status.**
 - a. Ensure that preschool, primary and secondary, and post-secondary educational services are provided in safe and accessible facilities with sufficient capacity, available at reasonable cost, and that meet or exceed state standards.
 - b. Ensure that new developments shall not place undue burden on the capacity of local school systems.
 - c. Support the location of schools and vocational training facilities within downtowns, planned growth areas, village centers, village areas or hamlets, rather than in non-growth areas.
 - d. Encourage the region's high schools and technical/career centers to offer specialized vocational training opportunities for both young adults and adults with varying backgrounds and educational levels.
 - e. Promote collaboration among local schools, technical/career centers, and businesses to support job growth and training needs and facilitate high-quality employment opportunities.
- 2. Ensure the region has a network of high-quality, publicly accessible, and free community libraries.**
 - a. Support the location of libraries within downtowns, planned growth areas, village centers, village areas or hamlets, rather than in non-growth areas.

- b. Encourage libraries to provide educational and cultural programs for community members of all ages.
 - c. Support libraries as a place to learn about and use technology for people of all means and abilities and support installation/maintenance of Wi-Fi hot spots at libraries.
- 3. Offer high-quality, sustainable recreational land, facilities, and programs that meet the recreational needs of current and future generations.**
- a. Support the establishment of a network of indoor and outdoor recreation land, facilities, and programs for people of various ages, physical abilities, incomes, races or ethnicities, and educational levels throughout the region.
 - b. Encourage the expanding network of high-quality, multi-use recreational trails in the region.
 - c. Promote the development of abundant opportunities for public access to the region's waters and shorelines.
 - d. Ensure all people feel welcome in our public and private recreation areas.
 - e. Support efforts to reduce financial barriers to access public lands.