

2.25.2026 PHAC Meeting Minutes

Attendees: Vicki McDonald, Kris Gruen, Liz Bicknell, Will Colgan, Lydia Vitale, Betsy Zeigler

Others: Kristy Farnham, Tammy Farnham, Eric Remick, John Broderick, Joe Kasprzak, David Upson, Alicia Weiss, Genese Grill, Michael Birbaum, Peter Youngbear, Mary Trerice, Karl Bissex, Eli Barlow, Philip Parisi, Laurie Veatch

Motions at a glance:

Call Meeting to Order: Will Colgan called the meeting to order at 5:03 p.m.

Approval of minutes from February 11th: Approval will occur at the next meeting because the minutes were distributed late.

Changes to Agenda: None.

Community Agreements: Read by Lydia Vitale.

Public Comment: None.

Discussion led by Kristy Farnham, Director of Business Support VDEC; David Upson, Hardwick Town Manager; Eric Remick, Hardwick Selectboard Chair; and Joe Kasprzak, Assistant Town Manager, Town of St. Johnsbury

A brief round of introductions was conducted. John Broderick was introduced as a consultant currently doing work related to an executive suite initiative.

Kristy Farnham spoke about commerce and community development in the context of flood recovery and revitalization efforts, including Plainfield Forward. She noted that experienced partners have been discussing Plainfield and considering how they can help. Kris Gruen and Kristy Farnham visited St. Johnsbury and Hardwick to observe housing projects and creative economy initiatives. The broader context included revitalization following historic floods and building damage over the past three years.

In response to a question about how long it took to see recognizable change, including fewer empty buildings and storefronts, Eric Remick explained that Hardwick has often felt close to turning a corner, only to experience setbacks. Some businesses closed, while others, such as a bookstore and a coffee shop, became strong community hubs. He emphasized that progress has been incremental rather than transformative. Infrastructure projects require significant time; a grant begun in 2017 was not completed until 2024. A bridge project that had been needed for decades has only recently begun.

David Upson described Hardwick's experience with catastrophic flooding. Approximately ten FEMA buyouts have occurred, along with several demolitions. Community engagement centered largely on agriculture, including development of a food venture center. The town engaged residents to identify shared priorities and formalized those in a town plan focused on Hardwick's agricultural identity. That clarity helped catalyze additional development, including restaurants and nonprofit partnerships. A downtown partnership was formed to focus

specifically on revitalization. A neighbor-to-neighbor group helped define community priorities and communicate them to local government.

Joe Kasprzak described revitalization in St. Johnsbury as a 10–12 year process. Inspired in part by Hardwick’s work, St. Johnsbury developed an action plan that evolved into a strategic plan with targeted initiatives for different areas of town. The town pursued multiple funding sources and redeveloped key buildings. A flagship \$15.5 million project in downtown transformed a former railroad-era hotel into 39 residential and 9 commercial units, signaling confidence in the town’s future. Stakeholder meetings helped identify goals, responsibilities, and timelines. Joe emphasized that three to five years is short-term in community development, while ten to twenty years is more realistic. Maintaining strong planning documents supports continuity during leadership turnover. Over time, private sector investment increases as confidence builds.

In response to a question about creative and arts-forward initiatives, Joe noted that since 2017 St. Johnsbury has explored outdoor recreation economy opportunities. An arts inventory facilitated by Catamount Arts quantified the impact of the creative economy and provided data to share with legislators and investors. Developing data and telling a clear story about the town’s heritage proved important in attracting support.

Kristy asked about Hardwick’s agricultural economy and how it was launched. David explained that a shared agricultural mindset drew local farmers and producers to the food venture center, a makerspace model where tenants rent space to create products. Anchor tenants such as Jasper Hill Farm helped sustain the initiative. An accelerator warehouse building was later developed with additional anchor tenants. Progress occurred gradually over roughly twenty years through partnerships and infrastructure development rather than through a single defining moment.

Hardwick functions as a regional hub serving seven to eight surrounding towns, including shared first responder coverage. Kristy noted that private entities played a significant role in investment, while municipalities leveraged grant funding. The Yellow Barn project involved more than a dozen grant funders. The municipality invested approximately \$12 million to construct the facility shell, and the Center for an Agricultural Economy contributed an additional \$4 million. Initial funding in 2017 included a \$250,000 grant from NVRC matched by Hardwick’s economic loan fund. Total grant funding reached approximately \$7–9 million. Some prospective tenants chose not to wait due to project delays.

Flood recovery and FEMA buyouts were discussed in depth. Joe indicated that St. Johnsbury currently has seven properties in the buyout program, several located near the center but not significantly altering the town’s identity. Eric described Hardwick’s approach of creating flood storage, restoring floodplains, widening riverbanks, and implementing flood benching around businesses to slow water flow and reduce velocity. Additional FEMA mitigation work is ongoing. Hardwick’s wastewater treatment plant was destroyed and remains under negotiation with FEMA. Leaders emphasized persistence and continued advocacy with federal agencies.

Participants raised concerns about buyouts reducing the grand list and affecting community identity. David noted that while buyouts remove properties from the tax base, unmanaged

flooding poses a greater long-term threat. In Hardwick, buyout funds allowed residents to relocate rather than resell vulnerable properties, preventing repeated loss. He emphasized that flooding itself, rather than buyouts, causes the most damage to the grand list.

Philip Parisi asked how development models might adapt to Plainfield's structural differences, including limited downtown density and sidewalk infrastructure. Joe responded that a deeper analysis of what makes the community function is necessary before recommending strategies. He noted demographic challenges such as aging populations and limited growth and emphasized the importance of creating housing opportunities to maintain sustainability.

Eric described flood mitigation strategies in Hardwick, including upstream buyouts, floodplain restoration at former motel sites, widening riverbanks, and slowing high-velocity flows between East Hardwick and downtown. Multiple mitigation sites are underway both upstream and downstream.

Participants referenced discussion about potentially removing the Plainfield dam. A student study suggested water levels could drop between five and nine feet, potentially reducing FEMA base flood elevation impacts on certain properties. A proposal to seek approximately \$7 million in funding is currently stalled. Dog River Park in Northfield was mentioned as an example of a comparable project.

Joe described St. Johnsbury's collaboration with Rural Edge and participation in housing committees and grant programs aimed at improving housing stock. A housing compliance officer role was created to conduct inspections and coordinate with community partners. The town implemented a rental housing registration and inspection ordinance. The first year carried no fee; subsequent years required a \$35 fee for four years. Registration compliance reached 96–99 percent. Half of registration revenue funds administration, and half supports micro-grants to property owners. Housing quality has improved, though rising rents have contributed to displacement pressures.

Vacant and dilapidated housing ordinances were discussed. Enforcement slowed during COVID-19 and staffing transitions but is being reestablished. Public-private partnerships were highlighted, including redevelopment of 560 Railroad Street into nine residential units at a cost of \$9 million, with a waiting list of 60 applicants. Building a strong track record with funders was identified as essential for continued investment.

Governance structures and town manager models were examined. David explained that Hardwick adopted a town manager model in the 1980s and gradually expanded staff capacity, adding roles such as community coordinator and town administrator. He emphasized that sustained progress requires dedicated staff rather than relying solely on volunteer selectboard leadership. Joe noted that St. Johnsbury transitioned to a town manager model in the 1960s and has evolved through multiple iterations. The assistant town manager role includes significant focus on economic and community development. Both speakers emphasized that investing in staffing capacity is critical to securing grants, managing projects, and advancing community goals.

Alicia raised concerns about vacant housing permits and absentee property owners. Joe referenced health and safety ordinances and noted that some communities, including Rutland, have developed specific programs to address absentee ownership.

Tammy asked about the relationship between a town manager and the selectboard. Eric explained that the selectboard oversees and evaluates the town manager, while the town manager brings forward issues and recommendations. David emphasized the importance of anticipating challenges, maintaining strong communication, and possessing skills in finance, human resources, negotiation, and organizational leadership. Joe noted that living in the community can provide credibility, while also maintaining professional boundaries. He emphasized the importance of ongoing training, including through the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, to ensure compliance and effective governance.

Discussion of St. Johnsbury Vacant and Dilapidated Housing Ordinance

The ordinance will be presented to the selectboard, though it was noted that broader community conversation is important beforehand. It was observed that early communication about the ordinance may have already prompted at least one absentee landlord to begin addressing neglected units.

Issues with tech

Technology issues will be added to the next agenda.

Items to add to next time:

Discussion of how to spend grant money due to be spent in March.

Discussion of steps moving forward.

Update on use of Google Drive.

Next meeting agenda items.

Announcement of date for next PHAC meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 6:39 p.m.