

## Local Grant Proposal Advances for VOREC Funding

The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) has invited the Mad River Valley Recreation District to apply to its competitive Community Grant Program for funding to support local economic development through outdoor recreation. The Vermont Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation and the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, which administers the program, received 104 letters of interest for this competitive program and selected 37 proposals to take the second step toward possible funding. Thanks to Governor Scott's allocation in 2021 the VOREC program will award a total of 5.1 million dollars to local communities which seek to leverage their outdoor recreation assets to grow their local economies. The program focuses on projects which expand participation in recreation, increase the quality of environmental stewardship and help grow outdoor-related businesses. VOREC full grant applications are due November 29, 2021 with award announcements to be made in January 2022.

The \$410,700 grant proposal was submitted by the Mad River Valley Recreation District (MRVRD) on behalf of a diverse group of local partners who envision the creation of a new Recreation Hub in Irasville, the commercial center of the Mad River Valley. Partners in the proposal include MRV Planning District, MRV Chamber of Commerce, Mad River Riders, the Friends of the Mad River, The Mad River Path, the town of Waitsfield and multiple local property owners.

The Recreation Hub will be sited at the Local Folk Smokehouse, which will provide space for a new recreationally focused visitors center operated by the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce. The grounds behind the building will offer parking, restrooms and a trailhead accessing a new pedestrian/bike bridge across the Millbrook. The bridge will connect to the Mad River Riders' existing network of trails on private and public land. Safe crossings to the Mad River Path's Village trail and town sidewalks are also planned. The central location near the intersection of Route 100 and 17 will direct pedestrians, bicyclists and other visitors to businesses, encourage locals to get outside, and increase visitor participation in recreation. "We see the MRV Recreation Hub as a place where locals and visitors can gather and connect to trails leading up into Camel's Hump State Forest or across the Valley, and also have easy access to businesses downtown. The Hub will include educational elements so that people can learn how to help protect and steward our amazing recreational resources," said Eric Friedman, Ex. Director of Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Environmental stewardship goals will be a focus in all of the project elements, from incorporating erosion control, stormwater management and an enhanced riparian buffer at the Trail Hub, to the development of educational strategies involving the community and its visitors in enhanced environmental stewardship. The project also supports broader community engagement in a valley-wide collaborative process to create a shared vision for a 'gold standard' trail network that capitalizes on outdoor recreation for all. The economic benefits are huge as well as the benefits around sustaining and enhancing the ecological integrity of the watershed. The process will involve the community and its visitors in the development of

strategies to enhance environmental stewardship. The project will also support the continuing effort to plan and provide for important trail links from Irasville to Bridge street in Waitsfield village, so that all members of the community can safely connect from sidewalks and village paths to the trail networks in the mountains. To further these goals and visions, this project will seek funding to support community conversations about ways we can celebrate outdoor recreation and the health and character of our natural heritage.

The Hub project addresses all five VOREC priorities:

1. Grow businesses – The central village location will entice trail users to start and finish adventures in the village center where they will shop and eat at local restaurants.
2. Increase participation – The bridge, visitor center, signs and maps, restrooms, and trails for all abilities will make it easy for a wider variety of people to get outside on the trails.
3. Strengthen outdoor recreation resources – The Hub greatly improves the quality of our trail system by improving access to it.
4. Increase stewardship and environmental quality – The MRV envisions a trail network that sustains ecological integrity and celebrates an ethic of environmental stewardship through trail design, community engagement and education.
5. Promote the health benefits of outdoor recreation – The Hub's visitor center will encourage healthy outdoor activities including biking, hiking, skiing, and swimming.

“Our broad coalition of recreation, environmental, business, and municipal partners believe the Hub has enormous potential to strengthen our local economy, improve the health of Mad River Valley residents and visitors, and educate the public about protection of our watershed. Much work lies ahead, but we are thrilled to be able to submit a full application to VOREC. Check [www.mrvrd.org](http://www.mrvrd.org) for updates.

UPDATE: The Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) announced a delay in their grant funding decisions until mid-February 2022. A maximum of 25 groups throughout Vermont will be awarded a total of 5.1 million for recreation projects that will leverage local economic growth.