



# Vermont Proposition

## Recovery, Resilience, Renewal for Vermont

***Working together, Vermonters can advance strategies, policies and investments to renew public engagement and advance justice, resilience, strong communities, healthy environment, and a sustainable economy that works for all.***

The challenges of our time call on us as Vermonters to unite to build a better future. The Vermont Proposition is a starting point for discussion on the work ahead to build the best possible future for the people and communities of Vermont. This draft Proposition has been built by the Vermont Council on Rural Development based on interviews with hundreds of individuals, written contributions from more than a thousand people, inputs from local, regional, and statewide COVID recovery convenings, ideas from partners, policy councils, and the tens of thousands of people who have engaged with us over the years to set and advance action to improve life in their communities. We present it, not as a finished product, but as a starting point for dialogue, to gather your ideas, feedback, corrections and improvement. What are your Propositions for the Future of Vermont?

In all we have heard, we have learned that Vermonters are dedicated to working together for a future where Vermont:

- ◆ Retains and attracts youth and answers our demographic challenges;
- ◆ Preserves, protects and renews participatory democracy;
- ◆ Does our part to take responsibility for and answer climate change, and improves economic opportunity and equity in doing so;
- ◆ Engages young people on the land and strengthens the land-based economy;
- ◆ Protects the natural resources, environment, and beauty of our land and waters;
- ◆ Expands racial justice, equity, inclusion, and the diversity of the state's population;
- ◆ Recognizes people with disabilities and provides expanded opportunities and greater equity and inclusion;
- ◆ Thoughtfully considers the impact and costs of public investment to Vermont residents and minimizes the financial burden on those who can least afford it;
- ◆ Reduces poverty and economic disparity and expands prosperity and opportunity;
- ◆ Strengthens the resilience of local communities;
- ◆ Advances telecommunications, connecting Vermonters to global opportunities, and strengthening local commerce and civic engagement in doing so;
- ◆ Rationalizes and modernizes regional governance and state long-term planning;
- ◆ Improves the lives and opportunities of children, families, and all Vermonters;
- ◆ Rededicates itself to renewed ideals of Freedom and Unity.

The Proposition is a starting point to promote action in the next three years that will be essential for a strong and prosperous future over the next thirty.

## Introduction

This is a defining moment for Vermont.

The intersecting crises confronting Vermont today have revealed a need to reimagine our social contract, rededicate to shared values and ideals, and recommit to bold action. Doing so means embracing new Vermonters, building infrastructure for the future, strengthening civic society, transforming our economy, and driving new economic opportunity in an era disrupted by climate change, technology, and globalization.

The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic crisis have affirmed lessons that should guide the future: to pay attention to science, to take personal and collective responsibility for each other's safety and health, to lift up those most severely impacted, to work together with rising generations, indigenous and new voices, and to set a common course to economic and civic renewal.

In the face of national upheaval and challenges to Vermont we must be bold enough to pull together to reimagine and act on our state motto of Freedom and Unity. It is easy to feel powerless. We are often presented with pessimistic or defeatist narratives. Cycles of social media negativity encourage us to see only the worst in each other. Algorithms don't build hope for unity and progress. This pattern has undermined facts, interrupted rational agreement on common truths, and undermined American and Vermont ideals.

We believe it is time to design an architecture of hope – a conceptual framework for the future; a framework that offers a set of propositions for an evolving and a stronger Vermont around which Vermonters can rally and take action to shape our collective future.

We do this in line with values that condition the entire proposition dialogue:

- Respect and empathy for the expertise and lived experience of all Vermonters
- Openness, intellectual curiosity and non-partisanship
- The crucial value of deep listening for all of us, especially when it is hard, and especially when it tests our preconceived opinions
- A dedication to community, justice, fairness and mutuality
- A pride of place, dedication to its improvement, commitment to our neighbors
- A commitment to democracy and strengthening the fabric of Vermont civil society and community
- A recognition that all the issues of economy, justice, environment, are woven into a single fabric of this place and its progress
- An assertion of the value of facts, and of a free, fair press and media that tests truth and shares good news as well as challenging stories
- An obligation to advance ecological and economic sustainability and human resilience
- A recognition that Vermont was and is built on the indigenous homelands and the dismissal of Original Peoples to our mutual detriment

Toward these ends and in consultation with Vermonters throughout the state sharing their experience and testimony from experts from relevant disciplines, elected and enterprise leaders, young and old, indigenous, newly arrived and long settled, the Vermont Council on Rural Development has framed the Vermont Proposition; a structured and non-partisan set of proposals toward action for the future of Vermont.

The proposition framework is designed to support policymaking, to prompt alignment between public and private action toward a common vision, and to establish a common language that builds understanding and empowers community volunteers, voters, investors, consumers and donors, and to support enterprises and initiatives that work in tandem toward common objectives.

## The Role of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD)

Since its founding in 1993 as a federally-authorized “State Rural Development Council” VCRD has been charged as a neutral convener of public process in service to the communities of rural Vermont. Over these years VCRD has served as a lead convener and facilitator of community prioritization and citizen action, rural summits, gubernatorial retreats, and year-long policy councils on issues of fundamental importance to the future, many of them transcending the rural/urban boundaries in the state. As a convener, VCRD is a listening organization that adds up community voices or policy ideas to frame paths forward.

In 2009, VCRD founded and led the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV), a sweeping initiative to gather input from thousands of Vermonters on the identity and trajectory of the state. The final, and probably most important, conclusion drawn from that process was a strong affirmation of Vermont’s role as a center for creativity. The Council’s final report described Vermont as a testing ground for community and economic renewal that can serve as an example for other parts of the country:

### Acting in Leadership

With its small scale and strong values, Vermont is an incubator of ideas, a center of innovation, and a laboratory for creative solutions. A history of ingenuity allows Vermont to respond to local, national, and global challenges in a unique way, and Vermonters want to embrace that leadership potential in many areas – the environment, arts and culture, education, agriculture, social issues, and civil rights. Vermont should be intentional in developing itself as a laboratory of innovation in public policy, education, energy and the economy, civic and community life, and act as a model and a leader for the nation.

In the years since the Council, Vermont has faced a myriad of challenges. Today we ask: *“What do Vermont and our communities need to start to do, and to stand for, now and over the next 3 years of action, to build a successful future for the next generation of residents, and for a sustainable, prosperous and unified Vermont in 2050?”* As we heard from one Vermonter, “the clock is ticking,” and we will need to act boldly and decisively today for success in the next generation.

The Vermont Proposition is built on this history, but also includes personal interviews with scores of Vermonters grappling with the big picture of the future of Vermont. To build the current edition of this draft of the Proposition we have added up findings from:

- Dozens of VT Proposition Interviews with organizations and groups ranging from chambers of commerce and business associations to arts councils, non-profit boards, and young leaders from throughout the state.
- Scores of individual VT Proposition Interviews with a diverse set of statewide and local leaders.
- COVID Recovery Visit convenings in every county of the state bringing over 1,000 Vermonters together to discuss response, recovery, and action for the future.
- Over 1,300 contributions through a survey that asked Vermonters to correct our draft and add their own propositions.
- Inputs from thousands of Vermonters from all parts of the state who have participated in the 22-year history of VCRD “Community Visits” and other local and regional convenings.
- More than 22 statewide rural summits capturing ideas from thousands of Vermonters.
- 10 policy councils building unified vision and strategies ranging from the VT Forest Products Council to the Vermont Climate Economy Council.
- Discussions with the VCRD staff and board, our state, federal, non-profit partners, and the Proposition Steering Committee.

“The Vermont Proposition” then, in its finished form, will be presented to all interested people, organizations, and businesses of Vermont. Those signing on in support of the elements of the Proposition will together will make up the **Partnership for the Future of Vermont**. A leadership team of diverse, creative, and innovative experts and visionaries from the Partnership, called the **Future of Vermont Action Team**, will lead strategy efforts toward further defining and driving implementation of key proposition elements.

### **The Vermont Proposition initiative is designed to:**

- Support policymaking and prompt actions by private and public enterprises and residents toward a common vision of resilience and renewal of Vermont;
- Gather and provide base-line data on a limited group of critical markers to track the progress toward state-wide goals;
- Establish a common language to empower voters, investors, consumers, and donors to support enterprises and initiatives that work toward critical objectives;
- Guide VCRD community support and convening strategies for years to come.

### **The Partnership for the Future of Vermont**

In the Spring and Summer of 2021, VCRD and partners in this effort will share the Proposition Draft with the public and begin to build an **implementation framework and political, social and economic action coalition** to advance priorities through communication, advocacy and collective action. This coalition will include Vermonters, organizations, businesses, and public/private partnerships working together as the non-partisan **Partnership for the Future of Vermont**. All Vermonters will be welcomed to join the effort. Convened and supported by VCRD, the Partnership will build and advocate for implementation strategies for each of the Proposition elements and be led by a VCRD-facilitated steering committee, the **Future of Vermont Action Team**.

Today, Vermont is at an inflection point — a turning point in its history, requiring a new creativity, new engagement, new leadership — to renew and revitalize the state; to advance equity, fairness, and opportunities for all; to protect and enhance our environment and working landscape; and to build the sustainable economy necessary for a resilient future. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that the resilience of Vermont is not in preparing for the last threat, but, guided by science and collective values, preparing for the challenges to come.

Our current moment, coming out of a global pandemic which has thrown our economy, institutions and home-lives into disarray, provides a galvanizing crucible for redefinition. As Vermonters look beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, they often say, “we can’t recover to our past,” or go back to a pre-pandemic “normal.” And they also share the belief that the process of recovery is a catalytic opportunity for creative cultural and economic renewal and starting point toward a more resilient future.

The Vermont Proposition, in this draft form, creates a venue for Vermonters to consider these opportunities. Together, let’s consider bold, positive ideas. Let’s have faith and find courage for action. Let’s consider the fundamental propositions we should make for the future of this place, the promises we make to our children and theirs, for the common good and the betterment of our communities. Let’s act together to build the best possible future for our families, communities and for all that we love in Vermont.

# The Proposition for the Future of Vermont

*Working together, Vermonters can advance strategies, policies, and investments to renew public engagement and advance justice, resilience, strong communities, healthy environment, and a sustainable economy that works for all.*

- PART 1: Vermont must ensure affordable high-speed broadband and cellular access for all Vermonters, while using digital tools to promote community connection and democracy, and to advance local commerce and economic opportunity**
- PART 2: Vermont must combat racism, celebrate our diversity today, and welcome new Vermonters of Color**
- PART 3: Vermont must advance creative solutions to climate change**
- PART 4: Vermont must reduce economic disparities, address poverty, and promote opportunities for prosperity for all Vermonters**
- PART 5: Vermont must ensure all children have access to affordable, quality child care**
- PART 6: Vermont must ensure that students of all backgrounds and abilities learn and thrive in public schools that advance diverse opportunities for educational, civic and vocational success**
- PART 7: Vermont must strengthen local business, entrepreneurship, investment, workforce and rural innovation**
- PART 8: Vermont must advance efficiency and foresight through state planning and regional coordination**
- PART 9: Vermont must conserve lands and waters and advance the working landscape**
- PART 10: Vermonters must renew civic engagement and strengthen trust, civility, community connection, democratic decision-making, and empower new leaders**

# ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSITION

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## PART 1

### **Vermont must ensure affordable high-speed broadband and cellular access for all Vermonters, while using digital tools to promote community connection and democracy, and to advance local commerce and economic opportunity**

Vermonters have come to consensus that high speed and affordable broadband is not a luxury, but essential infrastructure for all homes and businesses in the state. Let's bring home the long effort for ubiquitous and affordable broadband and cell connectivity everywhere within the next five years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that gaps in service create and reinforce unacceptable inequities in our society. Responding to this crisis, and being resilient for the future, depends on our ability to stay connected. Telehealth, distance learning, participatory democracy, and remote work require this infrastructure, and its lack leads to a dramatic opportunity gap for our children, families, elders, and people with disabilities. This is an injustice that results in unacceptable negative health and educational outcomes — especially for lower income and vulnerable Vermonters — and huge costs to Vermont's economy. It also suppresses innovation and undermines our capacity to attract entrepreneurial energy, businesses, and young people.

The COVID crisis has highlighted Vermont as a healthy, attractive alternative to life in more metropolitan areas. By building the last mile broadband solution we can situate Vermont as a post-pandemic capitol of remote work, distance learning, and digital innovation for those who also yearn for rural community, closeness to nature, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Vermont already has countless creative businesses in homes throughout the state — designing and building software and games, making art, managing financial portfolios, crafting new products, advocating for justice or environmental progress.

Building the infrastructure to support universal high-speed broadband and cell service will empower a revolutionary opportunity for Vermonters to participate in remote work and connect to national and international, creative and knowledge-based economies, and to the global marketplace. We should embrace this opportunity. As virtual meetings have become more mainstream, there have been positive benefits in the form of reduced travel expenses and emissions, and a lowering of barriers for Vermonters with reduced mobility and disabilities.

The expansion of the digital economy in Vermont has potential to increase the number of businesses and jobs in the state. Many Vermonters worry, however, that the expansion of last mile services could produce sprawl to the detriment of natural areas, farm and forest lands, and the character of rural communities. While we seize the opportunities that come with expanded services, it will be essential to balance growth with responsible land use, forward-thinking local, regional and statewide planning, and local action to welcome newcomers into the community as described elsewhere in this document.

Bringing broadband to the last mile will entail public/private partnership and collaboration that includes federal and state investment, Communications Union Districts, the network of current providers, and electric utilities working together to craft and produce last mile solutions throughout the state.

Universal service is not enough — focus must also be given to supporting the use of digital tools for the positive benefit of society and local commerce. Too often, the Internet can undermine local commerce and perpetuate bubbles of like-mindedness which reinforce our opinions and demonize those who think differently or have very different lived experiences of the world. As one Vermonter pointed out, it's crucial that we “address the injury to civility and democracy caused by the use of digital tools for the propagation of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and extremist organizing.”

Fortunately, we already have some best practices to follow. Front Porch Forum has long modeled ways to leverage the internet to increase social connection and face-to-face relations, not substitute for them. Since the beginning of the pandemic, working groups at the local, regional and state level have been using online meeting and collaboration tools at a historically unprecedented rate to connect and advance common priorities. The prevalence of digital tools will not end with the pandemic, and we need to ensure digital access to civic participation for all. We also must ensure that Vermonters have the digital skills necessary to navigate the modern world and access online services and information. We must expand access to digital literacy and learning so that everyone has equal opportunity to connect, making sure that online tools are accessible to people with disabilities and ensuring true access for all.

Many online purchases of consumer goods have no direct economic benefit to Vermont businesses and communities and instead extract resources from local services and our downtown economies. Redirecting outgoing dollars through our local economies can contribute toward the renewal of local prosperity, opportunity, and the economic resilience. Localizing spending can also reduce our collective carbon-footprint. Innovations in digital marketing that allow Vermont consumers to “order local” will further help to expand local purchasing, support local agriculture and forest products, and contribute to our downtowns and the myriad small business that are the backbone of Vermont’s economy.

The power of the internet to divide and isolate us, the parallel impact of online shopping, and the way it undermines local commerce and local economies, must be countered by intentional new policies, practices, and business models. High speed broadband can allow Vermont to avail all the tools and markets of the global economy; it is essential that it also builds our connections to the local marketplace, supporting local foods, products and services, our downtowns, and all the commerce of our towns and regions. We must use online tools to strengthen civil society and democratic participation, and boost local economic opportunity, development and investment.

This work will be fundamental to the successful future of Vermont and should be the immediate focus of a statewide economic and civic development initiative and a public/private partnership. Ensuring infrastructure and technology for the future must also be a long-term commitment, to maintain and grow infrastructure to ensure that Vermonters have cutting edge opportunities to innovate locally, and participate in global economic opportunities from their own hometowns.

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## PART 2

### **Vermont must combat racism, celebrate our diversity today, and welcome new Vermonters of color**

The Vermont identity has always been and will continue to be a key element in defining the direction of the state. In 2009, the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV) found that even in our cosmopolitan age Vermont maintained a clear and distinct identity that residents deeply valued. In reaching out to thousands of Vermonters the CFV heard scores of stories that started with words like these: ‘Well, I was born in N.J., so I’ll never be a real Vermonter.’ Or, ‘I moved to Vermont 18 years ago, but I’ll always be a flatlander,’ and others who shared a deep pride in an historic lineage, ‘My family has been farming our land for eight generations, and still going.’ Others described moving to Vermont because they wanted to embrace the values the state represented, or simply that they were drawn by what they felt as a deep sense of community. As dedicated members of our communities, we have much to be proud of.

Even so, as we look at the issues of declining birthrates, an aging population, loss of youth, economic challenges, and racial inequities; it is clear that we need to re-examine and expand what it means to be a “Vermonters.” One trajectory of Vermont’s future leads to a state that is older and whiter, with more division between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and steadily increasing economic doldrums. Our best alternative is to deliberately attract youth, diversity and entrepreneurship to spark our creative economic future.

People of color who visit or move to Vermont tell us they are made to feel like outsiders when one of the first questions they’re asked is, ‘Where are you from?’ To Vermonters or visitors of color or those who speak with a different accent, these words say, ‘You aren’t from here,’ or even, ‘you don’t belong here.’

Our historic definitions of who is and who isn’t a Vermonter are problematic; both for the safety and well-being of the people of color who live here today, many of whom are from long-time Vermont families or are native to the land Vermont is settled on, and because the state needs the energy, youth, creativity and entrepreneurship of immigrants, especially people of color, to thrive economically and as a modern community in the world.

We need to confront systemic racism and advance a culture of inclusiveness, welcoming, and equity, and we need to start by recognizing and celebrating the diversity of the state now. Part of this is recognizing historic injustices perpetrated on people of color and indigenous peoples in the past and present, and working together toward meaningful reconciliation. We also need to change the narrative and celebrate the ethnic and racial diversity in Vermont history, as well as today in our school system, local economies and culture.

We can value our history and the heritage of Vermont’s multi-generational families, and at the same time expand the definition of a Vermonter beyond those born in the state or with multi-generational lineage. Let’s make sure that anyone who wants to live in Vermont, participate in Vermont, and contribute to Vermont is embraced as a Vermonter on day one. Newcomers in all their diversity need to be welcomed and celebrated for the energy and richness of experience they bring to the state.

This attitude has policy implications for the state, for community, for education, and for organizational strategies for outreach and inclusion, but it must also be founded in our personal



relations and sense of mutual identity and the power that it can bring for the creative enrichment of all our lives and places.

The fundamental questions for people considering whether to relocate to Vermont and for many considering whether to stay: “Why Vermont? Why Now?” Let’s develop a campaign and a suite of intentional actions and messages to welcome and embrace new Vermonters of color. Doing this means recognizing and correcting existing policies, practices, and behaviors that result in inequity and division today. We need to explicitly reject racism in any form, work together to eradicate it from our systems and organizations, and educate the next generation of Vermonters to safeguard against the patterns for racism in the future. At the same time, we must back up this welcoming campaign by enacting new policies that demonstrate that commitment — in criminal justice, in housing, healthcare, childcare, and education.

We all need to be ambassadors for Vermont’s future, recognizing that change comes both with structures or acts of government, and in our own hearts, minds and actions. With expanded mutual understanding, deepened empathy, and a common commitment to civic and economic progress, together we can rethink and renew the best of Vermont for the next generation and foster a feeling of belonging for all who choose to call Vermont home.

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## **PART 3:**

### **Vermont must advance creative solutions to climate change**

Vermont's future success will be determined by our ability to advance economic renewal, reinvention and innovation in an age fundamentally conditioned by climate change, and to participate in an international competitive economy that rewards entrepreneurs and regions that build and model climate solutions.

The overwhelming majority of scientists agree that human-driven climate change is real, is already having dramatic effects, in Vermont and throughout the world, and that, left unaddressed, will produce cascading catastrophic impacts on communities, states, and ultimately on world civilization. In Vermont, our winters have gotten continuously milder. Extreme weather events like Tropical Storm Irene and the Halloween Storm of 2019 demonstrate the fragility of local power, communications, and transportation infrastructure. Unpredictable rainfall and warming trends strain farmers, sugar makers and ski areas.

Nationally, we are continually recording the 'warmest months on record,' and seeing unprecedented wildfires, floods, and desertification. The drying up of the Ogallala Aquifer will put pressure on the American food system and that of our trading partners, while human resource consumption, in the US and globally, already exceeds ecological carrying capacities in many places. Science tells us that that sea level rise will displace millions of people in coastal cities in ways that will exponentially grow the number of climate refugees, and contribute to international dislocation and strife that could define the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Climate change is the existential threat of our time.

This knowledge must act as an immediate imperative to us: We will need to dramatically reduce our local and global carbon emissions, to draw excess carbon from the atmosphere, sequester it in our forests and soils, as well as embodied carbon in our built environment, and renew our economy doing so. It is essential to act at scale now, locally, regionally and nationally to prevent the worst outcomes of climate disruption for the generation coming of age between now and 2050.

Answering climate change doesn't undermine the economy, it renews it. In fact, creativity in answering climate change is one of the greatest economic opportunities in world history. Places that lead in building fair, equitable, and affordable solutions will attract creative entrepreneurs, investment, and youth. Already Vermont businesses and innovators are rising to meet this challenge.

To advance the climate economy at scale over the next 5 years and set a path to success for 2050, Vermont must have the boldness and foresight to build policies to dis-incent all forms of released carbon, systematically divest from carbon investments except when they lead forward to future solutions, and invest at scale in clean energy development, efficiencies, transportation system change and the drawdown and sustained sequestration of carbon in the soil (with the added benefits of soil improvement and gains in farm and forest productivity).

Working with the nation, the region, or alone, Vermont should institute a carbon pricing or credit system, as well as voluntary market-based solutions, at a scale to change consumer behavior and produce revenue to invest in enterprises that produce clean energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and maintain the resilience of our natural and working lands and their ability to capture and store carbon. Vermont should build economic investments and incentives to systematically

support green infrastructure and business growth in Vermont. With national and regional partners, it is time for Vermont to invest in economic renewal based on innovation in climate economic development. This should be a fundamental policy guiding state government and a fundamental message in Vermont's efforts to attract new residents and entrepreneurs to the state.

Of the approximately \$2 billion spent annually on fossil fuels in Vermont, \$1.6 billion is siphoned out of Vermont's economy for good. Vermont residents and businesses can capture most of these dollars, build resilience and save money by participating in a distributed energy economy where households and buildings produce and share in generating and managing energy through the smart grid.

Energy efficiency, local production of renewable energy and strategic electrification will dramatically reduce Vermont's transportation and heating carbon emissions. With the smart grid that Vermont utilities are pioneering today, the distributed energy system can make homes and businesses at once producers, consumers, and storage sites of electric power which can be redistributed based on demand. This system will not only waste less and cycle dollars more locally, but will also be far more resilient to future disruptions.

Vermont's greatest assets of land, water, small, resilient communities and strong tradition of stewardship can be exactly the tools we need to put us at the forefront of global adaptation to a changing climate. We can nurture the conditions in Vermont to encourage engineers and inventors to create smart grid solutions, efficiencies, storage and novel techniques for energy generation. Vermont can attract a generation of creative and purpose-driven youth who want to be at the center of the movement to answer climate change through innovative economic and working lands development. We know we can do this, because we have already begun. The transformative opportunity for the future is to lead to the next level, take it to scale, and market our leadership as we tell the story of Vermont.

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## **PART 4:**

### **Vermont must reduce economic disparities, address poverty, and promote opportunity for prosperity for all Vermonters.**

Continually widening gaps in the distribution of wealth leave more and more people behind and feeling forgotten, with limited opportunities and hopes for the future. If Vermont is to thrive into the next generation and succeed as a democratic society, it will have to reduce these disparities and ensure economic and social opportunities for all its residents in the decades ahead.

Throughout the pandemic, even as our frontline workers bore the brunt of the risk, and those Vermonters with the barest of resources were hit the hardest by job losses, economic slowdown, and food insecurity, the wealthiest among us continued to grow their resources. We are currently witnessing what may be the greatest disparity of wealth within a democratic society in world history. This disparity is a disease to democracy and civic unity, which needs correction in our time. History demonstrates that republican institutions do not survive extended periods with disproportionate inequities.

As one Vermonter wrote, “Income disparity is one of the gravest threats to our civilization.” Clearly inequity in economic opportunity and wealth distribution is a national issue that intersects with education, racism and oppression, health access and outcomes, food security, housing and so many other aspects of our development.

How are these disparities felt in Vermont today? Sometimes they are felt as class divisions and resentments, tensions between the haves and have nots, divisions exacerbated by the inequity in health care and economic opportunity; sometimes as the ‘two Vermonts’ – the relatively successful one and those who have felt alienated from that success and all the proud talk that goes with it. Vermonters of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, Abenaki and other Native American community members, and people with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by disparity and face many barriers to economic participation and prosperity.

According to the 2019 State of Working Vermont Report produced by the Public Assets Institute, between 1980 and 2015 the number of Vermonters classified as ‘medium income’ fell by 7% while those classified as lower income or upper income rose by around 3%.

We need to reform tax policy to encourage investment in Vermont, but also ensure the affordability of the state for working people. We need to systematically look at the tax burden and ensure that those who can best afford to carry the greatest burden. That means raising taxes on the wealthiest Vermonters over time.

We also need to address the benefits cliffs that negatively impact low income families and people with disabilities. Low income Vermont families are eligible for financial supports and services that are abruptly ended as family income grows. According to the Final Report of the Vermont Tax Structure Commission of February of 2021, it is against the interest of some wage earners to earn more than \$40,000 – each step toward prosperity and out of poverty actually reduces the benefits for which they are eligible and they are unable to make up the difference until income is at the \$70,000 level. Services and supports can unintentionally but systemically limit aspirations and undermine progress, perpetuating intergenerational poverty and holding back Vermonters from economic success and security. Adjusting the benefits cliff has been an enduring public policy goal, one that must be renewed with diligent action.

Let's celebrate people and families that work through challenges to step out of poverty, and let's evaluate all the ways we support rather than restrain their power and progress.

If the pandemic has made anything clear, it is that the health of each of us is important to the health of all of us. We need to ensure that every child, every family, every one of us, has access to affordable, equitable health care, and we need to work step by step toward that goal. Likewise, every child born in Vermont should have access to high quality educational opportunities, nutritious food, and opportunities for economic mobility. We need to ensure that every young Vermonter can aspire to higher education or career training, and enable them to achieve their aspirations with affordable opportunities in workforce training and a strong University and State College System that answers their needs regardless of where they start in life.

Achieving greater equity in health and educational opportunity will take a shared commitment on the part of all Vermonters to ensure that we are collectively investing in the future of our families and our neighbors, and that we view their success as our own.

In essence, it is time for this country, and for Vermont, to declare a new "War on Poverty."

Safe, affordable housing is the bedrock of economic opportunity. In a reasoned way, balanced by smart growth principles, Vermont should ease the regulatory environment, reduce the costs, and incentivize housing development especially for workforce housing in downtowns and village centers. Let's make it easier and more affordable to build physically accessible small houses, duplexes and owned-apartments.

While Vermonters deserve a variety of housing options, including safe and affordable rental housing, often the most effective path out of poverty and towards economic security for families is that is to build equity through homeownership. The one strategic benefit that middle class young people have, and low-income young people do not, is family help in getting a start in home ownership. When you own, your investment grows with the marketplace, and every dollar you pay on your mortgage is money in the bank for your future. For the middle class, this is the foundation of security, the leverage for other investments (like education), a nest egg for your next home, and the spur to economic success for the next generation. To systemically build equity, expand economic opportunity, attract and welcome workers to the state, and support the progress of historically marginalized people, Vermont should provide seed grants to contribute to down payments on homes for lower income Vermonters and especially for people of color.

Ultimately, to reduce inequity is to build a more united community built on the freedom and opportunity for people to create their own future. These are the foundational principles of our state, visible on our flag, and it will be imperative to renew them in the coming decades to ensure economic security and sustainability for all.

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## PART 5

### **Vermont must ensure all children have equitable access to affordable, quality child care**

When you are building a house, you start with the foundation. The science around human development is clear: early stimulation, social connection, reading, music and love have direct effects ranging from the number of actual brain cells we develop and the density of their interconnection, to our ability to manage and moderate our emotions, feel reciprocity for others, and persevere to succeed in life. The absence of this strong foundation, and the traumas and deficits of early childhood experienced without it, undermine opportunity and contribute to all the societal challenges that confront us.

A study produced by the Vermont Business Roundtable and Let's Grow Kids documenting the return on investment of such a system for children 0-5 to be \$1.3 billion over the working lifetime of the cohort of children receiving that care. This entails substantial savings to the K-12 school system, the criminal justice system, and health care, to say nothing of the enormous boost to the economic output, lifetime earnings and tax revenue produced by that next generation of more successful Vermonters.

Vermont is facing a child care crisis. Before the pandemic, 3 out of 5 of Vermont's youngest children lacked access to early education programs. Vermont families spend a very high percentage of their income on child care, up to as much as 30 percent, even with state assistance, compared to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services' recommendation of 7 percent. This affects families' financial well-being, hurts the state's workforce, and undermines economic development. In the current COVID crisis and recovery period, this challenge has been exacerbated as child care programs closed and struggled to reopen, even as parents pivoted to work from home, and school aged children at home added to challenging family dynamics. Many child care programs are struggling with financial viability and some have gone out of business, while the needs of families have multiplied.

Vermont employers report that the most critical struggle they face as they work to grow their businesses in Vermont is to fill job vacancies because of an aging population and very low unemployment rate. Providing child care and family supports can be a competitive strategy to renew the population and enrich economic opportunity for Vermont's vital future.

Vermonters need to commit together to invest in a high-quality child care system where all families have access to the child care they need; where child care programs are compensated for the cost of care, including providing healthy meals and snacks, materials and resources to support early learning experiences, and access to comprehensive services; where they are accessible to children with disabilities; where educators are valued, fairly compensated, and supported in their professions; and where the statewide system ensures there is leveraged funding and accountability for outcomes.

Vermont should advance high quality, affordable and sustainable child care as a foundation for supporting all Vermont families and as a strategic lever for the fundamental goal of attracting families to the state. Quality early learning will be a beacon for young families looking for the best place to live, work, develop businesses and raise their children. It can be a foundation of Vermont's economic proposition to newcomers and employers, and it can make Vermont the most family-friendly state in the nation.

We can build a child care system that sets every child up to thrive; one that builds a path for the next generation of children to have increased resiliency to adverse childhood experiences; reduces their propensity for chronic disease and addictive behaviors; and nurtures character traits like critical thinking, perseverance and healthy emotional relationships with others.

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## PART 6

### **Vermont must ensure that students of all backgrounds and abilities learn and thrive in public schools that advance diverse opportunities for educational, civic, and vocational success**

Public education is vital to the lives of our young people, our communities, and our future. Our public schools matter. We ask our schools, more than any other institution, to provide equal opportunity and to help each child optimize their potential. We do this because we know that education is linked to greater social mobility, higher incomes, lower unemployment rates and higher overall health indicators. Yet our schools are not isolated from nor can they be asked to compensate for inequities in our communities. In fact, the COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the economic, racial, health, and social disparities that challenge our communities, and it is in our schools that we see the impacts of these disparities on children and their families and where we can commit to ameliorating them over the next generation.

An equitable approach to education is one that recognizes that children do not start from a level playing field. Schools must consider the specific needs and structural barriers that people face because of income, race, ethnicity, disability, language, and immigration status. Schools must look at the individual needs of each student, their talents and goals, and facilitate learning opportunities that build core competencies, but also allow students to follow their own aspirations, foster their own talents, and pursue self-identified vocational goals beginning in early school years.

As students identify and explore their passions, teachers facilitate access to skills and experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Schools of the future can be business incubation centers, “schools without walls” where inclined students can design their businesses or careers and where vocational mentorship increasingly complements traditional in class instruction. We need to cultivate the next generation of civic and business leaders and entrepreneurs, foster youth with optimism who are empowered to develop businesses or careers in state and go on to do so. Higher education and vocational programs better aligned with job markets, and that destigmatize, incent and inspire students to participate in vocational and technical education in high school, can help to build workforce readiness and broaden and diversify its reach.

School and community partnerships can ensure that the seeds for civic participation and strong democratic values are planted at youth. Schools have a critical role to play, both in terms of curriculum and governance. Learning about our democratic traditions is important. Just as important is the cultivation of opportunities to learn by participation in decision-making and leadership. Not only do students have a role to play in helping to guide their own educations — students also must be drawn into and given authentic voice in school and community conversations. The model of school and community partnerships can be a distinguishing feature of Vermont’s future, empowering and engaging youth in leading their educations in school and beyond. Vermont should also support Vermont schools in offering ethnic and social equity studies as part of the schoolwide curricular and pedagogical practices.

We know that strong relationships between students and teachers are essential to student engagement and academic achievement, that parent and community involvement in schools increases equity, and that increasing access to afterschool and summer programming for all children can decrease barriers to learning success. Ensuring access to high quality early care and education and afterschool and expanded learning programs will also help to level the playing field for our children.

We look to a future for public education where educational choices are driven by individual passions leading to fulfilling careers and stronger communities. Where community-based learning curricula are focused around real world challenges and schools become labs for innovative solutions. Schools invite in the community, and students are taught in the community, with teachers as facilitators of experiences. We need to celebrate multiple career pathways and eliminate the stigma associated with vocational education or entrepreneurship relative to the college bound. We need to commit to renewed civic curricula and educational experiences that produce informed voters and active citizens, leading to better governance; where students gain the leadership skills they will need to lead their communities and the state forward.

To advance public education, Vermont must hold a deep statewide conversation and action planning discussion about the vision, values, and goals for public education and ensuring equity and opportunity for every Vermont child. A 21st Century education dialogue would bring Vermonters together with education experts, leaders, and providers and youth to design a future where public education is deeply connected to community with integrated supports for students, expanded and enriched learning opportunities, active family and community engagement, collaborative leadership and practices, and safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. The process should also explore school funding mechanisms, with the priorities of simplification and ensuring equitable distribution of financial burden. Vermont must recommit to public education, and Vermonters must come together to build and implement a new vision of public education for the 21st Century.



## **PART 7**

### **Vermont must strengthen local business, entrepreneurship, investment, workforce and rural innovation**

Vermont has unique assets that contribute to economic opportunity. It has an opportunity to develop human capital, foster innovation, create jobs, address workforce shortages, leverage local institutions, access investment capital, and build community engagement. To realize these opportunities, we need to attract, develop and support entrepreneurs who build and grow creative businesses in the state.

We have been exceptional at creating global brands such as Ben & Jerry's, King Arthur Flour, Burton, Dealer.com, and Seventh Generation. We need to support more businesses through their initial stages of development and growth, to a scale that benefits more Vermonters. Startups are the biggest drivers of jobs and wealth creation in rural areas, but many of them could grow in the state as a foundation for regional development. We must improve the rate of formation, retention and growth of firms to secure our future employment base and restore and build a dynamic business environment.

Vermont's economy runs on great people. We need teachers and nurses, farmers and machinists, web builders and loan officers. Unfilled positions, too few candidates, and rising demand due to retirements are threatening the health of Vermont's businesses and economy. The pandemic has accelerated our workforce gap and it may take several years before we understand the impact of Covid on our current jobs, workforce, migration and demographics.

Industry shifts in technology, resiliency and adaptation will all be needed to plan for Vermont's future workforce. Coupling this with greater need for more equity, racial and age diversity will require collective efforts along with new relevant and regional data. Ultimately we will need to strengthen education, training and post-secondary certifications for today and tomorrow's future workforce.

One key can be to engage leadership in Vermont's iconic companies, to mentor the next generation. We can advance provisions in a tax structure that encourages those with wealth to invest in entrepreneurs, new ideas, and an ecosystem that is comfortable with taking chances and innovating. Successful entrepreneurs are the employers of tomorrow.

We also need to support places that create density, community, and the collision of ideas. Entrepreneurial hubs such as coworking and incubation centers attract the next generation of entrepreneurs and offer the technology, proximity, professional development, and low-overhead that they need to start up and succeed. With spaces networked throughout the state, every entrepreneur should feel like they have a local option to safely experiment with ideas and a supportive cohort of innovators to help them hone their business concepts.

We need to identify the areas of opportunity and growth for local entrepreneurship and in attracting the next generation of innovators, and invest in and boost those arenas. The creative economy, which has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, will be critical in moving Vermont forward through recovery and attracting and retaining a diverse next generation of Vermonters. Additionally, we have already seen the importance of the expansion of outdoor recreation and the food and beverage industry in boosting local and state economies and capturing the attention and imagination of visitors and new residents.

Along these lines, we have a huge opportunity to further develop and encourage business ownership among people traditionally underrepresented in the business community including women, BIPOC Vermonters, lower-income community members, and people with disabilities. Agencies like the Regional Development Corporations, Small Business Administration and Vermont Small Business Development Centers need better information and data to target their resources and technical assistance to these communities. We should make it easier and more accessible for existing businesses who want to support or connect to BIPOC businesses or freelancers to do so.

Vermont's creative sector is an enormously important driver of cultural stewardship, sense of place, and innovation. Vermont's performing artists, writers, musicians and storytellers are going to be instrumental in helping craft the narrative of how Vermont moves forward in the coming decades, and will need broad public support.

Vermont's hospitality sector (restaurants, lodging, recreation and attractions) is not only an incredibly important economic driver throughout the state but also nurtures and cultivates local community and welcomes and engages travelers to the Vermont experience. To support a vibrant and healthy hospitality sector Vermont must ensure that its investment in travel and tourism marketing and events is competitive within the Northeast region and beyond. The development of affordable options for culinary and hospitality training will ensure the availability of the workforce to meet growing needs. We also need to examine the current obstacles to traditional lending and generate new lending programs and provide ongoing technical assistance to emerging businesses to cultivating diverse ownership in hospitality businesses.

We need to experiment more with microlending and crowdfunding models and make sure that our economic support systems are transparent and inclusive. We have an opportunity to be nimble, to experiment, and to make resources easier to attain and more widely available.

The State of Vermont needs to use its purchasing power to leverage innovation in the products and services produced in state and create opportunities for entrepreneurs in doing so. If more small State purchasing contracts for goods and services were available, more local businesses could grow and more dollars circulate locally. State agencies could be required to issue a certain number of problem statements to be solved by Vermont vendors with emphasis on supporting women and BIPOC-owned businesses. More State contracts around innovative challenges could stimulate entrepreneurs to create more prototypes contributing to a system of rapid innovation.

At the same time there are huge opportunities for retail operations to overcome barriers and learn how to sell their wares online. Everyone needs to be able to reach the global marketplace. Our businesses need to learn how to adapt their offerings to ethnically diverse national and international markets that will require innovation, testing, and constant feedback.

Our state is losing young people and we have 10,000 trade jobs to fill. Perhaps the best way to incentivize young Vermonters to stay in the state and to attract a younger demographic is to ensure their wages exceed the cost of living. The state could invest more in incentive programs for first time home-buyers and builders, student loan forgiveness programs, and training for workers to create their own jobs or work remotely for companies in and out of the state.

We need to focus on 21st century skills that would make it possible for students to start businesses, manage their finances, and secure high-paying jobs. This could start by making classes in personal finance, entrepreneurship, and computer science available to all students. In addition, we need to normalize a practice of Vermont businesses actively recruiting students from in-state

high schools and colleges. To go a step further, we could offer this same type of educational focus and recruiting practice to inmates in our prison system. The more we can educate people with skills they can apply directly to helping our economy grow, the better.

We need to brace ourselves for the oncoming wave of automation and be ready to adapt to it. Restaurants, tourism, outdoor recreation, manufacturing and working lands enterprises will all be increasingly impacted by automation.

Our economic development ecosystem has the ability to affect every part of the Vermont Proposition. We can use it as a lever to innovate and utilize broadband technologies, to increase equity and advance historically marginalized populations, to face climate change head on, to close the opportunity gap, to re-localize and transform our marketplace, to address workplace and societal norms relating to education and family life, to rethink and innovate policy, to better protect and regenerate natural resources, and to promote transparency, communication, and the empowerment of young Vermonters.

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## PART 8

### **Vermont must advance efficiency and foresight through state planning and regional coordination**

For Vermont to be economically successful, efficient, and civically strong, it is crucial to improve vision and planning in state government and to coordinate and connect regional services.

With 251 towns and without strong county governance, local and regional services are overlapping, sometimes duplicative, and unduly complex. Vermont is fortunate to have more non-profits per capita than any other place in the country. Their work represents the institutionalization of creative problem solving for the common good and they provide tremendous benefits to towns, regions and the state as a whole. Their service territories, along with the matrix of governance territories, however, represent local and regional missions that have grown organically over time, without systematic strategic alignment with one another. The Council on the Future of Vermont described the challenge like this:

Throughout our history Vermonters have organized the state around local and regional systems for a variety of governmental services. Overlapping and incongruent regional and local systems for transportation, human services, economic development, land use planning, courts, public safety, education and local and regional governance are now the norm. This unsystematic structure makes for complexity and undermines the coordination and efficiency of services. It is time for Vermont to give serious study to the basic restructuring of the State's service areas. Vermont's regional systems need to be reorganized so that all service and planning boundaries also are coordinated within a set of defined regions. This will make resource sharing, decision-making and long-term planning more rational, effective and efficient.

In many parts of Vermont, energetic leaders are engaged in a dozen or more independent boards and processes. We clearly need to invite more people, especially young people, people of color, and newcomers, to step into leadership and open the door and reduce barriers to support their success. At the same time, we need to be realistic about the human capacity of each community and consider whether decision-making could be more meaningful and impactful if some of these boards were brought together. There is only so much human capital, and so many local boards that any one local leader can sit on at one time; aggregating decision-making can realize goals for collaboration and efficiency.

Let's recognize that much of the character of Vermont is founded in local government and local democracy and maintain that foundation. As one Vermonter expressed it, "Regional coordination is important, but it must be balanced by what makes Vermont, Vermont. Local communities have meaning for Vermonters, and it is important that strong elements of local decision-making power remain at the town level. Efficiency and collaboration are important, but so are human scale decision-making structures."

As a starting point, dialogues could take place about the potential for gradual and voluntary co-location of Regional Economic Development Commissions and Regional Planning Commissions (as has already taken place in Bennington County and the Northeast Kingdom). A second step would invite representatives from state agencies of commerce, agriculture, labor, and Small Business Development Centers, USDA Rural Development and others to co-locate in regional planning and development centers. These centers could then attract other organizations, from solid waste or

conservation districts to expanded county services, to deepen collaboration and eliminate duplication. Connection and coordination should add capacity to the creative work of local residents, not undermine local control.

While many parts of Vermont have recently seen an aging and slowly shrinking population, many Vermonters worry about our ability to adapt quickly to incoming waves of climate refugees, it will be crucial to better plan for statewide development, for the protection of natural lands and agricultural and forest assets; for housing in strong town, village and city centers; and for economic opportunity, innovation and sustainability. Currently, town planning, added up into regional plans, is orphaned at the state level without adoption and connection through an integrated statewide land use and economic development planning process.

To help coordinate local and regional efforts, and to systematically add up regional plans toward statewide land use and economic development plans, a Vermont Planning Office should be re-established as part of the Agency of Administration, with key planning staff who provide continuity across gubernatorial administrations. Working with elected officials, this office would be responsible for statewide community and economic development and land use plans on a five-year planning cycle.

Vermont has a unique opportunity to highlight the intersection of equity and environmentalism and be a global leader. A state planning office, working on smart growth and equity principles and policies established by elected officials, could support, enhance and incent and guide appropriate development that advances social justice and protects working lands and natural assets.

A state planning office, established by law, and with embedded staff that serve the current Gubernatorial Administration and provide continuity between administrations, could build better and longer-term community, economic, and land use planning than has ever been effectively done in Vermont. Efficiency and foresight in state planning will contribute to systematically advancing Vermont in myriad ways, from land use and the future of the working landscape, to social justice and opportunity; it connects to all other aspects of the Vermont Proposition; it is and will be urgently needed.

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## PART 9

### **Vermont must conserve lands and waters and advance the working landscape**

Vermont is more a garden than a wilderness. Generations of people living on the land, from the first peoples to today's farmers and forest land owners and managers, have shaped the land as stewards for Vermont's present and future.

Vermont is in a position today, given the national impact of the climate crisis and the in migration we have seen in this past year, to see population growth in the future. As the population shifts over time, it will be critically important to manage that growth in line with smart growth principles that benefit commerce and build density in our downtown and village centers while protecting natural areas, investing in the working lands economy, and advancing healthy outdoor recreational opportunities. We need to invest today to expand the conservation of our best agricultural soils and forest lands, and seed and support that land with young farmers and diverse entrepreneurial enterprises.

Vermont can seize a set of economic and ecological opportunities: to protect and conserve land and waters, to advance local agriculture and working lands enterprises to meet local and regional needs with innovative products, to promote outdoor recreation that aligns with conservation values and goals, and to benefit economically by contributing products and solutions beyond our borders, all while building a more adaptive and resilient landscape in the face of climate change.

Resilience begins at home. When Vermont experiences a crisis, be it Tropical Storm Irene or COVID, we rally together at the neighbor, town, regional, and state levels. The fragility of long, national supply chains is becoming increasingly clear. As we look ahead to a century of climate change impacts including increasingly severe weather events and other potential public health crises, with disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities, people of color, and low-income Vermonters, our security and its economic health call on us to deeply increase our investments in local production. We can provide more of our own food, clean energy, or other goods and services, even as we avail the best opportunities in the regional, national and global marketplace.

Vermonters currently spend approximately \$2 billion on food (at home and in restaurants) each year. In 2010, The Farm to Plate project estimated the local share of that food consumption to be 5% (\$114 million). After a decade of successes in the local food movement, that figure has jumped to 13.9% (\$310 million) in recent years, but there is still room for improvement.

Vermont can continue to dramatically increase local food purchasing, and the goal of doubling local food consumption by 2030 is within reach. Even as we increase our own consumption we have a tremendous opportunity to expand local and in-state processing for export. Vermont can continue to be the 'milk bowl' of New England; it can also be the breadbasket, cheeseboard, vegetable platter, and beer garden for more urban places to the south.

Meanwhile, more than half the trees cut in Vermont are shipped out of the state for processing. Trees felled in Woodbury or Rochester may be trucked to Canada, where they are milled and shipped to Asia to be turned into furniture, bowls or toys to be returned to the local dollar store — losing the economic multipliers and the higher end income that comes from production. Since we lack economies of scale and the lowest costs for production, we compete in quality, in design and creativity, and are known for some of the best hardwood furniture — along with cheese, beer, and ice cream — in the world. The bottom line is that Vermont's future prosperity will depend on our ability to capture the maximum value in the production and supply chain for creative value-added

products that we use here or export, and keep or bring dollars into Vermont, rather than compete for the bottom of the international commodity economy.

As an agricultural state, Vermont is the most dependent in the nation on a single commodity economy – dairy – with prices set in a complex matrix of international and national demand cycles and byzantine legal structures regionally and nationally.

In many ways, this marketplace has failed the Vermont dairy farmer – many fear that we will lose the agricultural foundation to our open landscape, and with it all it means to local prosperity, recreation, tourism and our quality of life.

Fluid milk used to supply 80% of agricultural revenue, and almost 95% of it was exported. Great progress in in-state value added production has brought some of the processing dollars home to Vermont. The growth of in-state processing provides the opportunity for partnership in the branding of VT dairy, and the potential for in-state partners to agree to a stable and sustainable market price for milk that can help ensure farm viability. This work can be one seed to a successful, cooperative, and at least partially vertically-integrated future.

There is a powerful opportunity also to invest in research and development in the private sector to spark and encourage new and diversified farm and forest operations, creative new processing and products, innovative market development and the branding, transportation and distribution of Vermont foods and forest products. Vermont should seed this growth at scale for all the rural economic dividends—from expanding the local working lands economy to cycling more dollars into rural VT enterprises, building future resilience and food security, and seizing market share in regional, national and international markets. Growing the working lands economy entails more than local purchasing; it is also dependent on growing our role in the regional and national market place. All investments in the innovative future for Vermont working lands will bring dollars and jobs back while increasing value-added production, supporting the land and Vermont's rural communities while also providing the economic incentive to keep our shared landscape whole.

For generations, residents and visitors have celebrated and cherished our natural and recreational assets. In the coming years, it is clear that interest in many forms of outdoor recreation will remain strong and even grow over time. Outdoor recreation presents opportunities for fun, wellness, and vitality, but also can be an economic driver for many communities. As work moves forward to advance these opportunities, however, a coordinated and connected approach will be important to ensure success and mutual benefit of multiple land uses and protection.

The land is our first point of resilience, the ecological foundation for our basic needs for air, water, food, clothing and shelter. On a global scale, human consumption has displaced the natural world and exploited ecosystems to serve our needs at the expense of innumerable species, some of which we have domesticated, others diminished, and too many forced to extinction. This trend proceeds today at an unprecedented rate, and with an ongoing increase of global human population, which in many places pushes against local and regional ecological carrying capacity. Challenges to local ecological equilibrium, from climate change, local environmental degradation, or human strife, have the rippling capacity to disrupt peace, security and economies across significant regions and nations in the next generation. Seen at this scale, population and ecosystem issues seem overwhelming. But all world citizens have a responsibility to other species and the environment, and humanity has an incredible power of creativity, adaptability and innovation that allows us to act in concerted ways to address even the most fundamental problems before us.

The larger context for Vermont's environmental future entails this question: "If we think globally, are we consuming environmental services and the products of natural processes faster than they can be replenished by ecological systems?" When asked this question, the great majority of people say yes. If this is a ground truth, and we are thinking ahead to the future of Vermont, and the civilization in which we are situated, what are the implications for public policy, community planning and personal decision-making now and over the 30 years to 2050?

Along with our desire to answer the demographic challenges facing the state today, Vermonters must take a long view of the limits to growth, and the limits of consumer behavior. Some of these limits could be approached in an ethic that looks to a new American Dream where our progress is not measured by an increase in consumption over that of our parents but by the quality and sustainability of our lives, the richness of our relationships, the strength of our communities, and the resilience of local agriculture, forest products, and the environment on which they are founded. In the generation ahead, issues around land conservation, ecosystem protection, and biodiversity will only increase in importance and Vermont will find benefits in improving soils through carbon sequestration.

Vermont has a responsibility and an opportunity to live within the ecological limits of our state and region. We must do this for our own sake and to support and live in harmony with our neighbors in our region, country and world. We can show the way forward in an economy that regenerates our soils, provides food security for all, improves forest health, preserves key natural assets, and models economic prosperity and landscape resilience in the face of climate challenges; but to do so, we must prepare, now.



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## PART 10

### **Vermonters must renew civic engagement and strengthen trust, civility, community connection, democratic decision-making, and empower new leaders**

Vermont's future success and prosperity is tied to our self-governance. Our connection to our neighbors and community and our faith in our local and state government and other institutions is fundamental to our way of life. The health of Vermont's democracy and sense of community is strong, but significant threats must be addressed to secure this foundation of our society into the next generation.

Well before the pandemic, much of Vermonters' lives had shifted to the online sphere. Amazon, Facebook, and countless other digital entities have had serious impacts on the way we connect to the world and interact with one another. The physical distancing imposed by the pandemic has exacerbated this trend. This shift has major implications for how Vermonters come together and make decisions and for how we sustain our sense of connectedness. Vermont must actively invest in our democracy, and our leaders must model the core value of engagement, mutual respect, and empathy in their work.

From our structures of local governance and volunteer leadership, to our Town Meeting tradition and other local processes to drive community action, Vermonters are proud of our long tradition of civic deliberation and dialogue. As we look to the future, we must build on this history of decision-making from the ground up – maintaining opportunities for, and fostering local leadership and dialogue while finding ways to bring in all voices and restore trust in and connection to civic process. We must find ways to bridge divisions and differences and engage Vermonters – of all ages, backgrounds, and political leanings – in the decisions and discussions that impact our communities and our lives.

The seeds for strong democratic values are planted at youth. Schools have a critical role to play, both in terms of curriculum and governance. Learning about our democratic traditions is important. Just as important is the cultivation of opportunities to learn by participation in decision-making and leadership. Not only do students have a role to play in helping to guide their own school – students also must be drawn into and given authentic voice in community conversations as well. The model of school and community partnerships can be a distinguishing feature of Vermont's future, empowering and engaging youth in leading their educations in school and beyond.

Raising the next generation of Vermont leaders will be a critical component of this work, but we also must support the potential and emerging leaders of today. People of all gender identities, color, sexual orientation, challenges or disabilities, backgrounds, religion, income and political persuasion must feel welcomed to leadership and be provided the tools to succeed. We must identify and eliminate barriers to engage and entry into leadership roles; actively inviting people of all backgrounds and lived experience to engage, finding ways to make it possible for them to participate, boosting their voice in civic process and offering opportunities to develop leadership skills. We need to empower municipal, regional, and state leaders with the tools they need to develop public processes and opportunities for engagement that are built on inclusiveness, skilled facilitation, and trust.

Together we will need more supports for next generation leadership – the work of the Snelling Center, regional leadership programs, Emerge, and VCRD's Community Leadership Network are

examples, but more is needed to systematize a renewed expectation of every young person in the responsibilities and benefits of taking leadership.

Vermont municipalities, schools, non-profits, and commissions need to recognize the need for renewed leadership and youth engagement and set goals for boards to engage youth, new Vermonters, people of color and historically marginalized Vermonters to grow in leadership within their communities and for the future of the state.

## **Summary: Renewing and Retelling the Story of Vermont**

Vermont has long been famous for its quality milk, ice cream and cheese, its town meeting tradition, quality of life and scenic beauty, and maple syrup.

Today, Vermonters face unprecedented new challenges and opportunities. Vermont needs to offer a new story of purpose and promise.

With universal high-speed communications, and new models of digital entrepreneurship and online civic democracy, Vermont can be the among the best places to live and work remotely in the country.

By advancing childcare for all, Vermont can build on its high standing for children’s health, safety and, with our reputation as a mecca for outdoor recreation, boldly make the claim that it is the most family friendly state in the union.

Standing against racism, and for social and racial justice and equity, and welcoming immigrants can dynamically grow Vermont’s diversity, workforce, economy and cultural creativity.

Advancing food and forest systems and local clean energy, promoting smart growth, and encouraging youth in leadership can mark Vermont as a dynamic destination for creative and purpose-driven young people.

We can tell the story of Vermont as the most business-friendly place in the country for enterprises that enhance our working landscape and natural environment, support our communities, and create solutions to produce a sustainable future. Vermont is fertile ground, right now, for business creation, development, and success.

By prioritizing growth of the climate economy – building businesses that address climate challenges – we can attract purposive youth, a new generation of entrepreneurs, and new economic opportunities for thousands of Vermonters.

Any marketing brand begins as a story you tell yourself. The external brand and marketing of Vermont follows from our internal story – who are we and where are we going. The Vermont Proposition proposes that together our story is of reinvented progress, built on our best ideals and values, dedicated to our next and future generations, a story we hold based on our hopes, common faith and commitment, and carried forward in hard work, and in marketing the state as a destination and model for an innovative new ruralism. With government, communities, and businesses in partnership, Vermont can rebuild and remarket itself as a center for rural renewal and resilience, building opportunity for all, and modeling ways forward for rural America.

The Vermont Proposition Initiative is produced by the **Vermont Council on Rural Development**.



**Vermont Council on Rural Development**

Unleashing the power of Vermonters to create a better future

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