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What do today's state trends say about tomorrow?

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The nonpartisan Council on the Future of Vermont made news last week by releasing a report warning that the state's lack of diversity may endanger its growth.

Noting that dairy totals nearly 80 percent of agricultural sales, for example, the study says "putting all your eggs in one basket' is always a risky proposition."

In contrast, the report itself — "Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends," written by the Center for Social Science Research at Saint Michael's College in Colchester — serves up a full menu of findings about life in the state.

Don't have time to digest all 160 pages, available on the council's Web site, www.futureofvermont.org? Here's a synopsis of its top trends:

Population

Vermont has a low growth rate but is "unusually well educated."

Its "somewhat older profile" is intensified by low birth rates.

Native-born numbers are steadily declining.

Fewer residents are marrying or in "traditional" families.

Environment

Average temperatures and precipitation totals are up.

Moose and deer populations are growing.

Air quality has "improved slightly."

Solid waste has increased but recycling hasn't.

Sulfur oxides (a byproduct of fossil-fuel burning) are down, but acid rain isn't.

Phosphate contamination is stable or up in Lake Champlain yet down in major

tributaries.

Mercury levels are up in Lake Champlain and, in Vermont's section of the Connecticut River, higher than in other states.

Land use

Rural acreage is down, especially cropland and pastures.

The rate of land development has exceeded that of population growth.

Agriculture

The number of dairy farms is down, with those remaining growing larger.

Organic dairy farms and small non-dairy farms are up.

Fewer Vermonters are working on farms, replaced by more undocumented laborers. Employment is up in food manufacturing and processing, support services and marketing.

Forests

Forestland is up, but the rate of growth is slowing and reforestation is geographically uneven.

Vermont's forests are largely privately owned, more fragmented and therefore harder to manage.

Pulp and softwood harvests are down; hardwood harvests show only "very modest" long-term growth.

Furniture manufacturing, paper production and other forest-related jobs are down.

Economy

Foreclosures have increased significantly, but the rate is one of the nation's lowest.

More are finding jobs in retail, professional services and government; fewer in manufacturing.

Health care is an "increasingly important" source of jobs. Some are "the very best jobs," but many offer little occupational advancement or stability.

Niche companies tied to Vermont's quality of life or "brand" are up. One of the more unusual: the captive insurance market ("in-house" coverage on the assets and risks of a parent company), where the state is a national leader.

Many of Vermont's best jobs are tied to exports. While those to Canada dominate, ones to Asia are growing in importance.

Many jobs created in the past 20 years pay less than state averages. Those that pay more require advanced training. High-paying jobs are decreasing for people with limited formal education.

Tourism numbers are flat or growing slowly.

Artist numbers are up slightly but the size of the "cultural workforce" is the same.

The rising percentage of working women is above national levels.

The gap between the rich and poor is growing, but considerably less than nationally.

Affordability

The gap between earnings and a state-defined "basic needs budget" is growing.

Burlington's cost of living (the state's only tracked area) has increased more rapidly than national numbers.

More are relying on food stamps and federally classified as being hungry.

Vermont ranks among the higher taxed states, but its tax structure lessens the impact for lower-income payers.

Housing prices are rising faster than income, but the percentage of owner-occupied housing is higher than the national average.

Energy

Energy use has risen at a rate greater than the nation's, but per capita use is "well below" U.S. numbers.

Individual electric use is down, but overall demand up due to more customers.

Carbon emissions are up despite conservation efforts.

Infrastructure

Vermonters are registering more vehicles and driving more miles. Air travel is up dramatically, while bus and train travel has risen more moderately.

The percentage of roads in need of repair is higher than the national average, but that in "mediocre or poor condition" is down.

A high proportion of bridges are in "critical" and "poor" condition due to deferred maintenance.

Education

K-12 student numbers are down, with Chittenden County holding steady and the rest of the state slipping.

Although low compared to national averages, the number of minority and non-English-speaking students is up.

K-12 personnel totals and spending per student is up, while student-teacher ratios and K-12 dropout rates are down.

K-12 testing shows "modest student improvements."

The percentage of female college students is up while the percentage of males is down. Women now receive the majority of advanced degrees.

More high school graduates are continuing their studies outside Vermont, yet the state imports more college students per capita than any other except Rhode Island.

Health

Birth rates are down significantly among women of all ages, but those who aren't married are having more children.

Fewer people are smoking and more using seatbelts, but binge drinking "remains a persistent problem" and obesity and diabetes are now widespread concerns.

Crime

Vermont has one of the nation's lowest crime rates. Property offenses and homicides are down, but other violent actions are up slightly.

The incarceration rate has increased dramatically, with the prison population becoming more diverse.

Civic Engagement

Charitable giving is significantly lower than in most states, although Vermonters have high rates of volunteering compared to the rest of the nation.

Surveys of overall "quality of life" report more continuity than change but reveal "decreased optimism."
