
Being part of Vermont's and The Valley's future

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By Bob Ackland Is The Valley a picture of Vermont? If you want to know for sure take the time to hear or read the just released findings of the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV). As a board member of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD), the initiator of the Council on the Future of Vermont 18 months ago, I have had the pleasure of getting a sneak preview of "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future." I have found the findings inspiring, conflicting and thought provoking. Much like conversations I have heard at town meetings, select board meetings, MRVPD meetings, DRB meetings, chamber meetings and just general conversations in The Valley, people across our state echo our concerns and hopes. The difference in my mind is how the information was accumulated, distilled and presented.

Historically these kinds of studies have taken place in Vermont about once a generation. Statewide conversations took place following the devastation of the 1927 flood, again in the late 1960s when the new interstate highway brought big changes and in 1988, Governor Kunin convened the Commission on Vermont's Future. VCRD initiated the Council on the Future of Vermont based on its experience in working with many individual communities around the state (though none yet in The Valley towns). As common issues (such as global trade patterns, climate change, erosion of cultural traditions and changes in land use patterns) surfaced, the time seemed right to take a statewide look at big picture trends, evaluate the opportunities and challenges ahead and consider common Vermont priorities.

VCRD was the perfect convener of this work. This nonprofit organization is known for its work in nonpartisan policy research and collaborative community planning dialog. VCRD was able to facilitate this discussion with a long-term perspective and get participants to think beyond day-to-day politics.

IMPORTANT ASPECT

One of the most important aspects of the CFV work was that it made sure that it talked to all types of people in gathering information. It did not just talk to planners, legislators and executive directors of nonprofits. It talked to veterans, social service providers and recipients, artists, business owners and employees, students and teachers, emergency service providers, farmers, downtown associations and even spent a day at one of the state's correctional institutions talking with inmates. CFV held meetings in factories, places of business, churches, schools, and town halls to reach voices not often heard. Over 4,000 people participated in these direct discussions, another 1,500 were surveyed by phone and others participated online. CFV further enlisted the University of Vermont and Saint Michaels College for research. The Center for Social Science Research at Saint Michael's College published a study, "Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends," as part of this overall work.

The output of all this effort is the articulation of a comprehensive picture of the values, concerns and aspirations of Vermonters as they consider the future of the state. Notably, the findings include a section of the values we share as a people and a vision of how our communities, economy, landscape and quality of life might be a generation from now.

FINDINGS

The findings will be shared with all of us on May 11 during a Summit on the Future of Vermont at the Dudley Davis Center at UVM in Burlington. This will not just be a presentation of the findings but a discussion

of what the next steps might be and what we, as Vermonters, do with this incredible assemblage of information. There will be breakout sessions on energy, education, agriculture, land use and many others allowing us as individuals to be engaged in shaping our future.

"Imagining Vermont" was released at the State House April 9 for legislators, other elected officials, administrative leaders and Supreme Court Justices. It's online, along with summit registration and program details, at www.futureofvermont.org.

The Mad River Valley is unique in many ways, but as this report shows Vermonters have a lot in common.

Bob Ackland, Warren, is a board member and treasurer of Vermont Council on Rural Development and was formerly president of Summit Ventures NE LLC, owner and operator of Sugarbush Resort.