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Study: Bright future for Vermont

*By Dan McLean
Free Press Staff Writer*

In 20 years, Vermont will be more affordable, more energy self-sufficient, have better public transportation and will offer more economic opportunity.

At least that's the vision set out in a new report on the state's future.

After 18 months of gathering input from nearly 4,000 Vermonters, the Council on the Future of Vermont presented its findings Monday, marking the "midway point" of the study.

The report's conclusions are divided into six categories: the Vermont community; the Vermont economy; youth and education; Vermont's landscape and natural resources; health, transportation and public safety; and Vermont's civic culture.

Now comes the hard part: Putting the ideas to work.

"These are really calls to action," Sarah Waring, program manager for the Council on the Future of Vermont, said of the report's bullet points. The report is titled, "Imagining Vermont: Values and vision for the future."

The Council on the Future of Vermont, a project of Vermont Council on Rural Development, will take the action plans developed in breakout sessions Monday afternoon to public forums throughout state later this month, Waring said.

"There is an ideal of Vermont that helps unite us," the report said. "Unfortunately, the ideal does not always coincide with reality.

"Many expressed deep concern that the facts and ideal of Vermont are diverging. If not addressed, the discrepancy between our vision for Vermont and the challenges we face -- such as decaying infrastructure, increasing incarceration rates, and decreased affordability of housing ... can lead to the destruction of what we say we love most about the state."

Aside from broad recommendations such as "building a Vermont economic strategy," one of the specific recommendations in the report is to increase participation in Town Meeting Day by allowing Vermonters to vote by cell phone and participate through the Internet. "Bring town meeting into the 21st century," said Paul Costello, executive director of the Council on Rural Development.

The report's suggestions also include "an efficient public transportation system" and "using and protecting the Vermont brand." It recognizes the difficult times some Vermonters are now facing. As the national recession drags on, the state unemployment rate hit 7.2 percent in March. The Labor Department estimates 25,800 Vermonters were unemployed, nearly 10,000 more Vermonters jobless since one year earlier.

Each of the 18 members of the Council on the Future of Vermont spoke for a few minutes Monday about the findings before a crowd of about 500 people at University of Vermont's Davis Center. Then former prime minister of Ireland, Garrett FitzGerald, praised the group's effort and made suggestions

about how Vermont could mimic the economic boom Ireland experienced in the 1990s during his keynote speech; Ireland, he acknowledged, is also experiencing a bust in the wake of the housing bubble and credit crunch.

"I was very struck by Vermonters' strong belief that we could innovate our way out of any problem," Charlie Smith, president of Snelling Center for Government and a council member, said during his remarks.

Francis Voigt, president and CEO of New England Culinary Institute, along with former Rep. Richard Mallary, added a dose of reality to visions presented by the other panelists.

Voigt ticked off the "hard facts we deal with:" Vermont has the smallest gross product of any state, the ninth highest cost of living, one in 10 Vermonters living in poverty, a growing number of residents on food stamps and in homeless shelters and "one of the best educated populations" in the country, but wages "just approaching the U.S. average."

Mallary, a former Republican congressman and Douglas' first tax commissioner, said the study has "real and lasting value," but cautioned the hundreds who attended and the panel to "be realistic about what is obtainable."

Sharon Murray, 51, of Bolton, attended the presentation. During the lunch break, she praised the effort, but shared some concerns.

"I think it's a great study. A great effort. ... But the challenge is definitely how to move on from here -- and whether it will get buy-in from the people that will affect change," Murray said.

"How do we turn this vision over the next 20 years into a reality. That's the tough part," she said, noting when visions become specific "tensions come up."

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By the numbers

- 3,900: More than 3,900 people contributed ideas to the Council on the Future of Vermont for the "Imagining Vermont" report.
- 18: Number of months spent creating the report.
- 14: Workshops will held to gain input from Vermonters on the action plan starting later this month.
- 5: This is the fifth such report conducted in Vermont exploring the direction of the state since 1927. Other findings were created by the Vermont Commission on Country Life, 1927; Vermont Planning Council, 1968; Governor's Commission on Environmental Control, 1969; Governor's Commission on Vermont's Future, 1987. • ON THE WEB: www.futureofvermont.org

Additional Facts

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