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## 'Imagining Vermont'

### Can state's future bring freedom and unity?

By KEVIN O'CONNOR Staff Writer

Surveying residents from northernmost Alburgh to southernmost Vernon, the Council on the Future of Vermont found on-the-spot agreement: Everyone loves the state. They just differ on same-sex marriage. And issues of the environment vs. the economy. And school spending vs. the needs of seniors. And the value of natives vs. newcomers.

"One clear idea that emerged from the thousands of conversations that the council held," members report, "is the need to find balance points between, on the one hand, the complex working out of community needs and engagement, and on the other hand the freedom of individuals."

The nonprofit, nonpartisan council had good reason to hold more than 100 meetings throughout the state to determine that. Once each generation, a similar group has asked Vermonters about the future - and reaped results.

The Vermont Commission on Country Life, formed after the disastrous flood of 1927, funneled its discussions into a report that called for the creation of the state police and enlargement of the state Board of Education.

In 1968, the state's first modern Democratic governor, Philip Hoff, chaired the Vermont Planning Council whose "Vision and Choice - Vermont's Future" study helped spur the pioneering Act 250 land-use law.

In 1988, the state's first female governor, Madeleine Kunin, created the Governor's Commission on Vermont's Future that sparked the Act 200 growth management law.

The latest study group, established by the Vermont Council on Rural Development, has spent the past 18 months surveying almost 4,000 experts and everyday folk. To share its findings, the council will gather 500 leaders for a summit in Burlington on Monday, then travel to each of the state's 14 counties this spring, summer and fall with copies of its new report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future."

The 112-page study - available on the Web site [www.futureofvermont.org](http://www.futureofvermont.org) - is a connect-the-dots book of statistics and suggestions. Fact: Vermont, whose population is 96.1 percent Caucasian, is the nation's "whitest state." Fact: Whites have a lower birth rate than other racial groups, which, in turn, is shrinking the state's growth. Recommendation: The Green Mountains should consider ways to embrace a greater spectrum of color.

The rest of the report is equally thought-provoking. But will anyone read or respond to

it?

### 'Conflicted' goals

The 18-member council hopes so. Made up of representatives from such diverse groups as the Snelling Center for Government, Preservation Trust of Vermont, New England Culinary Institute and RU12? gay and lesbian community center, it's proposing ideas to help the economy, environment, taxpayers, young people and, as outlined in this first story of a series, community and civic life.

"Vermonters are conflicted about the goals of progress," the council writes in its report, "yet united in wanting to see positive movement forward, while avoiding the destruction of Vermont's cultural values and community."

At first glance, residents have much in common, according to a council-commissioned study, "Vermont in Transition," by the Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College in Colchester.

Vermont's population of 621,000 - smaller than any state except Wyoming - is "racially homogeneous," with only 23,500 identifying themselves as black, Hispanic, native American, Asian, Pacific islander or multiracial (that 3.9 percent minority compares with 25.9 percent nationally) and only 5 percent speaking a language other than English at home (versus 20 percent nationally).

With the nation's lowest proportion of residents in municipalities of 2,500 or more (38.2 percent), Vermont is the most "rural" of the 50 states. More of its residents feel safe in their neighborhoods (84 percent versus 41 percent nationally) and trust those around them (71 percent versus 34 percent nationally). And Vermont often tops national lifestyle lists such as the most recent United Health Foundation's "America's Health Rankings" and Earthsense Eco-Insights' "America's Greenest States."

Even so, the forecast is cloudy. The number of residents who believe life in the state is "getting better" has fallen from 35 percent in 1990 to 19 percent, while those who feel it's "getting worse" rose from 30 percent to 37 percent, the council reports. Researchers attribute part of that drop to Vermonters' decreasing sense of job security and satisfaction with wages and amount of leisure time. But they cite geographic tremors, too.

### 'True vs. ideological'

"Vermonters have a strong sense of identification with the state," the council writes in its report, "yet often hold to one of two very distinct senses of their personal identity: citizens often classify themselves as 'Vermonters' or 'newcomers.'"

Touring the state in the fall of 2007 and the winter, spring and summer of 2008, the council sought opinions through public meetings, polling and its Web site. Before speaking, one resident prefaced his comments: "I've only lived in Vermont for 27 years, but ..."

He wasn't alone. Native-born residents, the council discovered, often dismiss transplanted families.

Said one meeting participant: "Just because your cat had kittens in the oven doesn't make them biscuits."

And another: "As folks move in from the outside, they want to bring what they left."

The council's report springs at least one surprise on natives: The number of residents born in Vermont is declining. In 1960, about 75 percent were born here. Today that figure is around 50 percent - "there are more Vermonters who were born elsewhere than were born here," the council asserts - while the percentage of people moving to the state is higher than anywhere else in New England.

Even so, the council repeatedly heard Vermonters blame newcomers for bringing an increasing cost of living, changing regulations and higher taxes.

Not all complained about "flatlanders." Some noted divisions based on income. "There are two Vermonts," said one Randolph resident, "the people who choose to come or to stay here, and those who cannot afford to leave."

Others referred to splintering between Chittenden County - with a quarter of the state's population - and regions such as southern Vermont, the Upper Valley, Champlain Islands and Northeast Kingdom.

The council heard from a resident in Burlington: "Vermont is Chittenden County and then the rest. We need to address the fact that this split exists and figure out the challenge and the opportunity."

And someone from Jay: "Vermont is what the USA used to be; the Northeast Kingdom is what Vermont used to be."

And White River Junction: "In the Upper Valley, the border disintegrates with New Hampshire. There's a multi-state feel."

One newcomer described the state's population as "true Vermonters versus ideological Vermonters." To him, "they need to be integrated."

'In-between territory'

The council goes a step further, calling for the state to ensure its growth by embracing more people of various colors and cultures.

"Because racial and ethnic diversity has not historically been an issue in the state, some Vermonters emphasize the need to build relationships and put plans in place now that will welcome and celebrate changing demographics," it writes in its report. "Although there is no consensus on how to take action to affect population issues, Vermonters seem united on these specific challenges and concerns."

The call for diversity comes three-quarters of a century after the Vermont Commission on Country Life, seeking more homogeneity, encouraged "every normal couple" to give birth to "good old Vermont stock." (Specifically, "six children to a family.") But recent discord over same-sex marriage shows how the state can struggle with issues of difference.

"It's time Vermonters get over some of our feelings of division - natives and 'flatlanders,' rural and urban, Chittenden County and the rest of Vermont," the council writes. "By recognizing our differences and celebrating the positive resources contributed by the diverse membership of the Vermont community, we will act more effectively together to address the challenges ahead."

Specifically, the council recommends:

- Restructuring and simplifying regional territories for state government services to make "resource sharing, decision making and long-term planning more rational, effective, and efficient."
- Affirming the tradition of town meeting while embracing technological advances such as Web casts and cell-phone voting to "inform citizens and directly engage their participation in civic and community life."

The council knows those two goals will be a challenge.

"One Vermonter described the paradox of local control versus regional efficiency in government; he claimed that the old joke 'you can't get there from here' sums up some of the local attitude that undermines cooperation between towns, regions, and the state."

Gov. James Douglas, for example, wants Vermont to be the nation's first "e-state" - with universal cellular and broadband coverage - by 2010. But more than half of its 251 municipalities choose to count election ballots by hand rather than use an electronic scanner - even when paid for by the secretary of state's office.

The council points to a Pew Center study on governance that questions the state's ambitious attempts to change the world - it notes recent local and legislative efforts to fight global warming - while employing an "obsolete" computer system for child welfare services.

"Vermont is a national leader in handling small discrete issues and huge global ones," the Pew study says. "It's in that in-between territory that the state tends to fall short."

'An envisioned future'

The council hopes to spark a dialogue to change that.

On Monday, the governor and Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., are scheduled to join 500 local and state leaders in Burlington for a Summit on the Future of Vermont. There,

they'll divide the report into discussion topics - agriculture, clean energy and digital advances are three of 14 subjects - and contemplate next steps.

After, the council will hold public meetings in each of the state's 14 counties this spring, summer and fall in hopes of reaching all Vermonters. It's encouraged by a recent survey in which more than 30 percent of respondents, asked what the state should do first to achieve its goals, call for more civic action.

"Vermonters believe that the state is just the right size to come together, recognize the contradictions and paradoxes inevitable to our society and culture, and still succeed in setting common goals and acting together toward an envisioned future," members write.

The council points to the past, noting Vermont was the first independent state to have a written constitution, to ban slavery, to abolish billboards, adopt a bottle return law and approve same-sex civil unions.

"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," it writes.

The council also cites its own poll that shows 93.6 percent are proud to be Vermonters.

"Protecting culture and community is not just a passive sentiment for Vermonters. Whether newcomer or multigenerational native, Vermonters want to act to maintain the Vermont identity."

Then again, 93.1 percent value a spirit of independence. That's why the council believes the state's motto - Freedom and Unity - is also its challenge. The study group doesn't have answers, just aspirations.

"In Vermont, there is a deep tradition of public involvement in civic life and government," it writes. "Therefore, the responsibility of determining the future of the state falls to the many, not the few."

kevin.oconnor@rutlandherald.com

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