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Survey Looks at Vermont's Future



Burlington, Vermont - May 11, 2009

Some 500 people packed the Davis Center at UVM for a conference billed as the Summit on the Future of Vermont -- the culmination of an 18-month study on the state's challenges and priorities.



"It's a little bit unprecedented in terms of the depth of the questions we asked Vermonters all across the state," said Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, which commissioned the study.

Four thousand Vermonters were interviewed about their long-term goals for everything from education and the environment to energy and the economy. In polls taken even before the recession hit, the top concern was the high cost of living. Could people afford a future here?



"We have a great quality of life, there's a great environment," said Brian Keefe, vice president of Central Vermont Public Service and one of 18 community leaders who served on the Council on the Future of Vermont. "If you can find a way to make a living in Vermont, it's a great place to live."



Keefe says he did not have to look beyond his own family to find proof of the state's high cost of living.

"My brother and his wife, for example, live down in North Carolina," he said. "They hope to return someday. They can make a living in North Carolina; they haven't quite figured that out in Vermont."



The council's research indicated household income has not kept up with the rising costs of health care, housing and education. Businesses reported the high costs of expanding or setting up shop, limiting the growth of new jobs.

"I think part of the penalty we pay as a small state is we do not have the same robust economic opportunities as other places have," Keefe said, "but that's the price you pay in Vermont."

Still, conference organizers were optimistic about the state's future -- taking a cue from the state's past.

"We've had great success in the past," Costello said. "You look at the 1970s when we captured the minds of these key young people, creative people who became entrepreneurs of businesses that range from Gardeners' Supply to Ben and Jerry's to NRG Systems and others, that are driving the economy forward."

The council hopes policy makers and community leaders will use their research as a tool -- how people can work together to achieve the common goal of a thriving Vermont.

The full report is available online at <http://www.futureofvermont.org/>.

[Kate Duffy](#) - WCAX News



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