



Residents in charge of state's future

By **BOB AUDETTE**

BRATTLEBORO -- What Vermonters are most concerned about is universal -- preserving the working landscape, fortifying the unity of their communities, retaining the Vermont "brand," creating local energy sources, making sure their children get the best education, keeping the costs of health care reasonable and being able to afford a home.

While every resident of the Green Mountain State recognizes those challenges, many also ask what exactly can be done to address them?

Though the purpose of the Council on the Future of Vermont, a project of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, was to ask the question about what challenges the state faces, its next task is even harder -- finding solutions.

But first, you have to identify what Vermonters treasure most.

One thing state residents have in favor of them, said Gold, is that "Vermonters are not interested in sitting back and letting things wash over them. They are interested in acting."

The council heard from thousands of Vermonters in its travels around the state over the past 18 months, quizzing them about what worries them the most.

"Many Vermonters talked about the challenges but also saw in those challenges opportunities," said Gold.

Because most Vermonters don't see a "clearly developed and well-articulated economic plan" in the state, said Gold, it's up to the citizens of the Green Mountain State to take the future into their own hands and work together proactively in all aspects of the economy.

"We need to decide what we are for and how we are going to make that happen," he said.

Many Vermonters expressed the need for good jobs in Vermont to keep young people from leaving for greener pastures, where the pay is better and they can afford their own homes.

But not just any kind of good job, he said.

"Good jobs that recognize the value of and preserve the Vermont brand."

Vermonters also expressed a concern that the state is losing its working landscape. At the same time, said Gold, those who work the land "feel disrespected and not valued by their fellow Vermonters."

It's important to support them by encouraging a statewide policy that focuses on expanding food production, transportation and consumption of local products.

And development in Vermont should be focused in the state's downtown areas and not in its farms and forests.

"Let's not allow sprawl to take over and destroy what we love about Vermont," said Gold.

Vermonters are also concerned that the state's civic culture is deteriorating, that many people feel left out of the process because of the increasing complexities involved in their towns and school

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systems.

"Every child should be educated in participatory democracy, Vermont style," said Gold. "Newcomers should be invited into the civil process."

While annual Town Meeting plays an integral part in that process, towns should be using new technology to share information.

"We need to move Town Meeting into the 21st century," said Gold.

And while access to health care needs to be improved in Vermont, said Gold, "It's a national issue. Universal access needs to be part of a national program."

One thing state residents don't want to see is "two Vermonts," he said, made up of "people on the hill and people in the flats," which Gold described as "an economic divide of those who are well-to-do and those who are just getting by."

That concept is antithetical to Vermont's egalitarian notion that we are all in this together.

"Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future" can be found at www.futureofvermont.org.

Using the study, the Vermont Council on Rural Development will begin to develop a plan to address the issues raised by Vermonters, said Sarah Waring, the project director.

Bob Audette can be reached at raudette@reformer.com, or 802-254-2311, ext. 273.

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