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## Balance point

A statewide discussion among Vermonters about the environment and the economy has shown that the quality of the environment — the rural landscape of woods, farms, lakes, rivers — is a value deeply embedded in the identity and hopes of Vermonters. Simultaneously, Vermonters remain worried about economic prospects, particularly during a recession, and the opportunities that may or may not be available for jobs and housing.

The Council on the Future of Vermont conducted a year-and-a-half-long study of the ways that Vermonters view their state in light of their values, fears and hopes. It was a remarkably thorough and inclusive discussion that involved thousands of people from all walks of life who were given the chance to speak their minds.

The degree to which Vermonters cherish the rural setting in which they live is no surprise. A high percentage of us live out in the midst of the woods and fields, and those who live in the towns appreciate the rural settings that enrich their lives just beyond the town line. Vermonters are active in the outdoors for recreation and spiritual renewal, but many also make their living on the land or in the woods. From the old-timer with a worm on the end of his hook to the young high-tech skier with the latest gear, Vermonters cherish what the natural world gives them.

But the pressures of the economy are a reality for Vermonters, too, including those who on the weekend are out fishing or skiing. Lack of affordable housing is a vexing problem, and job opportunities remain relatively limited, compared to the larger world of metropolitan Boston, New York or beyond. Economic growth is a must, and yet it raises disquieting fears about the potential destruction of the natural world.

The council's examination of these seemingly contradictory values — environmental quality and economic growth — revealed a fundamental dynamic of life in Vermont. In decades past similar councils have conducted similar studies and reached similar conclusions about the tension between these values. In that sense, the council's findings showed us something we already knew.

Further, the tension between the environment and the economy has become what amounts to a cliché of Vermont politics. Virtually every candidate of every party extols the environment and at the same time urges responsible growth to provide economic opportunity.

The council's study may have raised expectations that there was a solution to this contradiction — as if there were some law, or program, or code of conduct that could ensure that we could achieve prosperity while maintaining environmental quality.

What the study found instead was that there is no solution. Rather, there is a reality. Environmental consciousness inevitably creates tension, even within individual Vermonters. Thus, controversy about growth, water quality, pollution is not a problem; it is an inevitable consequence of who we are. It is evidence that we care about both our prosperity and our environment.

The council suggested that Vermonters may most usefully aspire to a balance point between our competing values. And we can find that balance point only through vigorous, open, continuing discussion. Those discussions take place in a variety of venues — on civic boards and in state government; on newspapers' op-ed pages; in every discussion that occurs over a cup of coffee at the local diner.

It is encouraging to recognize that continuing discussion of these issues represents not a failure to solve the problem, but the actual process of resolution, day by day, issue by issue. And since the tension we feel between the environment and the economy is a fact of life, we need not view those who disagree with us on a given issue as an enemy. Rather, we are all in it together, working to find that balance point so that we can continue to honor the contradictory values that are so widely shared.

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