

Burlington Free Press
Joel Banner Baird
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For 45 seconds, no one in the small crowd seated in City Hall's Contois Auditorium clamored for a turn at the microphone Thursday evening.

Paul Costello, director of the [Vermont](#) Council on Rural Development, didn't look surprised. He repeated the questions: "What does Vermont mean to you? What common values do we share?"

In advance of the forum, titled Conversations on the Future of Vermont, Costello said the council's statewide effort to gather and sort opinions never stalled for long. "But," he added, "sometimes the simplest questions are the hardest questions."

With only a little more prompting from Costello, the diverse crowd offered up opinions on community, independence, survival, interdependence, pluralism, [enterprise](#), education, housing and safety.

For starters.

Earlier in the day, council staff members held conversations in smaller, more focused gatherings in a dozen venues in Chittenden County, including the Champlain Housing Trust and Big Heavy World, both in Burlington. Comments from the latter's assemblage of music-driven youths kept Sarah Waring, the VCRD's project manager, good and busy.

The future? Full of challenges and opportunities, although not always in that order. Joseph Beaulieu, 26, moved to Burlington from Huntington years ago to forge an eclectic career in music. He hasn't looked back.

"This is an excellent place to start anything," he said.

The downsides to a forward-looking musician in Burlington, Beaulieu said, include gentrification and creative decisions increasingly compromised by the bottom line. He said he plans to stay, to shore up Burlington's growing international reputation for good music.

The bottom line will be an exit ramp for others.

"You have to move out to make it," said Kurstin Reuschel, 21, an upcoming senior at St. Michael's College whose summer internship at Big Heavy World revolves around TUNK, the music collective's blog site. Reuschel, a Colchester native who lives in Essex, said her multimedia chops would probably lead her out of state. But only temporarily: This is home.

"I plan to come back, but it's not an ideal place to start a career," she said. "I need a little time away from Vermont. I need to see what else is out there."

Jim Lockridge, an organizer of Big Heavy World's intern program (as well as the in-house Radiator radio studio and Vermont Music Library) said the Green Mountain State risked brain drain.

"Broadly speaking, there is very little consideration to the concerns of the younger demographic," he said. "That aspect of things too often gets shoved to the side."

But the possible futures are at least being noted, said Catherine Dimitruk a board member of VCRD, who will later help compile the conversations into a narrative.

"People sometimes say the same things in completely different ways; so different that if they were talking to each other they might not even realize it," she said.

More information about the Vermont Council on Rural Development -- and online summaries of county-by-county surveys -- can be found at www.futureofvermont.org.

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In your voice

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This isn't new. My husband is from here but had to leave because there were no jobs after being laid off from GE in the 70s. He is a grad of UVM with technical degree in science. It took the better part of 25 years to return and dozens of resumes sent to VT over the years. He scrubbed toilets and drove trucks to try and stay in VT during that time. Finally he was left with no other choice than to take a job that paid a living wage elsewhere.

We were fortunate because finally a position was found allowing his return. Hard work and the cost of relocation weren't easy. Now retired, the big concern is being taxed out of our modest home. It will kill us both if we have to move again. We sacrificed a lot to move back and secure ourselves here. We are good stewards and don't try to cheat on taxation. Still VT punishes us on everything, our dream to remain retired here is at risk despite financial prudence and discipline. We love VT but VT doesn't love us.