

Burlington Free Press Commentary
Chris Graff
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Speaking in 1931 to the Vermont Commission on Country Life, Vermont Supreme Court Justice Wendell Stafford said, "Of Vermont have many books been written, many pictures painted, many songs sung. Yet who shall say that he has ever really seen Vermont? She cannot be seen or described. She can only be suggested."

Later in the same speech, Stafford said, "It is always a perilous thing to let a Vermonter get started on the subject of Vermont."

As a member of the Council on the Future of Vermont, I appreciate those remarks more today than I did a year ago, when the council began an ambitious project to discover how contemporary Vermonters feel about their state and its future. The council's listening tour has visited 10 of the 14 counties, and Vermonters of all walks of life have spoken passionately about their hopes, their dreams and their fears for the future of Vermont.

Almost universally they have expressed profound pride in being a Vermonter, regardless of whether they have lived here one year or for seven generations. One student at Burr and Burton Academy said, "People are intense about being Vermonters." Implied in that pride is the belief there is something special about being a Vermonter. Vermonters seem to feel that those who live in this state are fundamentally different from people in other states. Asked what Vermont means to them, speakers at the forums and writers on the council's Web site (www.futureofvermont.org) list the state's spirit of independence, its small size, its working landscape, its work ethic, the integrity of its people, the sense of community and the value given to privacy.

Writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote in 1953 that "the life of Vermont men and women has always been colored by the absence of immense numbers of human beings. Our relations with each other have always been individual and personal." The forums have shown respectful interpersonal relations to be an enduring and defining value.

Yet the council fully understands and appreciates that its surveys need to get beyond the stereotypical image of Vermont as a bucolic paradise: "Vermont is what America was" has been a driving sales pitch since the late 1800s. It remains a compelling myth today. The council's in-depth conversations with Vermonters have shown that beyond the facade are divisions and concerns. A farmer in Franklin County said, "Sometimes we believe Vermont doesn't want us here." An elderly man in Rochester wrote on the council's Web site that he would leave Vermont tomorrow if he could sell his [home](#) because "state and local taxes are killing us." Seniors in Franklin County said, "It's not the cost of living; it's the cost of surviving."

Residents young and old worry about lack of opportunities for young people and share distress over a growing gap between high-income and low-income populations. Many

express a concern that the sense of community has been diminished as residents increasingly commute to other communities for employment.

One comment has stuck with me throughout this past year. John Cohn, a fellow at IBM, said, "If people can live anywhere, they will live in the place that speaks to their heart." This is why he chose to live in Vermont. For many Vermonters, Vermont remains a place that speaks to their heart. Our goal as a council is to identify steps to ensure that it always will.

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