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Challenges lie ahead for Vermont, new report warns

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Vermont takes pride in its dairy farms and a population that rates high in national health rankings.

And that could be a problem, the Council on the Future of Vermont warns.

The nonpartisan study group has released a new report, "Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends," that shows the state's lack of diversity may threaten its growth.

With dairy totaling nearly 80 percent of Vermont agricultural sales, for example, "no other state has a single commodity that accounts for such a high percentage," says the report written by the Center for Social Science Research at Saint Michael's College in Colchester.

That's good branding for a state that's home to Ben & Jerry's. But it's bad business when milk prices plummet, as the state's 1,100 struggling dairy farms can attest.

Likewise, Vermont is the nation's "whitest state" (96.1 percent of residents are Caucasian, compared with Maine at 95.2 percent and New Hampshire at 94.8 percent). That homogenous population recently topped the United Health Foundation's "America's Health Rankings 2008." But because whites have a lower birth rate than other racial groups, Vermont's growth rate is decreasing.

"When you look at both sides of these statistics, it's a double-edged sword," the council's Sarah Waring says. "We do have all our eggs in a few baskets. Maybe the answer to change some of these trends is to make Vermont a more diverse state."

The 160-page report released Tuesday is full of varied facts:

Native-born residents are steadily declining and fewer people are marrying or in "traditional" families.

Vermont's rate of land development has exceeded that of its population growth.

The state's crime rate is one of the lowest in the nation, with property offenses and homicides down and other violence up slightly. Even so, its incarceration rate has increased dramatically.

As for the economy, the report says:

The gap between earnings and a state-defined "basic needs budget" is growing.

Health care is an "increasingly important" source of jobs. Although some are "the very best jobs," many offer little occupational advancement or stability.

Housing prices are rising faster than income, but the percentage of owner-occupied housing is higher than the national average.

Tourism numbers are flat or growing slowly.

The rising percentage of working women is above national levels.

The state's environmental report card is equally mixed. Solid waste has increased but recycling ratios haven't. Energy use has risen at a rate greater than the nation's, but per capita use is "well below" U.S. numbers. And carbon emissions are up despite conservation efforts.

As for education, although more of its high school graduates are going to college outside Vermont, the state imports more students per capita than any other except Rhode Island.

"We hear about kids leaving," Waring says, "but it's much more complex than that."

In a concluding chapter on civic engagement, the study found that charitable giving is significantly lower than in most states, although Vermonters have high rates of volunteering compared to the rest of the nation.

The Social Science Research Center also notes that its ongoing "quality of life" surveys show "more continuity than change" — but reveal some "decreased optimism." The number of Vermonters who believe life in the state is "getting better" fell from 35 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2005, while those who say it's "getting worse" rose from 30 percent to 37 percent.

The council, having taken public testimony in each of the state's 14 counties, will release its final report this spring. In the meantime, its trend study can be found on its Web site, www.futureofvermont.org.

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