



Group readies forum results

By JAIME CONE, Reformer Staff

Thursday, March 19 BRATTLEBORO -- As Vermont evolves and the economic climate changes, it seems the need for a broad assessment of the state, along with the values of the people living here, crops up periodically.

The Council on the Future of Vermont was created by the Vermont Council on Rural Development in the fall of 2007 to tackle the challenge of compiling data on a wide range of topics, a process that involved numerous public forums, surveys, and interviews with business and organizations.

One of 14 public forums throughout the state took place in Brattleboro last August.

Now, a year and a half after the project began, the council is preparing to present its findings.

A statewide roll out that will inform the public of the forum results is slated to hit Brattleboro sometime over the course of the summer.

"This bubbled up from the grassroots, and now it's time for it to trickle back down to the grassroots," said Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, Marlboro College president and council member.

There will be a pre-summit meeting open to the public April 9 at the Statehouse from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. A few printed copies of the report will be available at the meeting, and after April 9 it will be available online.

On May 11, the VCRD is hosting an event at the

University of Vermont's Dudley Davis Center to hear Vermonters' reactions to the findings.

McCulloch-Lovell said that the report will be a comprehensive look at Vermonters' opinions regarding controversial issues such as Vermont's future in energy, education and health care.

In addition to the public forums that were held in each region of the state, the council met with about 50 groups across the state, including the Network Against Domestic Violence, the Vermont Hospitality Council, and the Interfaith Council.

About 3,900 people took part in the effort, according to McCulloch-Lovell.

"It's a notable snapshot -- since it was done over 18 months, maybe it's more of a time lapse photo -- of what is valued and celebrated in Vermont, and what people's fears are," said McCulloch-Lovell.

She added, "it will also be a valuable historical document."

The Council is comparing the study to the statewide conversation that took place after the devastation of the Flood of 1927, in the late 1960s when the construction of Interstates 89 and 91 brought big changes to the state's culture and landscape, and again in 1988 under then-Gov. Madeleine Kunin's leadership.

McCulloch-Lovell said that the compilation of the council's findings is unique because of the many layers of research that will be made available to the public.

She said the findings were broken down and organized into very general topics, but anyone who wanted a more in-depth look at a specific issue could dig deeper by looking at the findings of a

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study done by Saint Michael's College.

"Those broad topics should serve as starting points for a lot of other conversations that we hope will turn into action," said Sarah Waring, project director for the Council on the Future of Vermont.

"It's a chance to think about the next steps, design action plans and identify further work to be done," Waring said. "What is so often missing is the chance to step back together and really work together on a project."

"There hasn't been this kind of ubiquitous state-wide conversation on this scale for 20 years," added Paul Costello, executive director of VCRD. "The fact is, we still share a lot as Vermonters. We all share a sense of unity, and that gives us a lot of strength in terms of how we work together in the long-term."

Featured speakers at the will include leaders from within and outside Vermont. The event will also serve as a work session encouraging stakeholders around specific topics to draft action steps and policies that will move the council toward common goals.

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