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The Vermont identity

Vermonters have reverence for the state's rural landscape, and they hope for economic development that will provide jobs and housing for the future.

They cherish their small communities and value their ability to participate, and they cherish the freedom and privacy afforded each individual.

They value heritage, and they value progress.

The final report of the Council on the Future of Vermont, released this week, highlights numerous "balance points" between widely held but apparently contradictory values. The report comes after an extraordinary round of public hearings held in all 14 counties, plus meetings with numerous businesses, organizations and focus groups, all of it designed to hear the myriad viewpoints of Vermonters from all walks of life.

Members of the council were scrupulously open to all, encouraging a range of opinion from which it hoped to draw conclusions about the "realities and trends" at work in the state. The council characterized its work as a report "from Vermonters to Vermonters." It could not resolve the differences and challenges that became apparent after listening to thousands of Vermonters. It did well to highlight shared values, shared worries, shared hopes, and the conflicts inherent in the values that we share.

In a sense, the report examined what it means when we use the word Vermont as an adjective. We think we know what it means when we hear about "the Vermont way" or a "Vermont solution," but do we? At one level it is a cliché, but what is the meaning behind the cliché?

The report confirms what we have long believed: "There is a prevailing sentiment that Vermont is much more than a place. It is a profound idea."

But it is not a simple idea, which is why expression of the idea comes in the form of contradictions. "Vermonters are conflicted about the goals of progress, yet united in wanting to see positive movement forward, while avoiding the destruction of Vermont's cultural values and community," the report says.

Many Vermonters divide themselves between "Vermonters" and "newcomers." But they are united in wanting to maintain the Vermont identity.

An important part of that identity has to do with the people's connection with the land. That Vermonters care about the land is a generalization that cuts across categories. And yet Vermonters also worry that it is too hard for businesses to create the jobs and housing that make it affordable to live here.

The report found that Vermonters have an interest in agricultural and energy innovations that will allow the state to maintain its rural character while becoming a pioneer in technology that allows for progress, independence and self-sufficiency.

Economic pressures are a reality in Vermont — including the costs of housing, health care and education. And yet Vermonters value education and continue to value the small schools that are the centers of their communities and the foundation of their children's future.

The council's report was all the stronger because it did not seek to resolve or paper over Vermonters' conflicting values. The broad scope of its dialogue with Vermonters guaranteed that these conflicts would emerge. As the council said, "There is a continuing tension between Vermonters' desire for a thriving economy with good jobs and modern amenities and their desire for the preservation of Vermont's traditional working landscape and small towns. We are not willing to abandon either."

The council found that the identity of Vermont remains strong and that Vermonters remain proud of their state. The report outlined tensions that have existed for decades, but in drawing these conclusions from the Vermonters of today, the report was able to capture a complex contemporary reality. Awareness of that reality will be essential in shaping a future that remains mindful of the heritage we cherish while fostering the changes that changing times require.
