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Article published May 12, 2009

Summit starts search for state's future

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BURLINGTON – Vermont, said Paul Bruhn of the state's Preservation Trust, "is a great place for the most part — and for the moment. But will we increasingly become Anywhere, USA?"

Gather 500 leaders for a Summit on the Future of Vermont and you might expect to get some answers. On Monday, Bruhn and a wide spectrum of experts instead planted more questions: Can we balance the environment and the economy? Spending for schools and seniors? The needs of natives and newcomers?

"We have a lot of difficult choices ahead of us," Gov. James Douglas told the crowd. "Our future depends on our ability to adapt and grow in a changing world. The goal is to come together and find common ground."

That's why the Republican governor joined socialist Sen. Bernard Sanders and what Bruhn fondly termed a "fairly bizarre collection of characters" from Brattleboro to Burlington at an unusual daylong summit at the University of Vermont.

The nonprofit, nonpartisan Council on the Future of Vermont, having spent 18 months surveying almost 4,000 people at more than 100 local meetings, held Monday's event to launch a statewide discussion of its new report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future."

Participants heard details of the 112-page document — available on the Web site www.futureofvermont.org — before dividing into 14 discussion groups — economic strategy, energy and agriculture drew the most interest — to contemplate next steps.

Sanders, joining the governor as a kickoff speaker, cast his vote for universal health coverage, more renewable energy sources and an end to corporate greed.

"The state of Vermont, one of the very smallest, must accept the responsibility of being a national leader in creating and implementing a new vision of what our nation must become," the senator said. "This country needs new moral and intellectual leadership and it may be our destiny to provide it."

Other people had other priorities. Signups for Monday's summit promised a diverse group, from groSolar co-founder Dori Wolfe to Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant spokesman Brian Cosgrove; Vermont Youth Conservation Corps president Thomas Hark to Community of Vermont Elders executive director Dolly Fleming.

"Not only do we have the challenge of working through the issues," said Steven Gold, retired state deputy secretary of human services, "but also having that conversation in

a civil, instructive and inclusive way."

The 14 discussion groups brainstormed dozens of possible next steps, including creating a "garden in every classroom" program to nurture a new generation of farmers and more downtown senior housing to support both an aging population and community centers. Participants also called for the state to agree to a long-term economic plan and amend its sometimes contradictory land-use regulations.

"Town planners need to learn to say no to inappropriate plans," Peter Espenshade of the Vermont Community Foundation summed up the verdict of his discussion group.

The two dozen people who talked about population diversity suggested that Vermonters share lunch with someone different from themselves.

"It's making diversity and change something personal," council program manager Sarah Waring said.

The 18-member council plans on continuing its conversation this spring, summer and fall at public meetings yet to be scheduled in each of the state's 14 counties.

"All Vermonters have a crucial role in defining the future of our state," said Paul Costello, executive director of the sponsoring Vermont Council on Rural Development. "Today is not a day of revealed truths. The final report is our starting point."

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