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## Invest in our future

George Aiken really was the man with a plan. When he was governor, he took many of the qualities of Vermont he loved and built policy around them. Nearly all of the public policy he solidified had direct affects on farming, agriculture and Vermont's rural heritage.

For decades now, many of those policies have been carried forward (and modified), preserving the quality of life Vermonters covet.

But economies of scale have been unkind to our state over the years, making it harder for people working in agriculture.

The number of farms in Vermont has diminished at a staggering rate; for other areas of agriculture, the struggle has meant adapting and diversifying. The transition has been painful.

It also has changed the "working landscape" of our state, as more farmland has been converted from fields to developments, or has just been allowed to grow over.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development recently released a report indicating that in order to revitalize the state's rural economy and preserve its "working landscape," the state should invest at least \$15 million annually for grants, loans and other initiatives to boost agriculture and forest-product businesses.

The Revitalizing Vermont's Rural Economy campaign is designed to grow the local economy and protect the character of a state beloved for its pastoral landscapes and outdoor recreational opportunities, according to its organizers.

The problems, however, are myriad. The state is cash-strapped. Rebuilding after the devastation left by Tropical Storm Irene is proving expensive, with a price tag of at least \$1 billion. We are in a recession that won't seem to abate. And even if it did, the national economy, and certainly Vermont's, are somewhat unsupportive about fresh initiatives — no matter how noble and forward-thinking.

Paul Costello, executive director of the VCRD, was quoted as saying, "It's the small businesses and farms and forests that make Vermont what it is, and we know that without investment, without action, we won't have it in the future."

He pointed out that "the implications are huge," and could result in Vermont looking more like formerly rural parts of Connecticut, Massachusetts or southern New Hampshire that have since been developed. Costello is correct in his assessment that Vermonters don't want the state to simply be a playground for the rich; instead, they

do want the state to be “an active foundation for local community prosperity.”

The state should keep an eye out for money to put toward further supporting agriculture. But the timing for such a request could not come at a worse time.

Even so, the VCRD report finds that the state should raise at least \$15 million annually to support the Agriculture and Forest Products Development Fund, which would be invested in infrastructure, enterprise development, and designated “Working Lands” conservation and incentives. It is akin to building roads for the state’s agriculture.

The report also suggests adopting a recommendation from the Vermont Blue Ribbon Tax Commission to expand the sales tax to apply to some services. With a broader sales tax base, the group says, the sales tax rate could be reduced and still provide money for the fund.

These are painfully difficult times to put the onus on our state to kick-start an agricultural renaissance.

It has to be done collectively, and even individually.

Agriculture Secretary Chuck Ross lauded the group’s plan, saying it’s “absolutely headed in the right direction” but pointed out, “I don’t have that kind of money.”

Ross said there is still important policy groundwork to prepare for a time when more public money is available, and the group also could seek private grants or donations.

Ross is right. There is money out there, whether it is private grants, donations, and, even more simply, Vermonters buying Vermont-made products.

George Aiken’s thrust was one that kept farms thriving, and the agriculture economy sustainable through care, management, marketing and governance.

We are part of this landscape we find so appealing. It is therefore up to all of us — individually and collectively — to support its future and to safeguard our unique quality of life.

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