

# 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

Vermont Council on Rural Development



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## A New Call to Service

Welcome Friends and Partners!

VCRD is so grateful to our friends, partners, donors, and especially to local leaders of all ages and walks of life who step up to serve their communities. This is especially true as this report goes to press.

Everything has changed—our work plan, our family lives, our economy. Now at VCRD and throughout our society, we are battling COVID-19 and working for a strong recovery, and confronting racism and all its negative ramifications for our society in Vermont, finding our role in the battle to end this scourge on our communities.

2019 saw the Board and Staff of VCRD deeply engaged in towns throughout Vermont—in major Community Visit efforts in Westford, Rockingham, Poultney, Greensboro, Wheelock, Montgomery, and the 4-town region of Royalton, Sharon, Strafford and Tunbridge, and Climate Economy Model Communities efforts in Randolph, Marshfield, Plainfield, and Dorset, and nurturing emerging leaders throughout the state.

We've worked with the Climate Economy Action Team and Partnership, and the Working Lands Partnership and Coalition, to successfully promote policies and investments to advance innovation in Vermont's economy, opportunity for rural Vermonters, and resilience for our communities.

Today, our resilience is tested, and the hearts of Vermonters are careworn as we confront the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout and the racism still experienced by people of color in this country and in our communities. Our commitment to each other, to our communities, and to Vermont is strengthened by this crisis. We rededicate ourselves to the fight against racial injustice, and to supporting the rural families, businesses and communities living today under new stresses.

We cannot choose our time, or choose the problems we face. But in this time, we stand together and we can use our collective power to act toward the health and well-being of all Vermonters. At VCRD, we have had to postpone community convenings in Barre, Barton, Mendon, Bradford and Milton and put future gatherings on hold. We have stepped up to help coordinate local COVID-19 Response and Mutual Aid Teams throughout Vermont. We are convening resource providers to help coordinate response efforts, and we are helping to lead the work on the Governor's community recovery task force to make sure recovery reaches all Vermonters.

We are also managing processes to look beyond the crisis to the future of our state, to set and advance cornerstone goals for the renewal of rural communities and for a just, fair, and resilient Vermont that actualizes the best of our assets and opportunities.

We will need your help, your partnership, and your leadership more than ever.

It is the challenges we face that provide meaning to our lives, and it is in striving for the collective good that we realize the best in ourselves and in our communities. As proud Vermonters, we have a lot of ideals and a history of sacrifice to live up to, and a growing consciousness of the need to come together to rebuild, renew, and revitalize Vermont, refresh our ideals of justice and fairness, and rededicate ourselves to fulfilling them. We are eager and honored to partner with you in the work ahead.

Paul Costello,  
VCRD Executive Director

Ted Brady,  
VCRD Board Co-Chair

Megan Camp,  
VCRD Board Co-Chair

# Board Member Profiles

## Interview with Aly Richards



### **What is your "day job?"**

I am the CEO of Let's Grow Kids, a non-profit with the mission of securing affordable access to high-quality childcare for all who need it in Vermont by 2025. We set our sights on childcare because we wanted to work on something that would have a lasting impact on the state, and childcare is really a root

cause issue for economic and workforce development, and so many other issues facing the state. This dovetails with why I'm so excited to be a VCRD board member: to be part of a larger movement committed to community solutions for rural Vermont that has a track record of success working authentically in communities.

### **How did you wind up on VCRD's board?**

I actually remember the exact moment. I was on maternity leave, walking my 2- or 3-month-old identical twins through downtown Montpelier, when I got the call from Paul asking me if I would like to be a voice for early childhood education on the board. I almost immediately said yes. In a time-consuming job like mine, with two kids, you really have to balance your time, and there are very few things I would prioritize, but this was absolutely one of them. I think VCRD is uniquely situated to be an engine for a thriving Vermont, and I have been so impressed over the years by my interactions with them and by seeing how authentically and deeply the council is able to work with communities and lift them up to be the masters of their own destinies.

### **How would you describe VCRD's approach to community convening and to public policy?**

It's not over-bearing, it's not forceful, it's not even over-staffed. It's sort of good-old fashioned grit and common sense, from the size of the organization with its outsized impact on channeling energy and leadership within communities, to your ability to really bring together a true cross section of local people. It really feels like the community visit conversations tap into the life blood of local communities and draw out people's hopes and dreams in ways that are actionable. I have seen some real products come out of the community visit priorities.

### **What do you see as a major challenge for Vermont in the upcoming year, and how do you think VCRD is positioned to contribute to a solution?**

We all knew that Vermont faced some serious challenges before this all started. With COVID-19, we've all had front row seats to just how stark the fault lines in our society are, which really puts the issues we were facing into the crucible. Now it's on us to rebuild better and I think we can do it, because we've been given a sight of just how differently we need to do business, as well as the permission to think that way. I think VCRD is uniquely positioned to support Vermonters in helping us coalesce around what those challenges exactly are, and in giving us a vehicle to let communities drive the reinvention of Vermont.

### **What's VCRD's best-kept secret?**

I think the best kept secret is how much work happens on a shoe-string budget. It's incredible to see the scope of the work, really the entirety of Vermont, that gets affected by the work of VCRD on such a modest budget.

## Tribute to Paul Bruhn

The brilliant, irrepressible, irresistible Paul Bruhn, one of Vermont's most effective leaders and beloved citizens, passed away in September 2019. In addition to being the founder and Executive Director of the Preservation Trust of Vermont, Paul was a giant in the field of historic preservation and community development, and a key leader on the VCRD Board who will be greatly missed. Paul was the magic catalyst and kind orchestrator who galvanized countless community development and historic restoration projects across Vermont—over 1,500 at last counting—and inspired and encouraged community leaders like no one in his generation of Vermont patriots of place.

Paul served on our Board of Directors for 8 years, and was our Secretary at the time of his passing. To the board, and wherever he went, Paul brought humor, deep counsel, teasing banter, and the last word—always encouraging, empowering and bringing out the best in everyone around him. With VCRD, Paul had been a member of the VT Council on Culture and Innovation which built the idea of a framework and mission for the creative economy in

Vermont; he later served as a member of the Council on the Future of Vermont and worked for the VT Working Lands Coalition. In 2017, VCRD recognized Paul's greatness with the Vermont Lifetime Leadership Award celebrating his transformational role in historic preservation and community development in Vermont.



We will miss Paul's admonitions and his laughter; his deep seriousness and joy in life. Impossible though it may be, all of us here at VCRD will strive to live up to Paul—his model of service, love of place, kindness and humor, and dedication to all the people of Vermont.

# Community



## Community Visits

**Neutral platform for communities to come together to identify goals and opportunities, select top priorities for action, foster and engage local leadership, and connect to state, federal, private, and non-profit resources to move ideas to action.**

The **Our 4-Town Future Community Visit** was a unique and dynamic process that brought together over 320 voices from across 4 town – **Royalton, Sharon, Strafford, and Tunbridge** – to chart a collective, coordinated, and connected vision and action plan for the future. Residents of the region decided on 3 priorities for the future. Task forces are working today to: move forward on housing, with a focus on senior housing; develop comprehensive economic development strategies and business supports and networking in the region; and expand public land for both conservation and recreation.

The **“Poultney Comes Together”** process launched in response to the closing of Green Mountain College. Over 250 residents came together to consider steps they could take, in partnership with the town and village, to respond to the challenge and advance positive steps in community and economic development to improve the prospects ahead. Five priority directions were established and groups formed to expand trails, biking and outdoor recreation opportunities as an economic driver for Poultney’s future; develop a Poultney co-working space and incubator for new start-up

businesses, and invite newcomers to the town; develop a bank; improve broadband infrastructure; and boost Poultney downtown.

The **“Greater Greensboro”** process brought together over 180 Greensboro residents who set priorities and created volunteer task forces to build community wastewater infrastructure; improve community walkability and bike-ability; address water quality and lake protection; and improve broadband and cell service. Task forces are working today towards grant applications to review feasibility and options for wastewater infrastructure, connecting to a regional communications union district to advance regional broadband, developing a downtown Wi-Fi network, and taking steps towards improving pedestrian and bike safety in the Village Center.

VCRD facilitated two sessions in **Westford** to identify priorities and build action plans to move forward. Task forces are forming and work is underway to boost economic development and broadband connection; advance the arts and community events; and improve traffic safety, walkability and bike-ability.

## Looking Ahead

VCRD continues to support the work of task forces formed through past Community Visits. However, with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, VCRD’s work has shifted toward supporting Vermont communities as they respond to local needs and plan for economic recovery efforts ahead. Community response and mutual aid efforts are in full swing across the state as folks step up to support local needs. VCRD is honored to be serving them by convening weekly video chats, compiling best practices into a toolkit, and coordinating connections to regional, state, and federal resources. Though communities are not able to gather in person today, the importance of community strength and resilience is as strong as ever.

## Spotlight ► West Burke Revitalization

On July 11th 2017, Burke residents from all parts of town and all walks of life packed the Burke Town School for a performance by the local Bald Mountain Boys and a school-sponsored community barbeque. The room was buzzing with excitement and potential; excitement around the chance to highlight and celebrate the town's many assets, and the potential to build on these assets and seize the next stage opportunities for unity, community connection, and prosperity. Over the next months, over 150 community members came together for a series of public forums designed to set priorities for the future that spawned three strategic task forces with a membership of over 60 people.

Three years later, the town is still pushing ahead with the priorities identified through the One Burke Community Visit process, several of which have led to unexpected partnerships and new opportunities. The Village Infrastructure Revitalization and Trails and Transportation task forces have been particularly active, and have developed strong working relationships with the local Selectboard, Kingdom Trails and the Burke Area Chamber of Commerce. Together they have worked to secure a number of funding opportunities, many of which are focused on West Burke, a socially and economically distinct area that was identified in the Community Visit process as a priority spot for redevelopment.

They received a Municipal Planning Grant from the ACCD to help fund an economic development study and community visioning process in West Burke, an effort which has leveraged additional funding from the Vermont Community Foundation, Northern Border Regional Commission, Kingdom Trails, and the Chamber of Commerce. Other successes have included a comprehensive drinking and wastewater study for the village, the construction of a single-track mountain bike trail connecting West Burke and Burke Hollow, and the hosting of annual community gatherings to celebrate the groups' progress and gather feedback from the community.

And they're not done yet. "We are partnering with community members and the school to plan and complete needed projects in Burke such as: a food pantry in West Burke; beautification projects such as painting fences, planting, and mulch spreading at parks and playgrounds; and more traffic calming signs for West Burke and Burke Hollow," says Desiree Hertz, a Burke local who chaired the 2017 Community Visit process.



*"The VCRD Community Visit in 2017 was an energizing process that helped launch some productive conversations in Burke. Throughout this process, all participants' ideas and voices were included, thanks to expert facilitation."*

*-Desiree Hertz, "One Burke"  
Community Visit Chair*



VCRD is grateful for our partnership with the Vermont Community Foundation (VCF) in our Community Visit program through their "Closing the Opportunity Gap" initiative. VCF is devoted to the progress of VT Communities and provides significant resources to community projects throughout the state.

# Community



## Climate Economy Model Communities Program

**Helping Vermont communities rally citizens together to identify and implement action ideas that increase economic prosperity and reduce carbon emissions.**

While formal VCRD support for efforts in **Randolph** came to a close in spring of 2019, the Randolph Region Re-Energized (R3) initiative still supports two task forces pushing forward with positive work focused on energy opportunities and economic revitalization.

**Swanton** had a tremendously successful collaboration with Efficiency Vermont and Vermont Gas Systems, providing over 100 home energy visits and bringing the high efficiency modular home for a stay on the Swanton Green.

The process in **Marshfield/Plainfield**, named Revitalizing All Marshfield and Plainfield (RAMP) attracted nearly 150 participants and resulted in 4 task forces focused on the two village centers, a local food network, transportation, and energy. Particularly successful has been a collaboration with Efficiency Vermont delivering major incentives for energy improvement work at Twinfield School, and additional investments at Twin Valley Senior Center and the Plainfield Town Hall and Opera House.

In **Dorset**, 120 people gathered at the Dorset School to kick off the process with forums and a delicious locally sourced meal. "Dorset Tomorrow" consists of four task forces working on increasing affordable housing and attracting new residents, building community unity, transforming Dorset's energy usage & generating more electricity locally, and improving Dorset's transportation options.

## Climate Catalysts Program

At the end of 2019 VCRD launched the **Climate Catalysts Program** designed to provide leadership and project support to a cohort of local leaders working on climate initiatives in their communities. 45 Vermonters from all corners of the state applied for the program and a great group of 12 were selected. They have been gathering in-person and virtually as they provide mutual support with implementation of local projects.



## Profile ► Laurel Green

In the fall of 2019, the Town of Rockingham, including Bellows Falls and Saxtons River, participated in VCRD's Community Visit Program. Named "Let's Take Action Rockingham," the effort attracted hundreds of area residents for robust discussions about what makes this community great and where there are opportunities to make it even better. Along with building a youth center and redeveloping Bellows Falls buildings, the community decided that advancing community energy, efficiency, and resiliency is a key priority for the future of Rockingham.

Laurel Green stepped forward to lead the task force, now named Sustainable Rockingham, and with the support of many local volunteers and staff at the Vermont Council on Rural Development, she is off to a great start. Just as the community visit process was coming to a close, Laurel was selected to join VCRD's Climate Catalysts Leadership Program. She has joined this cohort of 11 other leaders from all corners of Vermont working to engage their community as they push forward with local climate and energy initiatives. Through in-person and virtual sessions and one-on-one connections, Laurel and the other members of this group are able to gain insights, share learning, and find opportunities for collaboration.

As with many members of the Climate Catalysts, and community leaders more generally, Laurel and her team have shifted some of their work towards response to Covid-19. As one of the leaders of Rockingham's efforts, she helped to establish the Rockingham Help and Helpers, a collaboration working to connect those in need with those who have something to share. Laurel and dozens of others building similar local mutual aid efforts have participated in weekly VCRD calls to hear from resource providers and fellow organizers and to share learning and best practices. For VCRD, leaders like Laurel who dedicate deep thought and boundless energy to their service, are the most essential ingredient in community success. Across our programs we work to unleash the power of these leaders to get great things done.



*"I care deeply about my community, and even before the 'Let's Take Action Rockingham' process I had decided that I was ready to invest time and energy towards Rockingham's success. VCRD's community visit helped to refine our town's focus. And now, the Catalysts Program and the Covid-19 community organizer meetings are a source of both tangible advice, expertise, and networking. The mutual support and group learning that comes from these programs is essential for me as I collaborate with others to help my community grow into these uncharted times ahead."*

*-Laurel Green, Chair, Sustainable Rockingham*

# Leadership



## 2019 Vermont Community Leadership Summit

### Local Leadership for the Future of Vermont Communities

Over 500 local leaders working to improve life in their communities came together at the 2nd Annual VT Community Leadership Summit to follow up on action and progress since the 2018 Summit, hear inspiring stories of community success, access skills to support community initiatives, engage in envisioning the future of Vermont leadership, and connect to leadership resources.

## Leadership Awards

**Celebrate Vermonters who exemplify “dedication, integrity and honorable service to community and to rural Vermont,” and who have had a “transformational” effect on their communities.**

### 2019 Lifetime Leadership Award: Gus Seelig



The *Lifetime Leadership Award* was presented to Gus Seelig, Executive Director of the VT Housing & Conservation Board. Under his leadership, VHCB has invested \$370 million in state funding to develop or rehabilitate 13,000 affordable homes, conserve 740 farms comprising 167,000 acres, and 267,600 acres

of natural areas and recreational and forest lands, and restore 71 historic community buildings. Gus embodies for so many of us many of the best ideals as Vermonters—conservation of the land married to strong town centers, and housing with dignity for all members of the VT community. Gus is a collaborative engineer and peerless champion of the people, buildings and land of VT.

### Vermont Community Leadership Award: Emily Maclure



The *Vermont Community Leadership Award* was presented to the owner and operator of the Craftsbury General Store, Emily Maclure. Emily (left) has owned the store since 2012 with Kit Basom (right). She grew up in Orleans VT, but spent a decade living in Los Angeles as an event organizer. The sense of

community is what brought her back to the NEK and also what drives her career. Emily is vice chair of the Craftsbury Planning Commission, Co-Chair of the Center for An Agricultural Economy Board and one of the proud hosts of the Annual Craftsbury Block Party. When VCRD produced the Craftsbury Community Visit process in 2015, Emily served as Community Visit Chair. Everywhere she goes, Emily builds community through food and fun, along with her positive energy and can-do spirit.



## Climate Economy Action Team

Since 2017, VCRD has convened the Climate Economy Action Team (CEAT) dedicated to advancing initiatives to expand distributed energy generation and efficiency in Vermont, cultivating climate economy entrepreneurs and startup businesses, and reducing Vermont's carbon impact while creating jobs, and attracting youth and creative businesses to the state.

In the 2019 legislative session, CEAT successfully advocated for several policy initiatives to advance Vermont's climate economy. These included:

- Increased investment in low and middle income home weatherization
- A new incentive for those purchasing electric vehicles
- Ongoing participation by the Scott administration in the Transportation Climate Initiative, a regional program to place caps on emissions from the transportation sector
- Steps to enable Vermont's efficiency utilities to invest in efficiencies in transportations and heating

For 2020, CEAT adopted a platform of support for an ambitious legislative agenda, but is also working to convene regional conversations to highlight successful climate economy business strategies. Covid-19 has resulted in the temporary suspension of these efforts, but we plan to return to this work, online and in person, in the near future.

## Working Lands Initiative

VCRD's Vermont Working Landscape Partnership includes over 1,000 farm, forest, value-added businesses and individuals working together to advance investment in the enterprises that conserve Vermont's land in practice and serve as a key foundation for the culture and economy of rural Vermont. The Partnership's leadership council framed and supported the passage of the Working Lands Enterprise Fund to invest in the Renaissance of agriculture and innovative entrepreneurship in the natural resource economy. The fund spurs start-ups, supports growing businesses, and builds infrastructure to support jobs, communities, and the landscape of Vermont. Since WLEF's inception in 2012, VCRD has convened the Working Lands Coalition to serve as the crucial promoter of the investments. After seven years of the program:

- ▶ **203** agriculture and forestry projects have been funded
- ▶ **\$6 million** in Working Lands funds were distributed
- ▶ **\$10 million** in matching funds were leveraged
- ▶ **\$27 million** in additional sales for the Vermont economy
- ▶ **508** direct new jobs were created
- ▶ For every **\$10,000** invested **1** new job is created



# Members and Donors

Thanks to the many contributors who support our work in service to Vermont's rural communities. Annual membership dues contribute to fund all of VCRD's programmatic activities.

Support us at: [vtrural.org](http://vtrural.org)

## MISSION STATEMENT

The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) helps Vermont citizens build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, marshalling resources, and collective action.

## VCRD STANDS FOR

- ▶ Local Democracy
- ▶ Rural Voice
- ▶ Engagement
- ▶ Patriotism of Place
- ▶ Community Renewal
- ▶ Working Lands
- ▶ Innovation
- ▶ Climate Economy
- ▶ Youth
- ▶ Community

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## BLACK LIVES MATTER

All of us at the Vermont Council on Rural Development are deeply saddened by the wrongful deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others, and the ongoing history of racial oppression and inequity in our country. As an organization focused on the strength, vitality, and prosperity of our communities, we know that any work to move Vermont forward must acknowledge and address the injustices inherent in our systems and beliefs. Our mission has always been to bring together Vermonters in all their diversity to build a prosperous and resilient future, and if the events of the past few weeks have made anything clear, it's that no individual, government, or organization, including ours, is above the need to look deeply and critically at their own practices and to identify ways to do better. We join forces with all who work to dismantle white supremacy and systemic racism as well as to eliminate police brutality in our country and dedicate ourselves to work for an inclusive and equitable future. Black Lives Matter.



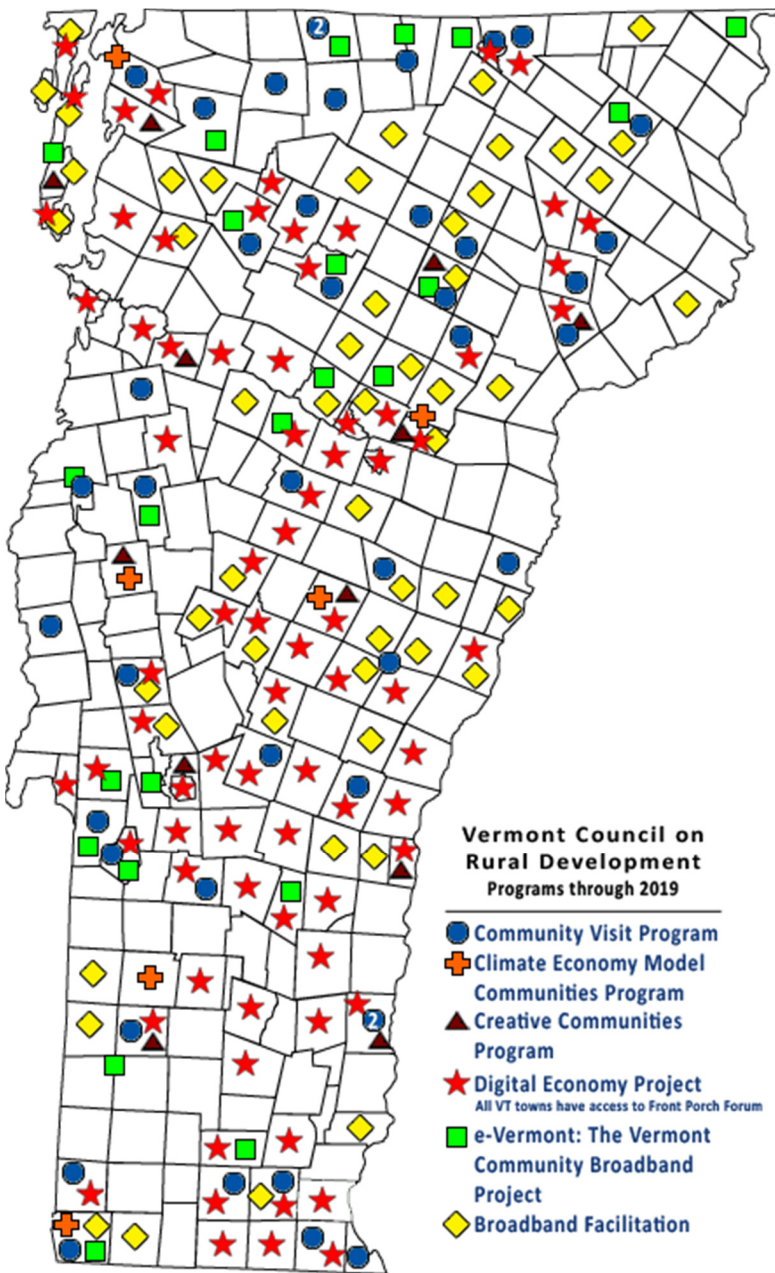
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- ▶ 23 years of Strategic Engagement for Action through 73 Community Visits creating over 265 community projects with thousands of volunteers.
- ▶ Led Broadband and Digital Economy Development Projects with 92 Vermont towns.
- ▶ Helped bring Front Porch Forum to every town in Vermont (the only state with community based social networks in every town).
- ▶ Developed 40 Downtown Wi-Fi Zones, supported the development of 40 municipal websites, and helped hundreds of businesses and non-profits enter the digital age.
- ▶ Led the development of VT's Working Lands Enterprise Fund that has increased business income by \$27M and created over 500 new jobs.
- ▶ Built over 22 Vermont Conferences and Rural Summits engaging over 6,000 people working together to spearhead rural progress.
- ▶ Developed 9 policy councils to unite Vermont efforts for the working landscape, in-state energy development, planning, the creative economy, the climate economy, and in setting vision through the Council on the Future of Vermont.
- ▶ Leading new initiatives to make Vermont a national leader for small business creation in the Climate Economy.
- ▶ Leading a statewide initiative to support community leadership in Vermont cities and towns.

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