

# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

Vermont Council on Rural Development

 Wallingford, Vermont



**Vermont Council on Rural Development**

Unleashing the power of Vermonters to create a better future



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## Building a Better Future Together

Thank you to all who have partnered, led, funded, and contributed to our work together this past year. It is a critical time to be working in communities, listening, learning, and helping foster civic engagement across the state.

Lincoln called American democracy a "great experiment." There is no guarantee of continued success in this experiment we have all been part of these past 246 years. Sustaining a vibrant democracy requires that each generation step forward and grapple with the challenges of the day in a way that listens and weaves together the voices, needs, ideas, and values of a diverse society.

That generational effort begins at the local level. At VCRD, we get the chance to work with people stepping forward in leadership to serve their communities. At a time when the national news can sometimes feel daunting or deflating, the efforts and stories of these local leaders and volunteers is invigorating and renewing. Their vision, ingenuity, and commitment to their communities is a great source of strength not only for our state but also for our shared American democracy. Their work makes us proud to be part of the Vermont community!

It's been a full and productive year at VCRD. At a time where many things feel in flux, VCRD is listening carefully in communities across the state and working to meet the evolving challenges and opportunities in Vermont's communities. We are creating new ways to support leaders stepping forward to help their communities, advocating for increased funding for Working Lands enterprises, expanding our ability to engage communities at the intersection of economic opportunity and climate resilience, and building from the tremendous input that led to the Vermont Proposition toward a series of concrete, inclusive objectives with long-term value to Vermonters.

For all the challenges and uncertainty, this year has shown that collectively we have the potential to rise to the moment and work together to build a better future together. And we must! VCRD is eager to continue playing our part supporting Vermont's communities and people with steady work and bold action.

There are no guarantees in this "great experiment," and our work supporting the locally-defined progress of Vermont's rural communities and strengthening civic engagement across the state has never felt more important. We are honored to partner with you on the work ahead, need your continued support and ideas, and are optimistic about our shared future for Vermont.

Brian Lowe,  
*VCRD Executive Director*

Julie Moore,  
*VCRD Board Chair*



# Community



Communities across our State have faced immense challenges over the last two years but have shown great commitment, drive, and resilience through it all.

VCRD-facilitated processes provide a 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 resources to get things done. In 2021, VCRD staff conducted **Community Visits** in Londonderry, Mendon, Bradford, Barre, and Milton; and brought our **Climate Economy Community Program** to the town of Rochester. Throughout the pandemic, VCRD facilitated these public engagement processes with both in person and remote options to best accommodate each community. While we continue to work in-person when possible, remote options can help include voices that can't otherwise participate. VCRD provides ongoing grant-writing and technical support to communities from current and past engagements as they advance their priorities.



In early 2021, VCRD convened the **Community Response and Recovery Core** – a group of approximately 15 local leaders from across Vermont who came together twice a month via Zoom to make connections, hear from guest speakers, and think together about how best to support their communities during this challenging time. This Recovery Core also gave VCRD insight as we continue to build programming that best supports those working to make progress in their communities.

The **Working Communities Challenge (WCC)** was launched in 2019 by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB) to address local challenges in rural communities. As a statewide neutral facilitator engaged by the FRBB, VCRD plays a key role in WCC for Vermont. In the fall of 2021, VCRD hired additional staff to provide support to the eight Vermont teams with technical assistance, facilitation services, coaching, and more. The eight teams are addressing challenges such as workforce development, reducing intergenerational poverty, housing, a network for new Vermonters, and engaging more diversity in communities.



Through this work across Vermont, VCRD has connected with hundreds of new and thriving volunteer leaders who are supporting their communities and advancing priorities in exciting new ways. We are proud to support their efforts.

# Leadership



The **Vermont Community Leadership Network (VCLN)** launched in 2020 during the height of the pandemic as a way for self-identified leaders across Vermont to come together to engage with fellow leaders to provide support, coaching, connections, and more. VCLN continued to grow and thrive in 2021, with new leaders joining the Network. We offered several workshops on topics including COVID Recovery; Hosting Local Events that Draw a Crowd & Build Community; Local Recreation Programs, Trails, and Facilities to Get Us Active & Outdoors; and several others. VCLN workshops bring over 50 leaders to each virtual workshop from all corners of Vermont. Join the Network! <https://www.vtrural.org/leadership/join>.

The **Climate Catalysts Leadership Program** brings together Vermonters from all walks of life and corners of the state to build peer connections, strengthen leadership skills, and receive support in developing a local climate economy project or initiative. Participants are asked to outline a potential or ongoing project or initiative that will be a focus of their participation. In 2021, VCRD celebrated the graduation of 14 local leaders from the second class of the Climate Catalyst Leadership Program. The third class began in the fall of 2021 with 16 leaders participating.



VCRD also launched the **Climate Catalyst Innovation Fund** – a small, catalytic grant program for local innovative climate projects. Through various support, VCRD awarded \$35,000 to 18 local projects focused on climate initiatives.

## What Makes a Leader?

Lindley didn't waste any time getting involved in her community when she arrived in Bethel with her wife ten years ago.

A furniture maker by trade, Lindley can be found in the woodshop, hiking Vermont's Green Mountains, or spending about every other free moment volunteering. The **Bethel Revitalization Initiative** was the starting block for Lindley when she settled in Bethel. From there, she quickly became invested in the Bethel community.

With a strong background in community engagement, it isn't a surprise that Lindley and her wife immediately became active members and leaders within their community.

"With a little bit of initiative, drive, and a willingness to step up, anyone can be a leader. But the most important thing to keep in mind is to find the right venue that fits your passions and interests and grow from there."

Having gotten to know many leaders in her community over the years, Lindley also recognizes that many of her fellow leaders still aren't identifying themselves as one, especially young adults.

"We must remember to provide encouragement to our young adults when they are presenting as a strong influence to those around them and highlight that they are already a leader. By telling today's youth that they are a leader, we are shaping them into lifetime leaders. If they are never noticed as a leader in their youth, they'll never consider themselves a leader in their adult life."



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**VERMONT COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT**

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# Policy



In 2021, VCRD released the newly revised **Vermont Proposition** while announcing the **Future of Vermont Action Team** to steer the effort and the **Future of Vermont Partnership** to support the work.

The Vermont Proposition is a set of bold transformational goals built to drive common action and advance a successful and resilient future for Vermont, capturing themes that VCRD hears in communities across the state. After numerous drafts and meaningful feedback from a diverse group of Vermonters, the current Vermont Proposition was adopted by the Future of Vermont Action Team as the core document to shape and implement this initiative.

With the Proposition's ten elements as its guideposts, the Future of Vermont Action Team began developing strategies to shape new policies; launch public and private action; empower partnerships of community volunteers, voters, investors, consumers and donors; and support enterprises and initiatives that work towards its goals. This diverse, dynamic group of 24 leaders from around the state will identify ways to support and catalyze existing efforts and focus new attention and resources on areas where new action can spur success.

All interested people, organizations, and businesses of Vermont are invited to join the **Partnership for the Future of Vermont** to support this initiative, continue discussions, keep informed, and help shape Vermont's future: [futureofvermont.org](https://futureofvermont.org).



VCRD's Vermont **Working Landscape Partnership** includes over 1,000 farm, forest, value-added businesses and individuals working together to support working lands enterprises that serve as a key foundation for the culture and economy of Vermont. VCRD continues to engage the Partnership and convene its leadership team, the **Working Lands Coalition (WLC)**, as the crucial promoter of Working Lands Enterprise Fund (WLEF) investments in farm and forest businesses. VCRD helped launch WLEF in 2012. Since its inception, the program, housed at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, has funded agriculture and forestry projects in every county of Vermont, created hundreds of jobs, and generated millions in additional sales for the Vermont economy.

Thanks to the leadership of the Governor and Legislature, the base funding appropriation for working lands was nearly doubled to \$1 million annually and for this year the legislature set aside an additional \$2 million. These funds help support new jobs and investments in our farm and forest businesses through strengthened supply chains, new value-added production lines, and business expansion in Vermont.





# Contributors

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).

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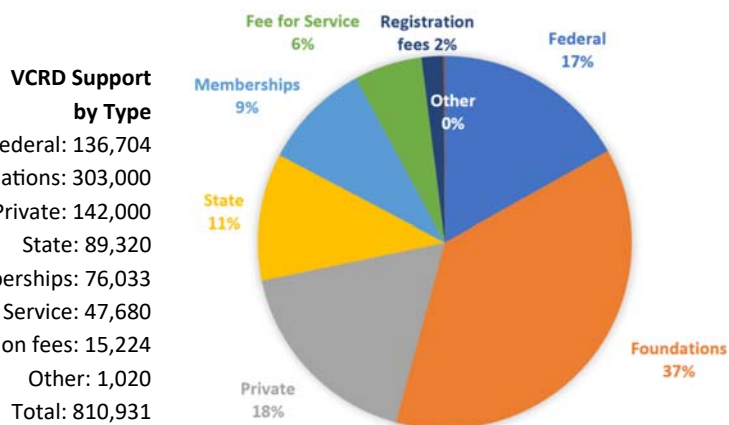
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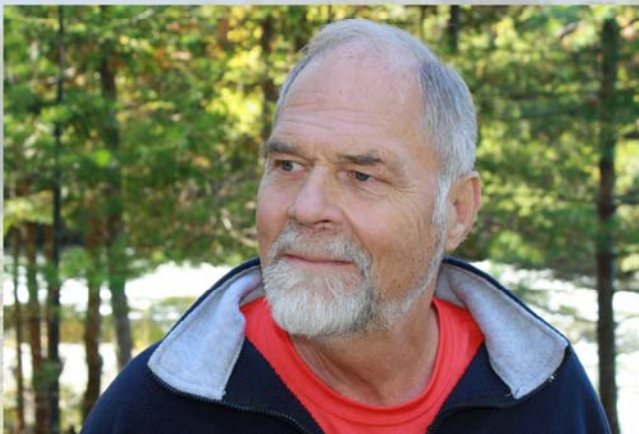
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*Sydney Lea, Newbury  
Former Poet Laureate of Vermont*

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