

# Vermont Council on Rural Development 2022 Annual Report



**Vermont Council on Rural Development**

Unleashing the power of Vermonters to create a better future

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## Focusing on Our Shared Future

Friends,

In our work at VCRD, we meet hundreds of people every year who are stepping forward to build a better future. Time after time, in town after town or with groups of volunteer leaders, we see people pulling together to advance projects that matter for their families, neighbors, and communities. Their work represents the strengthening of the civic fabric that binds us together as Vermonters and Americans.

A vibrant democracy requires that citizens and residents step forward and create a common future together. Local leadership is the key building block for that shared sense of purpose, and our best hope for making progress in the face of the significant challenges we all see. We are so grateful to the many people who have partnered, led, funded, and contributed to this work together.

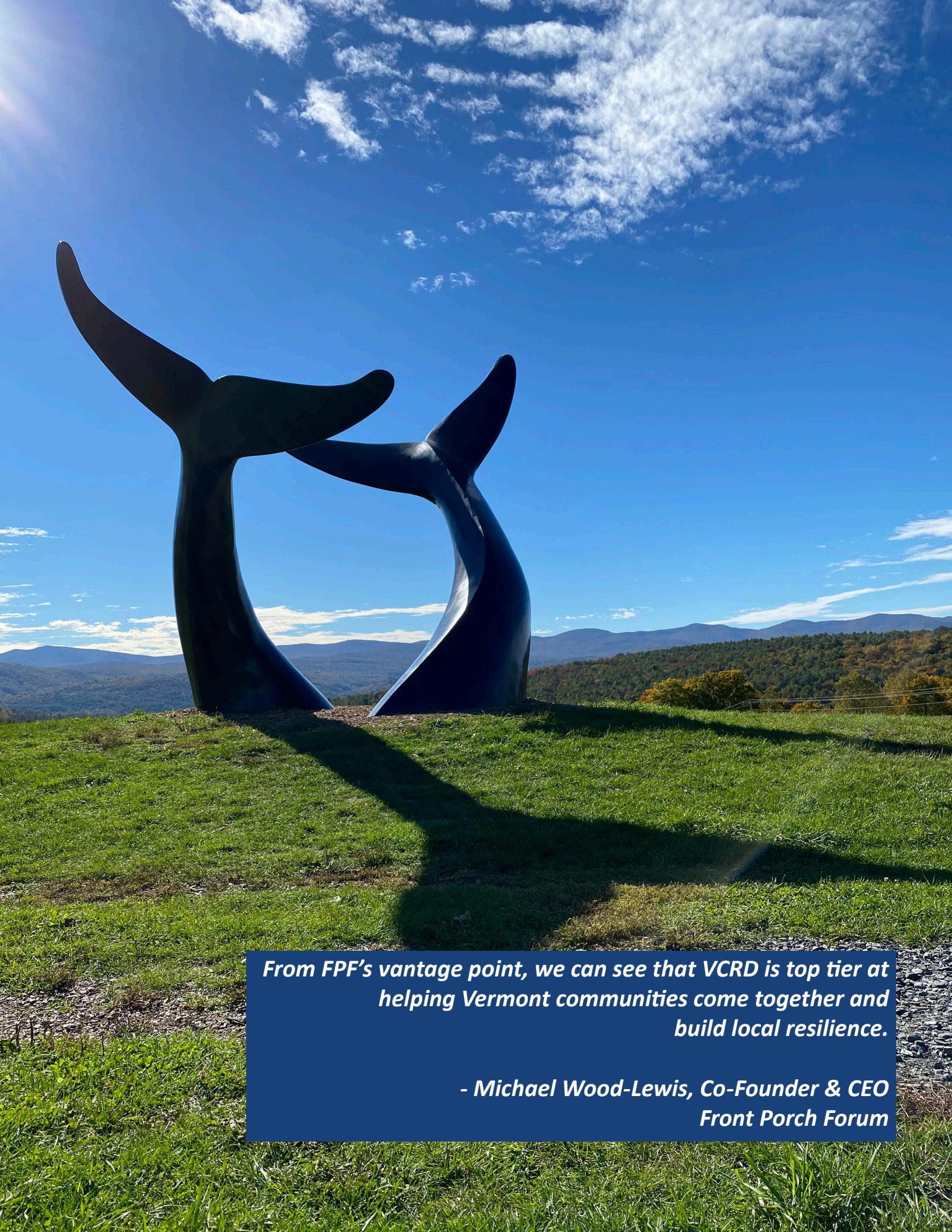
VCRD has had a full and productive year, thanks to an outstanding staff team. This Annual Report presents our work in Community, Policy, Climate, and Leadership. These thematic areas include our longstanding and effective Community Visit, Climate Economy Initiative, and Working Lands programs. This past year, we also launched the Youth Opportunity Initiative – a major statewide engagement effort that focuses on youth aspirations, community connections, and potential new ideas for strengthening the tie between youth aspiration and the opportunities in community that grow out of the Vermont Proposition.

We will continue to listen carefully and adapt our programming to the changing needs and goals we hear about in communities across the state. Focusing on locally-defined projects and a shared, positive future is a team sport – and it requires sustained effort in listening, engaging, and taking concrete action. We welcome your ideas, observations, time, and partnership as we build a shared, positive future.

Warmly,



Brian Lowe, *Executive Director* Julie Moore, *VCRD Board Chair*



*From FPF's vantage point, we can see that VCRD is top tier at helping Vermont communities come together and build local resilience.*

*- Michael Wood-Lewis, Co-Founder & CEO  
Front Porch Forum*

# COMMUNITY

For towns across the state, VCRD provides a neutral platform for communities to come together to first identify goals and opportunities for the future and then select priorities for action, foster and engage local leadership, and connect to resources to help get those priorities done. In 2022, the Community Visit program worked with outstanding community leaders in Milton, Highgate, Brownington, Concord, and Putney.

Every community is unique, and VCRD works hard to help advance locally-identified priorities. In 2022, that included priorities around housing, community centers, business and agriculture, community events, downtown revitalization, and more.

At a time of many challenges – from recent flooding to the lingering impacts of the pandemic – Community Visits provide an opportunity for connection, rejuvenation, and a chance to work positively for the future of the community. Since its inception in 1992, VCRD has worked with nearly 90 towns and hundreds of local leaders building the pathways to a vibrant State.

**“It was an incredible experience to bring the Highgate community together and really see new faces joining in the efforts to build a strong future for our town.”**

**-Rebecca Manning,  
Highgate Community Visit Chair**

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Highgate, a community located along Vermont’s northern border, helps anchor the new Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and has major projects underway around a town library, a local airport, and new wastewater investments.

For three months during the winter and spring of 2022, Highgate community members came together in the gymnasium of the Highgate Elementary School to talk about their strengths and challenges, vote and set priorities for action, connect with statewide resource providers, and build new friendships with neighbors. Rebecca Manning, a mother of two, serves on the Highgate Library Board of Trustees, and the new Highgate Community Visit Chair reflected on the enthusiasm of her town and forward growth. “It was an incredible experience to bring the Highgate community together and really see new faces joining in the efforts to build a strong future for our town.”

Throughout the Community Visit process, community members in Highgate identified some of their top priorities to work on such as advancing career training, workforce development, and agricultural career pathways, and expanding the library and community center.



## WORKING COMMUNITIES CHALLENGE

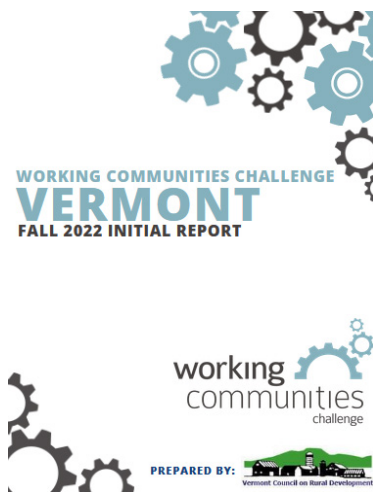
The Working Communities Challenge (WCC) was launched in Vermont in 2019 as a partnership between the State of Vermont and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB) to advance collaborative efforts to build healthy economies and communities in northern New England's rural towns, regions, and smaller cities.

The eight Vermont teams are focused on Greater Barre, Lamoille County, Northeast Kingdom, Northwest Vermont, Southern Vermont, Springfield Area, White River Valley, and Winooski – covering approximately 62% of Vermont.

The WCC represents a new approach to locally-driven economic development focused on system change within Vermont. The teams are innovating at the local or regional level and are supported by the Steering Committee which is positioned to identify, scale, and support new approaches to long-standing challenges.

VCRD was engaged by FRBB to provide technical assistance and coaching support to each of the eight teams. Jessica Savage, VCRD's Director of Community Collaboration, is the primary staff person supporting the Vermont teams.

In 2022, WCC released its Initial Report sharing the new approaches made by the eight Vermont teams over the first three years to address systemic challenges in Vermont like housing, childcare, poverty, workforce development, racial equity, and more. The report was shared with Vermont's decision-makers and community builders on October 14 and is now publicly available.



The WCC Initial Report can be found at [www.vtrural.org/working-communities/policy](http://www.vtrural.org/working-communities/policy).

## VERMONT PROPOSITION

In 2022, the Future of Vermont Action Team reviewed the 10 elements of The Vermont Proposition which were established in 2021 with the input of thousands of Vermonters.



The Future of Vermont Action Team identified three areas of action for 2023:

- 1) A **Vermont Youth Opportunity** Initiative to bring together youth, community, and expert voices from across the state to identify strategies to advance youth opportunity, engagement, and aspiration.
- 2) A **Proposition Scorecard** to track progress, success, and areas of focus for each Proposition element.
- 3) A **Working & Natural Lands Convening** that brings together farmers, foresters, and other experts to explore ways to make farm & forest businesses focused on regenerative and climate resilient efforts more economically viable and sustainable by emphasizing the role they play in providing environmental benefits to the public.

The Action Team also determined several "lenses" through which they should focus work in any of these areas. These include racial equity, economic opportunity, disability and access, and civic engagement.

## WORKING LANDS

VCRD convenes the Working Lands Coalition, which helps advocate for funding to create jobs and invest in projects that honor Vermont's agriculture and forest heritage as well as its future and celebrate our working landscape.

Over the past 10 years, the Initiative has helped create 539 new jobs, fund 418 agriculture and forestry projects in every county in Vermont, distributed over \$13.6 million in funding, and generated over \$55 million in additional sales for the state economy.

# '22

# VCRD

## OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

*Unleashing the Power of*

COMMUNITY VISITS



# 480

PARTICIPANTS

# 12

NEW  
TASK  
FORCES  
FORMED



# TOWNS ENGAGED



# \$11,000,000

INVESTED IN TOWNS THAT PAID FOR  
VISITS TO ADVANCE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

VCRD CONVENED THE WORKING LANDS COALITION



# \$3 MILLION

FOR FARM AND FOREST LANDS



# 700+

PARTNERSHIP FOR  
FUTURE OF VERMONT



**NUMBERS**  
*of Vermonters*



**8**  
SUPPORTING  
WCC TEAMS  
COVERING **62%** OF VT TOWNS



**\$18,250**  
AWARDED TO SUPPORT  
TASK FORCES

**153** VOLUNTEERS  
ACTIVATED  
TO ADVANCE  
PROJECTS

**0,000+**  
PARTICIPATED IN VCRD COMMUNITY  
LOCALLY DEFINED PROJECTS

**1,200+**  
ENGAGED WITH  
COMMUNITY LEADERS

ADDITION TO SUCCESSFULLY ADVOCATE

**MILLION**

FOR FOREST BUSINESSES



**16**  
CLIMATE LEADERS &  
THEIR PROJECTS

CATALYZED

ADVANCED FOR CLIMATE  
ECONOMY INNOVATION PROJECTS

**\$82,912**



**300+**  
VCLN WORKSHOP  
PARTICIPANTS

# CLIMATE

VCRD's Climate Economy Initiative is designed to help communities and leaders build and implement priority actions that increase economic vitality and affordability in a time of climate change. The ultimate goal is to help model change by implementing energy efficiency, transportation system transformation, renewable energy generation, working lands development, and entrepreneurship and business incubation to spur economic progress.

The Climate Economy Initiative has three components:

- The **Resilient Communities** program, which started at the end of 2022, supports 3 – 5 communities each year working on local climate solutions through a community engagement process for strategic planning or project implementation.
- The **Climate Catalysts** program works with local leaders from around the state on a year-long process focused on peer connections, strengthening leadership skills, and providing project development and implementation support. The third cohort concluded and the fourth kicked off in 2022!
- The **Climate Catalyst Innovation Fund** provides annual grants for municipalities, schools, non-profits, or businesses ranging from \$500-\$4,000 to support local innovators throughout Vermont to develop solutions that move communities closer to their climate and energy goals.



Photo Credit: Kathy Swanson

## CLIMATE SPOTLIGHT

In 2022, thanks to the generous support of VLITE, VSECU, the Sunflower Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation and others, the Climate Catalyst Innovation Fund made 25 grants worth a total of \$82,000 to help advance community-scale climate resilience and energy goals. Projects are practical and creative efforts that reduce energy use, save communities money, and create new approaches to challenging problems.

Projects funded in 2022 include a farmer-led network hosting regular climate-focused events, a library resilience center energy system, climate economy workforce training, and many more. Projects are underway across the state, from supporting an EV charging station in Enosburg to a weatherization project in Bradford to support for a town solar array in Sheffield. One investment in Addison County supported a new electric bike at the Ilsley Public Library in Middlebury. Through a variety of programs, that Library now has 3 different electric bikes getting regular use.



# LEADERSHIP

VCRD expanded the work of supporting local leaders during the height of the pandemic in 2020 by announcing the **Vermont Community Leadership Network (VCLN)** to offer virtual workshops to community leaders throughout Vermont with various resources and connections to shape the future of the towns with topics such as engaging with local municipalities, legislative updates, and more with over 300 attendees in 2022.

VCLN connects and supports local leaders as they build projects, organizations, and systems that serve their communities and Vermont's urgent and long-term needs.

Within VCLN, VCRD also offers additional engagement opportunities through specialized cohorts and the Vermont Community Leadership Summit.

In 2022, VCRD hosted the third **Vermont Community Leadership Summit** at Vermont Technical College in Randolph to build skills, share opportunities, network, and learn. Approximately 500 community leaders throughout Vermont attended including youth, municipal leaders, community organizers and volunteers, people with lived experience with critical challenges facing our community, experts and technical assistance providers, regional, state, and national leaders, and others working to improve the economies and quality of life of their communities.



2023  
VERMONT  
COMMUNITY  
LEADERSHIP  
SUMMIT  
AUGUST 15  
VERMONT STATE UNIVERSITY  
RANDOLPH



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

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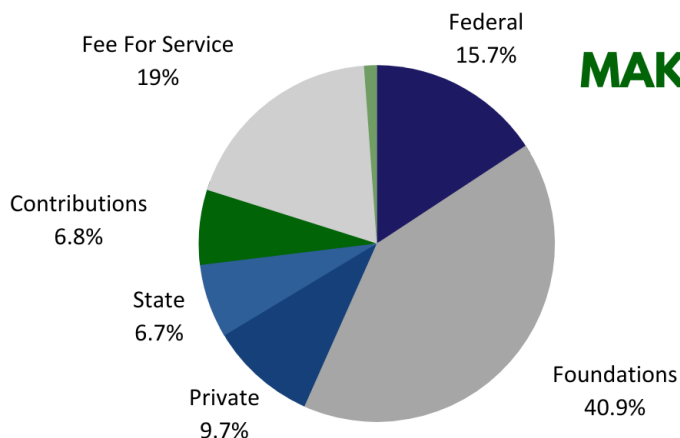
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Vermont Council on Rural Development

**PO Box 1384**

Montpelier, Vermont 05601-1384

802-223-6091 | [info@vtrural.org](mailto:info@vtrural.org)



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