

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Vermont Council on Rural Development



Vermont Council on Rural Development

Unleashing the power of Vermonters to create a better future



VERMONT COUNCIL ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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OUR MISSION

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

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Lauren Brady, *Community Engagement and Policy Coordinator*

Margaret Gibson, *Operations Director*

Kaziah Haviland, *Village Trust Program Director*

Alyssa Johnson, *Community Visit Program Director*

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Dear Friends, Partners, and Fellow Vermonters,

As we look back on 2024 at VCRD, it's clear that it was a year marked by significant change, meaningful growth, and dynamic movement. We navigated leadership transitions, launched new program initiatives, and saw some important staffing changes within our programs.

Through it all, we remain deeply proud and inspired by the VCRD team. Their unwavering dedication to our mission, vision, and values has been nothing short of remarkable. In the face of constant evolution, they have demonstrated exceptional adaptability, responsiveness, and leadership, always with a steadfast commitment to the communities we serve across Vermont.

At VCRD, we see and acknowledge the many challenges rural communities are facing. Yet, we are also privileged to witness something else: Vermonters stepping up, communities setting direction, neighbors working together to build community projects, invite new voices in, and breathe new life into their towns. The power of people coming together to make local progress fuels our hope and strengthens our belief in Vermont's future and in the collective story of this place we love and call home.

We extend our deepest thanks to our partners, funders, collaborators, and community members who make this work possible. Your trust, support, and engagement are the foundation of everything we do.

With heartfelt appreciation,



Denise Smith,
VCRD Executive Director



Shannon Barsotti,
VCRD Board Chair

Goodbyes

VCRD extends our gratitude to two incredible Vermonters who left the organization in the Fall of 2024.



Jenna Koloski's work with VCRD spanned a decade. Her incredible leadership, vision, and work paved the way for increased community engagement and program growth and set VCRD up for future work. We wish her all the best in her role with the Heron Foundation.



Charlie Smith served as our Interim Executive Director in 2024. His steady and humble leadership kept VCRD on course until a new Executive Director was in place. VCRD will be forever grateful for his support through the transition.



Leadership

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

The **Climate Catalysts Innovation Fund** is a small, catalytic grant program for local innovative climate projects. In 2024, VCRD awarded \$82,500 to 25 local projects.

The Charlotte Public Library received \$4,000 to install two solar-powered flashing LED pedestrian crossing signs and repaint a crosswalk in the West Village area of Charlotte with reflective paint.

These updates allow for safe crossing on a road that sees excessive speed at all times of day, especially with commuter and ferry traffic. Providing a safe crossing helps to promote the walkability of the neighborhood.

Visit <https://vtrural.org/climate-economy> for more.



Vermont Community Leadership Network

The Vermont Community Leadership Network (VCLN) brings self-identified leaders across Vermont together to engage with fellow leaders for support, coaching, connections, and more.

In 2024, we offered several workshops including Project Management 101, Community Trusts and Your Town, Reflections on Flood Resilience and Recovery, Sharing a Vision for Youth Success, 2024 Legislative Roundup, and Resilience, and Coping and Caring for Community. VCRD distributes a semi-monthly newsletter to 2,900 that promotes opportunities and highlights some of the great work happening at the community scale across Vermont. Join the Network: <https://www.vtrural.org/leadership-network/>.



Climate Catalysts Leadership Program

Facing the climate challenge means mobilizing at all levels of human organization. Strong and inspirational leaders are key in unifying and sparking collective action. With hundreds of tight-knit communities, Vermont is a place that can model unique, powerful, and replicable local actions for growing the climate economy. The Climate Catalysts Leadership Program brings together local leaders from Vermont communities for a six month long process focused on building peer connections, strengthening leadership skills and providing project development support. Participants work on implementation of a local project as a focus of their program participation. The goal is to move projects from concept to reality while investing in leaders who provide multi-faceted service to their communities. In 2024, VCRD celebrated the graduation of 16 local leaders from the fifth class.



Vermont Community Leadership Award: Charlie Hancock

VCRD's **2024 Vermont Community Leadership Award** was presented to **Charlie Hancock** of Montgomery, Vermont at the 5th Vermont Community Leadership Summit. We present the award to highlight people who epitomize the best spirit of local service and whose work has made their community a better place.

Charlie's contribution of time, energy and skill, and his unwavering commitment to Montgomery and to Vermont has been extraordinary. It's an honor to recognize Charlie for his tremendous community leadership and dedication to his work and volunteerism across Vermont.



Denise Smith (VCRD Executive Director) and Charlie Hancock

2024 Vermont Community Leadership Summit

On August 6th, over 450 community leaders from across the state came together at the Vermont State University's Randolph campus to engage with each other, build leadership skills, make new connections, celebrate community successes, and talk through challenges facing communities. The day was an opportunity to dig into what it takes for a community to thrive – capacity, economic vitality, emergency preparedness, youth engagement, inclusion, and more – and offered a diverse range of topics tailored to support and connect people in all aspects of local vitality and resilience through workshops, panels, and networking sessions.



Leadership By the Numbers

800 engaged with VCLN workshops
16 participated in the Climate Catalyst Leadership Cohort
\$82,500 was awarded for the implementation of **25** innovative climate projects
450 attended the Leadership Summit including **100** speakers, panelists, and presenters

Community

Community-driven services that include support with community engagement processes, priority setting, technical assistance, and project implementation.

Community Visits help towns line up for action. In 2011, VCRD facilitated a Community Visit in Morristown. Through the process, the community formed a local task force to **develop a food coop**. After 5 years of planning, fundraising, and building community support, the Morrisville Food Co-op opened its doors in 2017. After the start-up phase and just as they were seeing some stability, the pandemic hit requiring a pivot to curb pick-up and eventually back to in-store shopping on a limited basis. They continued to make progress with the hiring of Eric Bessette as General Manager. Today, the co-op is a bustling community hub committed to the health and wellbeing of people and features products from more than 115 providers from within a 100-mile range.

"The VCRD Community Visit process was the turning point for Morrisville. It brought people together, helped us identify our shared priorities, and ultimately laid the foundation for bringing the cooperative to town. Without that collective vision and momentum, the coop might never have become a reality."

*~ Susan Titterton
Morrisville resident and task force member*

Community Engagement and Prioritization

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 2024, VCRD facilitated **Community Visits** in Albany, Franklin, Bridport, Westmore, and Lunenburg-Gilman; and brought our **Climate Economy Resilient Communities Program** to Johnson. These communities have built local task forces to take action in the months and years ahead on the priorities they selected, which include improving community communications, information sharing, and connection; expanding childcare options; advancing housing solutions; redeveloping the downtown; increasing food access; revitalizing historic buildings; increasing community events, social engagement & recreation; building outdoor spaces for youth, families, and community members; expanding outdoor recreation, trails & tourism; collaborating for the health of the lake; developing a local recreation access management plan; and strengthening the college/town connection. We also provided support to communities that have worked with us in prior years as they continue to implement projects that bring vibrancy to their towns including Barnard, Barre, Bradford, Brownington, Granville, Highgate, Newport, Northfield, Putney, Richford, Rockingham, Rupert, Shelburne, and Weston.

Village Trust Initiative (VTI)

This year in collaboration with the Preservation Trust of Vermont and the Vermont Community Foundation we launched the Village Trust Initiative. VTI offers expertise and funding to help small towns (under 2,500 people) create or bolster a local community trust organization and take on a transformational revitalization project in their village. Through an application process and the support of an Advisory Board, seven communities were chosen for support this year — Benson, Braintree, Greensboro Bend, Lunenburg-Gilman, Reading, West Fairlee, and Wolcott. In 2024,



we facilitated community engagement processes in each town and laid the groundwork for the implementation of projects ranging from housing to community centers, to general stores, to community amenities such as coffee shops, child care and recreation spaces.

Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP)

Through our **Municipal Technical Assistance Program** grant from the State of Vermont, VCRD offers free support to towns as they plan for and implement economic and community development projects. In 2024, we worked with over 20 communities—Albany, Athens, Bridport, Cabot, Canaan, Craftsbury, Franklin, Hardwick, Hubbardton/Sudbury, Johnson, Lunenburg, Marshfield, Peacham, Plainfield, Readsboro, Rochester, Rupert, Shrewsbury, Wardsboro, Westmore, Weston, Wheelock, Windham—delivering a range of services from facilitation of community or stakeholder engagements to hiring consultants for hands-on support with planning, grant writing, facilitation, and project implementation.

Working Communities Challenge (WCC)

An initiative of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB), the Working Communities Challenge advances local collaborative efforts that build strong, healthy economies and communities in Vermont’s rural towns, regions, and smaller cities. The initiative supports diverse, local teams as they tackle complex challenges facing their communities. In 2024, FRBB continued its contract with VCRD to support 8 teams across the state with ongoing advice and coaching as they tackle complex challenges facing their communities including strategies for local team building, communications, outreach and engagement, and project implementation in housing, transportation, childcare, the benefits cliff, racial equity, resource navigation, workforce development and other interconnected systems.



Community By the Numbers

6 communities participated in deep facilitation processes

800 community members participated

16 projects were prioritized

255 volunteers were activated to advance them

159 statewide and regional experts participated and are available to support the work ahead

7 communities began efforts to implement a village revitalization project with input from **270** community members

8 local and regional teams covering **62%** of Vermont received support as they tackle complex challenges

20 communities received technical assistance

Policy

Researching, developing, and advancing policies that support Vermont's quality of life while promoting economic opportunity. Respected for its neutrality, fairness, and ability to facilitate productive discussions among disparate parties, VCRD utilizes a strong network of thoughtful and effective leaders to analyze and make crucial recommendations on VT policy.

Policy Initiatives and Current Work

In 2024, VCRD used The Vermont Proposition as a framework for policy dialogue and planning. The Vermont Proposition is a set of transformational goals designed to optimize the best of Vermont by mid-century for our economy, environment, communities, and people. It outlines bold, forward-looking action to guide progress today and into the future, grounded in the values and aspirations Vermonters have shared with us over decades of local engagement. With numerous partners VCRD was able to advance youth opportunity, working lands, and civic health.

Youth Opportunity Initiative (YOI)

Over the past two years, VCRD has prioritized Vermont's youth through the Youth Opportunity Initiative, rooted in the understanding that the strength of our democracy, the vitality of our economy, and the well-being of our communities all begin with young people — and with a shared belief in a positive future.

In early 2025, we concluded the Initiative with a daylong Symposium, co-hosted with UP for Learning and guided by a youth-adult facilitation team. This gathering brought together 80 youth and adult participants from across Vermont to review the findings of the Vermont Vision for Youth Success report and collectively identify key areas for action to improve youth aspiration and opportunity statewide.

"In order to build strong communities and realize our vision for a thriving economy, we must adequately prepare our youth with the tools, support, and connections they need to establish and then realize educational, career, and life goals."

~Denise Smith, VCRD Executive Director

Read the reports and find out more about the Youth Opportunity Initiative at <https://www.vtrural.org/vermont-vision-for-youth-success/>.

Vermont Vision for Youth Success

June 2024

Findings and outcomes of the Youth Opportunity Initiative, an initiative of the Vermont Proposition and the Future of Vermont Action Team

Produced by:
Vermont Council on
Rural Development



Report of the
**Vermont Vision for Youth Success
Action Symposium**

Greenway Institute | Montpelier VT | December 12, 2024



Produced by: Vermont Council on Rural Development

Working Lands

For over a decade, VCRD has led the Working Lands Partnership to support the farm, forest, and value-added enterprises that are the backbone of Vermont's rural economy and working landscape. These businesses not only provide jobs and local products, they sustain Vermont's identity, heritage, and environmental resilience. In 2024, we continued to convene partners across the agricultural and forest sectors to strengthen shared policy goals and coordinate strategic advocacy. Looking ahead, VCRD remains committed to supporting the vitality and adaptability of Vermont's working lands through collaboration, innovation, and community-driven leadership.

Vermont's Civic Health Index

VCRD served on the Advisory Board and promoted public engagement for the Vermont Civic Health Index—a tool designed to evaluate how Vermonters engage with their communities and participate in democratic processes. Convened by the Vermont Secretary of State's Office, this initiative was supported by the National Conference on Citizenship, the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, and an advisory group of organizations and individuals from across the state who helped identify the indicators that define civic health in Vermont and shape the framework for tracking civic engagement over time. Input on voting habits, civic participation, and engagement with government was gathered from Vermonters through listening sessions and surveys and then compiled into a report. In early 2025, VCRD hosted an online workshop through our Community Leadership Network to share the report findings and answer questions. The Secretary of State's office plans to use the report as a roadmap to set goals and implement strategies to further improve civic engagement and education in Vermont.



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.

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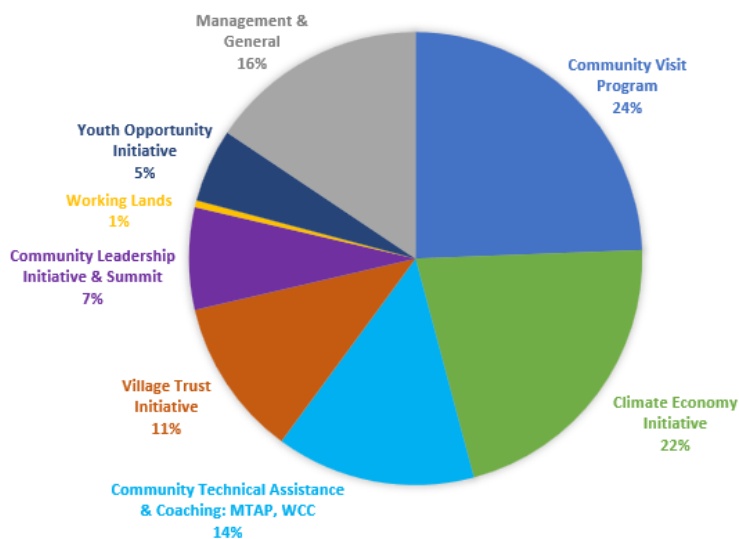
Foundations and Special Project Funders: Argosy Foundation | Ben & Jerry's Foundation | Cabot Creamery Cooperative | Center for an Agricultural Economy | Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission | EastRise Credit Union | Intervale Center | Janes Trust Foundation | Johnson Family Foundation Fund of the VCF | The Lintilhac Foundation | National Life Group Charitable Foundation | NOFA Vermont | Northern Border Regional Commission | Preservation Trust of Vermont | Ruth H. Brown Foundation | Shelburne Farms | Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development | Vermont Assn of Conservation Districts | Vermont Community Foundation | The Wisdom Connection | The Woodstock Foundation, Inc. | Vermont Land Trust | Windham Foundation

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Revenue by Type

Federal: 312,372
 State: 196,840
 Foundations: 373,250
 Private: 70,000
 Indivs/Orgs: 37,036
 Fee for Service: 105,670
 Registrations: 16,607
 Other: 18,961
 Total: 1,130,766

Spending by Program



VCRD works toward a future for Vermont in which its:

- ♦ **communities** are healthy and resilient;
- ♦ **economy** is innovative and vibrant;
- ♦ **citizens** are engaged in community-building and governance, working closely with their neighbors;
- ♦ **communities** attract youth, entrepreneurs, and healthy diversity;
- ♦ **youngest citizens** are fully prepared to contribute to their communities and participate successfully in a changing economy;
- ♦ **rural character and open lands** are conserved and managed productively and profitably;
- ♦ **communities, businesses and citizens** prosper by designing and building economic solutions to climate change; and
- ♦ **communities** serve as models for other communities throughout rural America.



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"My personal purpose is to change the operating system of the world from one based on fear to one inspired by love. Obviously, I need a lot of help. VCRD is one of my favorite collaborators in community building here in Vermont. Please join me by investing in our local Vermont communities."

~ Trish Passmore Alley, Shelburne VT

Your contribution provides direct support to rural Vermont communities.

Make a contribution to VCRD today!

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