



Vermont Council on Rural Development

2025 ANNUAL REPORT





VERMONT COUNCIL ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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

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Dear Friends:

We are in awe. Every day we discover something new and beautiful about Vermont: the working lands, rolling hills, and small towns full of people who are imaginative, resourceful, resilient, and deeply committed to this place, their families, and their future.

At VCRD, we're fortunate to see a Vermont where neighbors come together and support one another, and where hopes, worries, and differences can be heard and addressed through shared problem-solving.

That was on full display this year. As school closures forced hard conversations across the state, communities didn't just mourn, they got to work reimagining those buildings as childcare centers, community hubs, and housing. We facilitated Community Visits in three towns, helping neighbors build plans for a shared future. The Village Trust Initiative helped some of our smallest communities take on transformational revitalization projects. Our Climate Economy Program brought deep technical assistance to flood-impacted communities, now visible in resilience hubs and stronger infrastructure. And our leadership initiative kept growing the next generation of leaders in our towns.

None of this happens by accident. It happens because Vermonters keep choosing to show up for each other, at the late night meetings, the kitchen table where hard decisions get made, the moment it would be easier to walk away than stay in the room. That choice, made over and over, is what trust looks like in practice.

We are deeply grateful to the partners, funders, and community members who make this work possible. You trust us with your stories and your hopes for what comes next, and that trust is the foundation of everything we do. We remain in awe of this place, and of the people willing to do the slow, unglamorous work of building it together. Vermont's future is being built right now, in town halls, schools, and living rooms across the state. We're honored to help make it happen.

With deep appreciation,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The first signature is 'Denise Smith' and the second is 'Shannon Barsotti'.

Denise Smith, *Executive Director* & Shannon Barsotti, *Board Chair*

VCRD works toward a future for Vermont in which its:

communities are healthy and resilient;

economy is innovative and vibrant;

residents are engaged in community-building and governance, working closely with their neighbors;

communities attract youth, entrepreneurs, and healthy diversity;

young people 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 individuals prosper by designing and building economic solutions to climate change; and

communities serve as models for other communities throughout rural America.

VCRD Core Values:

- ▶ **Collaboration**
- ▶ **Non-Partisan**
- ▶ **Service**
- ▶ **Community**
- ▶ **Democracy**
- ▶ **Hope**

Leadership

For three decades, VCRD's work has shown that Vermont's progress depends on the people who step forward, formally and informally, to support their communities. These leaders – whether they serve on local committees or boards, volunteer their time, work in town government, or support communities through state, regional, nonprofit or federal roles – are the champions in service to Vermont communities and the backbone of progress. VCRD works to lift up these leaders and strengthen the networks that support them. Through coaching, peer learning, statewide gatherings, and practical tools, we help leaders connect with one another, build skills, and access resources that make their work easier and more effective.

Vermont Community Leadership Network

The Vermont Community Leadership Network (VCLN) includes more than 2,400 leaders from across the state who joined to connect with peers and receive updates about leadership opportunities. In 2025, we hosted workshops for the VCLN including the Legislative Roundup, Civic Health Index Overview and Discussion, Federal Transition for Rural Communities, and sessions on Reimagining Technical Assistance and Nonprofit Collaboration. We also co-sponsored the Office Hours for Uncertain Times series with Common Good Vermont and Leaves of Change VT with workshops on health care resources, learning from practitioners, and exploring nonprofit mergers. We also distributed a regular e-newsletter that highlighted opportunities, resources, and inspiring work happening at the community scale across Vermont. Join the VCLN here: 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 to build peer connections, strengthen leadership skills, and provide project development

By the Numbers

992 engaged with **5** online workshops

9 participated in the Climate Catalyst Leadership Cohort

\$60,500 was awarded for the implementation of **25** innovative climate projects

400 attended the Leadership Summit including **90** speakers, panelists, and presenters

The **Climate Catalysts Innovation Fund** is a small, catalytic grant program for local innovative climate projects. In 2025, COVER Home Repair received \$4,000 to install solar-powered power stations in two pull-behind job site trailers demonstrating small-scale, portable solar power generation to a socio-economically diverse group of more than 300 people annually.

"I'm so grateful to VCRD for the funding to make this solar trailer project possible. It'll make our worksites safer, more efficient, and hopefully inspire others to install solar power systems at their workplaces or in their homes."

- Conor Teal, Work Crew Leader at COVER



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. The sixth group of Climate Catalysts included 9 leaders from across the state that came together for 5 in person and virtual meet ups. They heard from Climate Catalyst alumni, climate leaders and internally worked on challenges and successes in their projects. Visit vtrural.org for a map that shows projects for each class.

2025 Vermont Community Leadership Summit

On August 11th, hundreds of community leaders from across the state came together at the Vermont State University's Randolph campus with over 90 presenters and panelists to gain skills and build connections. The day included a diverse range of topics designed to support and connect community builders in working together and getting things done, even when times are challenging and resources are limited. There were workshops, panels, networking sessions, and participation pathways focused on building community leadership and capacity; using arts and culture to create community and solve problems; from idea to action; and navigating change and uncertainty.

VT Community Leadership Award: Vermont's Long Term Recovery Groups

The 2025 Vermont Community Leadership Award was presented to Vermont's Long Term Recovery Groups at the 6th Vermont Community Leadership Summit. The award highlights people who epitomize the best spirit of local service and whose work has made their community a better place. Born out of urgent need, the Long Term Recovery Groups played an essential role in uniting communities, coordinating volunteers, sharing critical information, and securing resources to meet the needs of flood-impacted Vermonters rebuilding their lives after disaster.

LTRGs include: Barre Up, Black River Good Neighbor Services, Community Resilience for the Waterbury Area, Helping Our People in Emergency Coalition, Kingdom United Resilience and Recovery Effort, Lamoille Area Recovery Network, Montpelier Disaster Recovery Network, Mountain Town LTRG, Recovery After Floods Team, Rutland Regional Disaster Committee, and Upper Valley Strong.



Grafton Conference: Leadership Development for Female Executive Directors

At the end of 2024, VCRD partnered with the Windham Foundation, the Wisdom Connection, and Watershed Coaching to host a Grafton Conference for female executive directors across Vermont. The two-day gathering reinforced the strength of a statewide network in fostering strong, lasting connection. In the year since, that convening has grown into an active network. Participating organizations report stronger partnerships, continued shared learning, and new collaborations that trace directly back to conversations that began at Grafton. What started as a one-time event has translated into real, ongoing action advancing programs and policies that benefit rural Vermont.

Supporting Youth Leadership

In 2025, VCRD and UP for Learning launched *Leading Together: Strengthening Youth Voice in Vermont's Democracy*, a cross-sector leadership effort involving 15 youth- and adult-leadership organizations. The initiative builds a cohort model to strengthen youth–adult partnership across school boards, municipal government, community groups, and private enterprise. This work addresses key statewide needs: youth feeling disconnected or a lack of belonging, limited civic pathways, declining volunteerism, and clear evidence that outcomes improve when youth voices are valued. By expanding youth participation and strengthening youth–adult partnership, Vermont can bolster civic trust, revitalize local leadership, and reinforce our democracy.

How a Community Visit Got a Local Skatepark Rolling



In Bradford, a youth-inspired vision for a skatepark has grown into a long-term, community-driven effort that demonstrates how broad engagement, evolving leadership, and persistence can turn an idea into lasting public investment.

After young people named a skatepark as a real need during the 2021 Bradford Community Visit, local leaders launched a multi-year process to test ideas, build consensus, and strengthen leadership. Early wins like a dog park and small skate ramp helped build momentum and demonstrate value. Youth engagement remained central, with young people serving on committees, shaping outreach, and speaking at town meetings. Five years later, Bradford has been awarded a \$400,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant to build the skatepark. Through their proactive and consistent community engagement and communication, the group was able to garner the 50% in needed match funding approval at Town Meeting and is poised to break ground in 2027. We can't wait to follow their progress!

Community

Across Vermont, communities are demonstrating what's possible when many voices are invited in, local leadership is supported, and momentum builds through small wins. VCRD's programs help communities move ideas into action. Through Community Visits, the Climate Economy Resilient Communities Program, the Village Trust Initiative, and the Municipal Technical Assistance Program, we provide the neutral facilitation, coaching, and hands-on support that help towns identify shared priorities, organize task forces, and access the resources they need to carry projects forward. This work shows that when communities come together to define their future, transformational change can take root and thrive.

Community Engagement and Prioritization

VCRD-facilitated processes provide a neutral platform for communities to come together to identify opportunities, select top priorities for action, foster local leadership, and connect to resources to get things done. In 2025, VCRD facilitated **Community Visits** in Roxbury, Sunderland, and New Haven and brought our **Climate Economy Resilient Communities Program** to Plainfield. We also facilitated a two-day community process in Windham and a housing meeting and celebration of the 2023 Community Visit in Putney. These communities have built local task forces to take action on the priorities they selected, which include re-imagining the school building, creating and improving community spaces, increasing food access, expanding outdoor recreation trails and access, building a resilience hub, expanding community events, expanding housing options, and boosting community connection and skill sharing. We also supported communities we worked with in prior years as they implement projects that bring vibrancy to their towns including Bradford, Bridport, Franklin, Johnson, Lunenburg-Gilman, Putney, Westmore, and Weston.

Village Trust Initiative

This was our second year collaborating with the Preservation Trust of Vermont and the Vermont Community Foundation on the Village Trust Initiative (VTI). VTI offers expertise and funding to help small towns (population of 2,500 or less) 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, five communities were chosen for the program this year including Belvidere, New Haven, Orwell, Rupert, and Sharon. In 2025, we facilitated community engagement processes in several towns to help them understand the community's vision for the future of their village and how the building can support that vision. This work is laying the groundwork for the implementation of projects ranging from housing to community hubs, to general stores, to amenities such as a multi-use church and community center.

By the Numbers

6 communities participated in deep facilitation processes

800 community members participated

12 projects were prioritized

264 volunteers were activated to advance them

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

7 village revitalization projects supported with input from over 700 community members

5 additional communities selected to receive planning support and implementation funding

33 communities received technical assistance

Municipal Technical Assistance Program

Through our Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP) grant from the State of Vermont, VCRD offered free support and flexible funding to towns as they plan for and implement economic and community development projects. In 2025, we worked with over 38 communities in 13 counties delivering a range of services from community facilitation or stakeholder engagements to hiring consultants for hands-on support with planning, grant writing, facilitation, and project implementation. With an increasingly uncertain federal funding environment, MTAP gave small towns the additional capacity they needed to solve challenges and realize transformational projects for their future vitality and prosperity.



Policy & Partnerships

In addition to our direct work with communities, VCRD works to advance statewide systems that shape the future of rural Vermont through councils, coalitions, and partnerships. These efforts reflect our commitment to building a Vermont where rural communities, local leaders, and democratic practices can thrive.

Working Lands

For over a decade, VCRD has convened the Working Lands Coalition to support the farm, forest, and value-added enterprises that are the backbone of Vermont's rural economy and working landscape. These working lands businesses not only provide jobs and local products, they sustain Vermont's identity, heritage, and environmental resilience. In 2025, we continued to convene the Coalition across the agricultural and forest sectors to advocate for \$5 million dollars in funding to the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative for business development and growth. While the legislature ultimately appropriated just \$1 million, the need and opportunity remain clear. Investing at the \$5 million level annually would strengthen the farm, food, and forest economy and ensure that the businesses who steward our working landscape can continue delivering the scenic, cultural, economic, environmental, and recreational benefits that define Vermont's future. Visit workinglands.vermont.gov to see the impact reports.

Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance

In 2025, VCRD served on the Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance (VERTA) Steering Committee. VERTA was formed in response to a 2024 legislative directive (Act 181) charging the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to assess how Vermont supports its rural communities and how that system can be strengthened to better deliver housing, infrastructure, climate resilience, and economic development. DHCD partnered with the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies, with support from UVM's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, to design a comprehensive research approach that included a broad survey, key informant interviews and focus groups, and an examination of technical assistance models from other states. The report included clear priorities and actionable recommendations to increase State Agency participation in solving local challenges, develop and enhance municipal and regional shared services tools, expand local engagement and leadership development, and increase local capacity and flexible resources. VCRD along with our State, regional and local technical assistance partners are working to develop a statewide program to implement action items from the report.

Wellbeing Economy Alliance of Vermont

VCRD serves on the Steering Wheel of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance of Vermont (WEAV), a collaborative initiative working to reimagine what Vermont's economy could look like if wellbeing, rather than profit maximization, were the primary measure of success. WEAV brings together the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, the University of Vermont's Gund Institute for Environment, Abundant Sun LLC, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, the Vermont Humanities Council, the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll), and VCRD to advance this shared vision.

This work is grounded in what people across the state are experiencing and expressing every day. Across Vermont, rising costs for housing, transportation, childcare, and food are making it harder for people to get by. At the same time, rural communities continue to demonstrate what makes Vermont

unique: collaboration, creativity, and a deep commitment to supporting one another. That spirit is reflected in a growing statewide sentiment. In the 2026 Vermonter Poll, administered by the UVM Center for Rural Studies, 67% of respondents strongly agreed that Vermont's economic priorities should center the health and wellbeing of people, communities, and nature over maximizing profits and individual wealth. As WEAV looks ahead, its focus is on strengthening statewide collaboration by connecting the networks, organizations, and communities already advancing wellbeing-centered economic practices, and expanding that impact through storytelling, policy work, and systems-level change. Visit <https://weav.network/> to learn more.

Democracy and Civic Health

Throughout the year, VCRD engaged with partners around the topic of democracy and civic life in Vermont's communities. A healthy democracy is what allows communities to come together, listen to one another, and line up for action around shared goals. VCRD works at the intersection of civic engagement and democracy, designing public engagement processes that honor local agency and community-led decision-making. In a time when national forces often sow division, our work provides a counterweight, helping neighbors stay connected, collaborative, and focused on shaping their shared future. Again and again, we see that when people are recognized for their contributions and knowledge of place, civic participation deepens and a stronger sense of connection and belonging takes root. Grounded in local wisdom, VCRD remains committed to building partnerships that strengthen our democracy and the civic health of communities across the state.

Partners for Rural America

Partners for Rural America (PRA) is a national network of statewide rural development councils committed to strengthening rural communities through local engagement, leadership development, and collaborative problem-solving. The PRA provides a forum for these organizations to learn from one another, share effective models, and elevate rural priorities at the national level. As Vermont's representative, VCRD contributes Vermont's experience in community-driven planning and rural policy while gaining insight from peers across the country. In 2025, we attended the annual conference of the PRA held in Arizona.

Members & Donors

Thanks to the many contributors who support our work in service to rural communities and on behalf of Vermont's economy, environment, and people.

Friend (\$5-\$50)

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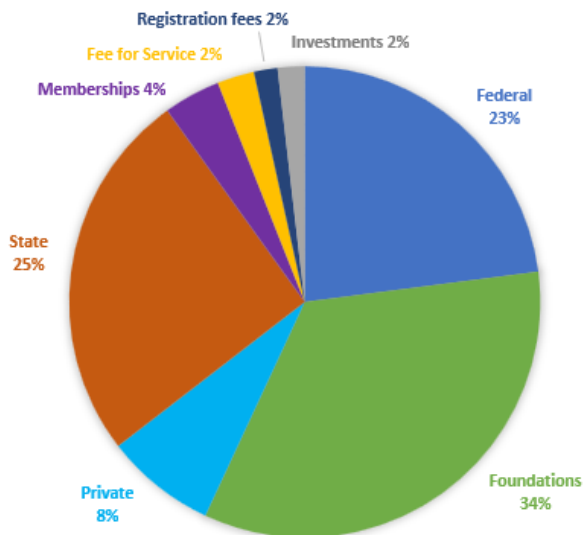
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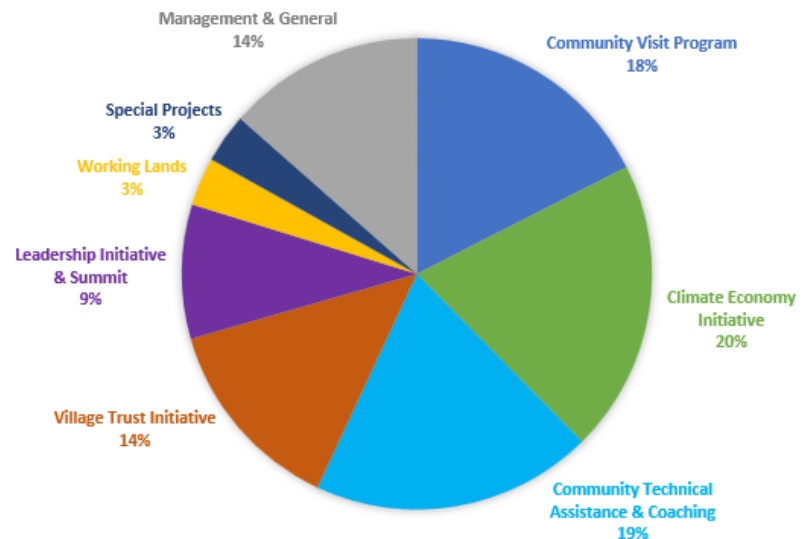
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Revenue by Type



Federal: 286,122
Foundations: 423,800
Private: 94,854
State: 318,515
Memberships: 48,704
Fee for Service: 31,755
Registration fees: 20,224
Investments: 22,938
Total: 1,246,912

Spending by Program



Community Visit Program: 224,725
Climate Economy Initiative: 257,675
Technical Assistance & Coaching: 248,177
Village Trust Initiative: 174,622
Leadership Initiative & Summit: 118,217
Working Lands: 42,464
Special Projects: 43,609
Management & General: 173,450
Total: 1,282,939



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Lunenburg Gilman Community Trust, a Village Trust Initiative participant, partnered with the recreation and events task forces to host a community-wide summer celebration where residents shared their hopes for the future of the Gilman Middle School building and the adjacent Fox Field Recreation Area through a picture-based dot-voting exercise.



Your contribution provides direct support
to rural Vermont communities.

Support VCRD today!
vtrural.org/support-us