

7th Vermont Community Leadership Summit

October 6, 2026 | Vermont State University Castleton



Agenda

8-9:00am *Registration* | Coffee and Pastries..... Fine Arts Building

9:00 **Conference Welcome:** Denise Smith, Executive Director, VCRD
Opening Song: Heidi Wilson

9:35 **Spark Stories:**
Max Barrows, Green Mountain Self Advocates
Kathryn Baxter, Lunenburg
Harmony Belle Devoe, Vermont State Youth Council

10:00 **Award Presentation:**
Lifetime Leadership Award: Paul Costello, former Executive Director of VCRD
Community Leadership Award: Bill Moore, Town of Brandon

10:35 *Break*

10:45 **Breakout Sessions**..... Breakout Rooms

Session Type Key:

Panel	(L)ivestreamed
Workshop	(H)ybrid
Networking	

W1 – Storytelling: Bridge Divides and Build Trust (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Madison Murphy Barney, The Center for Story & Strategy

This interactive workshop explores how storytelling can transform difficult conversations or processes into pathways for trust and collaboration. Gain insight and skills to listen differently, design programs more justly, and build trust in your community. The solutions to our biggest challenges are already here in the stories of your community. Our work is to hear them, honor them, and act accordingly.

W2 – Best Practices for Meeting and Event Facilitation (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Jessica Savage, Vermont Council on Rural Development

This session will cover the basics of framing a process of engagement, meeting planning, agenda design, facilitation 101, setting priorities, and effective follow-up.

W3 – Wild Belonging (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Jeanette Langston, Social Roots Studio

Working on community resilience, strategic planning, economic development — or just want to sharpen your networking skills? Social connection can seem like a nice-to-have, but a closer look proves it's essential to a thriving community. Investing in growing meaningful social connection doesn't only reduce isolation and loneliness and improve health; it's the foundation a resilient and regenerative community stands on. Dive deeper with Jeanette Langston of Social Roots Studio, a leader in the emerging field of social connection. She serves as US Regional Ambassador to the global Social Connection Collective and brings eight years of work, grounded in research, practice, and lived experience. You'll leave with a deeper understanding of connection, why it matters to your community's goals, and how to cultivate it intentionally — with practical grounding and fresh inspiration to start or continue your own social connection work.

W4 – Mental Health Literacy for Communities (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Cari Kelley, Hopeful Minds

Learn how to support community members in times of uncertainty. Gain tools to start conversations, identify needs, resources, and support the individual to develop coping and resiliency for future mental wellness.

P1 – Community Housing: Borrowing Brilliance (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Jessica Hyman, CVOEO

PANELISTS: Joe Camaratta, Waterbury Housing Taskforce; Sue Coakley, Putney Planning Commission; Marcella Eversole, Putney Housing Solutions Taskforce; and Jeff Pratt, New Haven Housing Taskforce

Creating more attainable housing is a priority in many communities: come hear from people just like you on how to get started, what is possible and what resources exist to create housing that fits your community's needs. Panelists will tell their stories and answer your questions so that you can take home new ideas and peer connections to help your community take its next steps.

P2(L) – School Building Transformations (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Alyssa Johnson, Vermont Council on Rural Development

PANELISTS: Shannon Barsotti, Town of Bennington; Kathryn Schenkman, Valley Hub Inc – RHS Repurposing Project; and Meg Streeter, Old School Enrichment Council

The closure of a local school is a challenge many communities are facing or experiencing. Come learn from towns that have navigated this transition and have completed or are in the process of repurposing former school buildings to serve new community purposes.

P3(H) – Safe Streets, Accessible Recreation, and Inclusive Mobility (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Sharon Plumb, Vermont Trails and Greenways Council

PANELISTS: Nate Besio, Vermont Center for Independent Living; Caitlin Cusack, Vermont Land Trust; Felicia Fowler, Vermont Adaptive Sports; and Randy Richardson, Upper Valley Trails

Hear from experts and community members who are working to increase the accessibility of recreation in Vermont communities including playgrounds, interpretive trails and more.

P4 – Boosting Local Democracy Without Picking Sides (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Sarah Henshaw, Nonprofit Helpdesk

PANELISTS: Robyn Palmer, Secretary of State's Office; Shanna Ratner, Braver Angels; and Dottye Ricks, League of Women Voters of Vermont

How can organizations and community leaders support democracy without becoming branded as politically divisive? In this facilitated discussion, participants will hear from a panel of organizations working on non-partisan projects that support democratic systems. Participants will then break out in small groups to reflect on a dilemma in their community and practice skills for inquiry and advocacy. At the end, we will regroup for some debriefing and panelist reflections.

P5 – AI for Rural Leaders (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Neale Lunderville, AI Taskforce

PANELISTS: Brian Lowe, Assembly Theory; Cass Madison, Center for Civic Future; Tino Rutanhira, Vermont Professionals of Color; and AnGayle “AJ” Vasiliou, Middlebury College

AI is here and is having a real-world impact on VT’s rural communities and businesses. This panel, moderated by Neale Lunderville, Chair of Vermont’s AI Task Force, will help participants understand what the State is doing to plan for this technology, and feature panelists with different expertise on the use and impacts of AI. This session is intentionally designed to bring multiple perspectives and to answer your questions about AI.

12:00 – 1:00 *LUNCH*

1:15 – 2:30 **Breakout Sessions** **Breakout Rooms**

W5 – Facilitating in Demanding Moments (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTERS: Andy Robinson, Andy Robinson Consulting, LLC and Jessica Savage, Vermont Council on Rural Development

Explores techniques for a more complex or difficult meeting or convening facilitation.

W6 – Funding Your Project – Institutional and Individual Giving (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Jenn Hayslett, Jenn Hayslett Coaching & Consulting

Every community project needs a plan for where the money comes from, and that plan usually involves more than one kind of funder. This session walks through the essentials of building a case for support and shows how that case shifts depending on your audience: what grantors and institutional funders need to see versus what motivates individual donors in your community to give. You’ll leave with a clearer sense of your funding landscape, the building blocks of a strong case for support, and a simple framework for setting realistic goals across different revenue streams.

W7(L) – Planning Accessible Public Engagements (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Peter Johnke, Vermont Center for Independent Living

Learn fundamental skills to plan a public event, municipal process, or community project welcoming to all. Learn how to integrate accessibility and inclusion into the core of your project, from pathways for participation to inviting and responding to ADA accommodation requests. Leave with skills that will break down barriers and get more of your community engaged!

W8 – Youth and Adults Leading Together (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTERS: Lauren Brady, Vermont Council on Rural Development; and Pat LaClair, UP for Learning

How can communities create and expand opportunities for young people to engage in civic leadership and local decision-making? In this interactive session, participants will explore the relationships, structures, and supports necessary to meaningfully engage young people in local decision-making. Participants will help create a training cohort model based on outcomes from Vermont’s “Leading Together” initiative.

W9 – Leadership as a Creative Practice (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Kris Gruen, The Creative Campus at Goddard

Creativity is a Leadership Skill: Successful leadership requires creative thinking, creative skills, and a creative approach. This workshop will help you understand where the creative version of yourself lives, where and how to access it, and help you use your creativity as a necessary leadership skill.

W10 – Capital Projects 101: Vision to Planning to Implementation (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Nicole Gratton, Preservation Trust of Vermont

Join this workshop for an introduction to project management for a community revitalization project that requires extensive capital. Learn how to organize around an initial vision, define goals and priorities, navigate funding considerations, and move your project from idea to implementation.

W11 – EVERYDAY — Big and Small: A Conversation with the Filmmaker (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Bess O'Brien, American Film Producer and Director

Join filmmaker Bess O'Brien for a viewing of a segment of her new documentary EVERYDAY – Big and Small, which highlights Vermonters creating connection, resilience, possibility, and joy in their communities. After the screening, O'Brien will lead a discussion on how Vermonters pull together and create miracles to create positive change. The full film will tour Vermont from September 15 to October 11.

P6 – Small Town Economies: Models for Businesses and Beyond (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Sarah Furman, Chamber & Economic Development of the Rutland Region

PANELISTS: Ryan Nakhleh, Local Maverick; Mike Solimani, Killington Resort and Pico Mountain Thayer Tomlinson, Friends of Algiers; and Andy Vermilyea, Friends of Castleton Parks and Recreations, Inc.

Creative models for strengthening community and business development go hand in hand. This panel will explore examples where small towns have built out Community Trusts, cooperatives, town-led redevelopment, or partnering with major employers. We will hear how efforts got started, adapted to (or overcame) challenges, and how successes have led to vibrant small towns across the state.

P7 – Reinventing Social Connection (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Henry Botzum, Shires Young Professionals

PANELISTS: Sarah Blizzard, Shires Young Professionals; Will and Jennifer Condry, Juniper Creative Arts; HB Lozito, Out in the Open; and Gretchen Schimelpfenig, Huntington Block Party

Creative and new ways to increase social connections demonstrate the opportunities to bring joy and connection to our lives. Local groups are re-inventing how to gather: from shutting down streets for neighborhood block parties, social groups around a common theme, and connecting people through skillshare, song, or meals.

P8(H) – How Farmers and Foresters are Building Community (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Jon Ramsey, Center for an Agricultural Economy

PANELISTS: amber arnold, SUSA ComUNITY Farm; Megan Browning, Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN); and Kate Forrer, Vermont Woodlands Association

While many Vermonters value our working landscape, farmers and foresters have faced many challenges in recent decades. This panel will explore how the people behind our working lands build networks among businesses and strengthen themselves and their communities. This panel will ask what can community leaders learn from their collaboration and how can communities and working lands businesses work together?

2:30

Break

W12(L) – Fundraising Conversations: Building Relationships That Lead to Giving (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Jenn Hayslett, Jenn Hayslett Coaching & Consulting

Raising money in your community starts with relationships. This session focuses on the person-to-person side of fundraising: how to identify the people in your community who care about your project, how to open a conversation with them, and how to move that relationship toward an invitation to give. Relationships also matter in seeking grant support. Using a simple model for donor conversations, you'll explore how to frame your project's story and leave with next steps for who to talk to next and how.

W13 – From Crisis to Opportunity: Rethinking the Big Issues (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Dru Roessle, Wellbeing Economy Alliance of Vermont

Housing, population, healthcare, affordability... Many Vermonters agree that these are existential issues. But at the statewide down to the local level our communities struggle to find common ground on solutions and then take concrete action. How can we call on community-level experience, think creatively, and move forward together? Join this hands-on creative workshop to think with your peers and leave with tools to have these discussions in your community.

W14 – Finding “Both/And” Solutions to Your Community’s Hard Questions (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Susan Clark, Community Development Professional

Attend this workshop if you have ever left a local meeting feeling discouraged about how the conversation went and wanting more inclusive, productive, and empowered community dialogue. Learn why things often go wrong and gain a tool to help groups work towards outcomes that honor diverging viewpoints.

W15 – Engagement By Design: Crafting Processes that Work (WORKSHOP)

PRESENTER: Rebecca Sanborn-Stone, Community Workshop

Great projects have great engagement — from ideas to implementation and beyond. That means bringing people in early, keeping them involved, and creating opportunities that work for everyone. But great engagement doesn't happen by accident. In this hands-on workshop, we'll explore practical ways to design processes that get diverse people involved at all stages of a project or planning process. We'll look at community case studies and ideas worth borrowing. Then we'll roll up our sleeves and work in small groups to design a community engagement process for a mock project. Come ready to share your experiences, experiment, and have some fun.

P9 – Building Community Climate Resilience (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Maggie O'Brien, Rutland Regional Planning Commission

PANELISTS: Lena Greenberg, Community Resilience Organization; Kate O'Neill, Center for an Agricultural Economy; and Marian Wolz, Climate Action Office

As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, how do communities prioritize climate resilience? Years after the storm, volunteers have moved on, roads are rebuilt, and displaced residents have found housing. But planning for and implementing resilience requires a continuous, focused effort, especially during calmer “blue-sky” periods. This panel explores various tools available for analyzing community vulnerabilities, integrating those with lived experiences into decision-making processes, and ensuring municipal procedures prioritize reducing or eliminating risks to critical infrastructure, facilities, and people. Despite the ongoing challenges of limited local capacity, leave with a clearer understanding of how to advance resilience forward.

P10(H) – Community Gathering Spaces (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Richard Amore, Central Vermont Economic Development Corporation

PANELISTS: Shannon Barsotti, Town of Bennington; Bebe Bullock, Arlington Common; and Jasmine Yuris, Johnson EATS

Small towns have opportunities for developing community gathering spaces for community connection, trust building, belonging, and neighborliness. This panel will showcase local leaders creating flexible spaces that often must take on many different forms within the span of a week. From community meals to music and recreation, examples will highlight the partnerships for success and the power of social infrastructure in small towns that utilizes the buildings and spaces already there.

P11 – Outdoor Recreation Economies (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Jackie Dagger, VOREC

PANELISTS: Martha DeGraf, City of Vergennes; Gary Fox, Town of Rockingham; and Nic Stark, Rutland Regional Planning Commission

Strong outdoor economies rely on intentional partnerships across agencies, nonprofits, towns, volunteers, and businesses. This workshop introduces the Vermont CORE Toolkit, shares lessons from pilot communities using data to strengthen projects and partnerships, and guides participants through identifying data, partners, and goals for their outdoor recreation economy work.

P12 – Steady Leadership in a Changing World (PANEL)

MODERATOR: Amy Cunningham, Vermont Arts Council

PANELISTS: Kristen Getler, Town of Roxbury; Jon Ramsey, Center for an Agricultural Economy; Rick Ufford Case, City of Newport; and Barbara Vacarr, The Creative Campus at Goddard

“Change Leadership” matters now more than ever. Vermont communities are navigating a shifting landscape — from college closures to changes in federal funding to decisions about protecting the built environment from harm. This panel brings together skilled change leaders to help participants understand how to prepare and what it takes to support people through challenging times.

N1 – Community Project Help Desk with Resource Providers (NETWORKING)

RESOURCE PROVIDERS:

Nicole Gratton, Preservation Trust of Vermont

Sarah Kearns, Vermont Small Business Development Center

Elisabeth Nance, Agency of Commerce & Community Development

Devon Neary, Rutland Regional Planning Commission

Sarah Pelkey, Chamber and Economic Development Corporation of the Rutland Region

Karen Scott, Vermont Community Foundation

Jules Shackman, Vermont Economic Development Authority

Laura Sibilila, Brattleboro Development Credit Corp

A networking opportunity to share your community project/initiative/idea with peers and resource providers and ask for advice, resources, and strategies to move forward. Talk directly to a resource or technical assistance provider about legal compliance, accessibility, outreach strategies, funding stacks, etc. for municipalities, nonprofits, and volunteer community groups.

4:00

Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream Party!

Free ice cream, with dairy free and gluten free options

