



# Symposium on the Future of Vermont's Campuses

*Protecting and Preserving Vermont's College  
Campuses Through Complicated Transformations*

The Creative Campus at Goddard | Plainfield, Vermont | May 13, 2026





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# Introduction

Vermont is experiencing a historic wave of college closures and campus transformations, reshaping rural economies, community identity, and the state’s long-term demographic and workforce trajectory. Vermont has lost 12 colleges in recent years, many in rural communities already facing economic strain, housing challenges, and the impact of recent flooding. What happens next to these campuses is not simply a real estate question—it is a matter of regional vitality, economic resilience, and community sustainability.

The Creative Campus at Goddard has been exploring this reality and on May 13, 2026, they hosted the *Symposium on the Future of Vermont’s Campuses* at their campus at 123 Pitkin Road in Plainfield. The Symposium convened statewide leaders, campus stewards, funders, and community partners to explore how Vermont can intentionally shape the next chapter of its campuses and the role they can play in our communities.

Participants emphasized that campuses are **more than real estate**: they are civic, cultural, and economic infrastructure that hold relationships, memory, and possibility. As one speaker noted, when a college closes, “*we don’t just lose an institution*”—we lose a generative force that has long anchored community life.

Across panels and keynotes, speakers described Vermont’s demographic pressures, regulatory barriers, and the urgency of moving from reactive crisis response to proactive statewide readiness. They highlighted emerging models, from The Creative Campus at Goddard to Greenway Institute’s adaptive reuse in Montpelier, that demonstrate how campuses can become mixed-use, multigenerational “creative commons” integrating housing, learning, arts, childcare, and community life.

A cross-cutting consensus emerged: Vermont needs **shared structures**, such as jump (resource) teams, land-bank-like entities, and coordinated funding and policy tools, to help communities act early, build trust, and steward campuses as long-term public assets. The day closed with a clear sense that Vermont is at a threshold. The state can choose to reimagine campuses as engines of belonging, resilience, and economic vitality for the next generation.

Hosted by the owner and staff of the Creative Campus, the event was made possible through financial support from the National Life Group, the Preservation Trust of Vermont and the Vermont Community Foundation. The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) participated as an in-kind sponsor and note-taker for the day and produced this report to document the proceedings which are offered in the spirit of future action and collaboration.



# Welcome

The day opened in the Haybarn Theater with a welcome from Kris Gruen, Director of The Creative Campus at Goddard, who acknowledged the impressive mix of people in the room, state leaders, local officials, campus stewards, funders, and community members, and framed the gathering as an opportunity to think together about the future of Vermont’s campuses as shared assets.

Secretary Lindsay Kurrle of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development delivered remarks on behalf of Governor Phil Scott. She emphasized that Vermont’s campuses are “more than just buildings”, they are places where people have built community, shaped local identity, and generated economic activity over generations. Many closures, she noted, have occurred in rural communities already facing economic strain, housing shortages, and climate-related challenges. How these campuses transition, she said, is not just a local issue but a statewide concern.

Plainfield and the Goddard campus were lifted up as a powerful example of both loss and opportunity. The campus had long been an anchor for the town’s identity and economy, and its closure was deeply felt. At the same time, Secretary Kurrle pointed to the campus’s history, scale, and location as the “greatest opportunity for resilience and recovery,” and affirmed the state’s intention to be a partner in helping communities navigate these transitions. She underscored that there is no single model for success; instead, local partnerships, creativity, and state support will be needed to ensure campuses remain economic drivers and centers of community life.



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## Opening Remarks

### Barbara Vacarr, From Closure to Commons



Kristina Lear, Co-Founder of the Goddard Institute for Dramatic Arts (GIDA), introduced Barbara Vacarr, PhD, former President of Goddard College and Chair of the Board of The Creative Campus. Barbara’s remarks, “From Closure to Commons: A National Inflection Point,” set the tone for the day by naming both the depth of the loss and the scale of the opportunity.

Barbara began with a simple truth: when a college closes, “we don’t just lose an institution.” We lose a place where people came into themselves, where relationships took root between campus and town, and where learning was “not simply the transfer and expansion of knowledge, but the unfolding of a life.” She noted that over the past decade, roughly half of Vermont’s private colleges have closed or merged, and that nationally, hundreds more are at risk. These campuses, she said, were often economic, social, and cultural anchors, centers of gravity for community life whose loss is not easily replaced.

She highlighted another dimension of loss that is harder to measure but deeply felt: the way Vermont's social, cultural, artistic, and civic life has been shaped by people who came to places like Goddard, Sterling, and Bennington, and then stayed. They built lives, founded organizations, and contributed to the fabric of their communities in ways that ripple across generations. When campuses close, we lose not only programs and buildings, but "a generative force, a place that draws people in and often roots them in community."

Barbara argued that the opportunity before us is not simply to preserve what was, but to reimagine what these places can become. She described many of these institutions as having begun as deeply place-based centers of learning and community life, only to be pulled over time into more inward, enrollment-driven models that became increasingly disconnected from their surrounding communities. The gradual erosion of "town-gown" interdependence, she suggested, has made both campuses and communities more vulnerable.

She then connected campus closures to a broader "structural shift" rather than a series of isolated failures. We are living, she said, amid interrelated crises: a deepening loneliness and social disconnection crisis, a housing crisis, an education crisis of meaning and relevance, and an ecological crisis, all alongside a profound hunger for purpose, belonging, and connection. The paradox is that "the very campuses that are closing were built to hold many of the things we now need most," yet we have been using them in increasingly narrow ways.

Barbara proposed a reimagining of campuses as "Creative Commons:" living, place-based ecosystems that integrate housing, learning, creative practice, and community life. In this model, campuses are not just places people come to for programs; they are places where people live. A resident community becomes the anchor that creates continuity, stabilizes the economic model, and makes community possible. From that foundation, arts, learning, and programming grow, drawing others in and turning the campus into a destination, not in the sense of a one-time visit, but as a place people feel called to experience and return to.

She described how this vision is beginning to take shape at The Creative Campus at Goddard: five nonprofit organizations leasing and activating campus buildings (many of them therapeutic schools serving children and youth), cohousing for workers, short-term stays for artists and visitors, shared public spaces including a restaurant, bar, and hiking trails, retreat and conference spaces, an annual calendar of performances, GIDA as a training and performance platform, and Goddard Spark as a pilot in lifelong learning. In its next phase, the campus will add senior housing and efficiency apartments, extending its role as a multigenerational community.

Barbara emphasized that this emerging model is rooted in partnership: a private owner, a nonprofit steward, and the local municipality each holding a different piece of what makes the campus viable. But she cautioned that the future of campuses cannot depend on private actors alone. If we understand campuses as civic, cultural, and economic infrastructure, then their future is a matter of shared responsibility and public concern. She closed by framing the moment as a threshold: we can continue to "manage decline" and liquidate assets, or we can choose to reimagine campuses as foundations for new solutions and act as "good ancestors" by aligning policy, capital, and community purpose now.



## Panel: The State of Vermont’s Economy and the Inevitability of Change

**MODERATOR:** Sarah Waring, *Northern Border Regional Commission*

**PANELISTS:** Kevin Chu, *Vermont Futures Project*

Lindsay Kurrle, *Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development*

Gus Seelig, *Vermont Housing & Conservation Board*

Ben Doyle, *Preservation Trust of Vermont*

The morning panel, moderated by Sarah Waring, Executive Director of the Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC), explored Vermont’s economic and demographic context and what it would mean to intentionally shape change rather than simply respond to it.

Sarah opened by situating the conversation in a broader regional pattern: rural communities across the Northeast are grappling with the closure of key institutions, schools, churches, mills, and colleges, while simultaneously working to redevelop infrastructure for housing, childcare, resilience hubs, and community spaces. She described the panelists as “big picture thinkers” who are also deeply grounded in rural practice.

Kevin Chu began by outlining the demographic and workforce trends shaping Vermont’s future. Vermont’s population is approximately 645,000, with a median age of 43.9, making it the second-oldest state in the country. Over recent years, the state has seen a decline of roughly 20,000 students in its K–12 system, which translates into a shrinking workforce. Vermont Futures Project analyzed the workforce gap by comparing the number of people entering and exiting the labor market: about 5,300 twelfth-grade students versus an estimated 15,000 retirements annually. Not all graduates stay in Vermont, which widens the gap further. To respond, the Project set an aspirational target of growing the population to 802,000 by 2035, both a symbolic and practical goal.

Kevin framed the choice starkly: if Vermont simply follows current trends, it will be “managing decline,” an “economic hospice” approach. Alternatively, the state can articulate a vision of what it wants to build toward and treat campuses as part of an “economic healing” process. He also pointed to changing household patterns: in 1970, average household size was 3.1; today it is 2.18. Many older Vermonters now occupy large homes while younger adults struggle to find housing in their hometowns. A town-by-town analysis comparing peak historical population to current population shows that many rural places have depopulated; restoring them even partway toward their historic

peaks could add tens of thousands of residents. The question he asked is not how to recreate the past, but how to plan what comes next.

Secretary Kurrle spoke to the policy and regulatory barriers that make campus redevelopment difficult. Vermont has a reputation for being hard to develop in, she acknowledged, but that reputation is intertwined with a strong culture of environmental stewardship. Policies like Act 250 were created with good intentions yet have not always evolved to meet current needs. As a result, developers often try to avoid triggering Act 250 because they perceive it as unpredictable, expensive, and time-consuming. She also noted that Vermont's shrinking tax base and growing social needs constrain public investment, especially now that the extraordinary federal funds available during the COVID-19 pandemic have receded.

At the same time, she emphasized that Vermont's small scale and strong networks are assets. Communities can lay groundwork through local zoning and designations, as Plainfield has done, to unlock potential on campuses. The state has also created tools to bridge infrastructure and housing gaps, such as the Community Housing Investment Program (CHIP), which helps finance costly infrastructure in partnership with developers and municipalities, and the Vermont Housing Improvement Program (VHIP), which supports bringing units back online or creating new ones. There is no single silver bullet, she said, but there is a growing toolbox that can be applied creatively to campus transitions.

Ben Doyle, speaking from the perspective of Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV), described campuses as both physical and cultural infrastructure. PTV's mission is to "build community through historic preservation," and Ben shared stories from his time at USDA Rural Development, where he helped finance institutions of higher learning, some of which later closed. When a college closes, he said, communities experience a profound loss of identity as well as economic activity. The challenge is to help communities pivot from crisis to opportunity.

He recounted the closure of Green Mountain College, where the campus went to auction with bidders in one room and community members watching in another. The question of what the new owner would do with the campus was deeply unsettling. Ben argued that we cannot save every building, but we must ask which buildings and landscapes "tell the story of who we want to be" and embody our values. He called for intentional efforts to share lessons learned from past closures and transitions, and for early support to trustees and communities before institutions reach a point of crisis. Vermont's "brand," he suggested, is rooted in quality of life and place; campuses can be central to that if we treat them as part of the infrastructure of a community.

Gus Seelig brought decades of experience from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and his own history as a Goddard student and member of the Goddard Fire Department. He underscored the importance of partnership and community dialogue in moving complex projects forward. He shared examples of adaptive reuse: Green Mountain Seminary in Waterbury Center, converted into apartments; the long-vacant Bennington High School, now being redeveloped into mixed-use housing and community space; Cambrian Rise in Burlington, a large mixed-income neighborhood on a former industrial site; McClelland Hall in Johnson, being transformed into senior and family housing; Watkins School in Rutland, converted into senior apartments; and the Sacred Heart campus in Newport, repurposed for mixed-income housing.

In each case, Gus emphasized, success depended on local consensus, cross-sector partnership, and the willingness of funders and regulators to be flexible. Community development, he said, begins with "Job One": building community consensus. Without that, permitting and financing tools cannot do their work.

The panel closed with questions from the audience, including a powerful intervention from a Goddard parent who described the lack of early outreach from the college's board and the absence of a mechanism for parents and community members to help before closure. Panelists agreed that boards often lack tools and support in crisis, and that Vermont needs intentional structures, playbooks, jump teams, and shared resources, to help institutions and communities navigate transitions earlier and more creatively. Kevin ended by returning to the theme of trust: Vermont needs more people, and more people need Vermont, but rebuilding trust in institutions and processes will be essential to any successful future.

## Keynote

### Skyler Skikos: Restoring the Commons: Vermont's Opportunity in Reimagining College Campuses



The late-morning keynote was delivered by Skyler Skikos, founder and president of Story + Place, a firm that works with communities, institutions, and developers to create places that are “environmentally flourishing and deeply resonant.” Skyler framed his talk, “Restoring the Commons: Vermont’s Opportunity in Reimagining College Campuses,” as both a diagnosis of the “metacrisis” we are living through and a vision for how campuses can help address it.

Skyler began with a line from Dante’s *Inferno*: “Midway through the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood, having strayed from the straightforward path.” He suggested that both the nation and its campuses are in such a “dark wood” moment. He named four interlocking crises: loneliness, meaning, polarization, and ecology, and described them as manifestations of a single underlying “metacrisis”: the loss of relationship.

Drawing on his work in the built environment, Skyler argued that environments are not neutral; they either evoke meaning and belonging or they do not. He contrasted a traditional “Vermont way” of building, centered on a commons, surrounded by a mixed village, with streets for people and a strong local character, with the fragmented suburban pattern of segregated uses, car-dominated streets, generic design, and the elimination of the commons. Flourishing environments, he said, are “nourishing, uplifting, and resonant,” and so are flourishing relationships. When we eliminate the commons, we erode both.

Skyler introduced a simple framework of three domains of society: the state (which manages populations), the market (which allocates resources), and the commons (which forges trust and community, where people are treated as people rather than subjects or consumers). The state and market are domains of transactions; the commons is the domain of relationship. When the commons is lost, trust erodes and institutions break down. The loneliness epidemic, meaning crisis, mass polarization, and ecological crisis, he argued, are all rooted in this loss of relationship, to one another, to place, and to the natural world.

Turning to campuses, Skyler acknowledged the educational and economic losses associated with closures but suggested that something deeper is at stake: campuses are among the last places where many Americans experience dense, walkable, relational communities. He referenced a viral tweet noting that “college was the best time of their life” for many people because it was one of the few times, they lived in such a community. Yet, he noted, even walkable cities can feel lonely if they are organized around transaction rather than relationship.

Historically, he said, higher education was rooted in the commons and oriented toward human formation. Ancient academies and medieval universities were embedded in community life and focused on cultivating wisdom and character, not just technical skills. Today, in an effort to survive, many institutions have narrowed their focus to return-on-investment metrics and technical degrees, cutting liberal arts and the very forms of education that help people become fully human. In the absence of place-based formation, the digital world has become a surrogate, but it cannot substitute for embodied, relational learning.

Skyler argued that Vermont has a unique opportunity to lead the nation in reimagining campuses to address both the loss of the commons and the crisis in higher education. He proposed that campuses be reimagined to do two things: reestablish places rooted in relationship, and introduce a higher education refocused on human formation and learning rooted in life. He outlined four “vision pillars” for this work: restoring the commons as a central, relational gathering place; surrounding it with a vibrant, mixed village designed for the rhythms of real human life; interweaving learning throughout the community so that the “village becomes the university”; and returning to local placemaking so that each campus has a distinct identity that builds kinship and pride.

He shared a Bay Area precedent where a former campus in the Oakland hills is being reimagined as an intergenerational community with a micro-college, community classes, and a creative arts center, all organized around a central commons and walkable streets. He also described the Presidio Trust in San Francisco, where a former military base was transformed into a financially self-sustaining national park and mixed-use district through a combination of federal support, careful stewardship, and a commitment to the commons. And he pointed to the Green Bay Packers’ community ownership model as an example of how symbolic ownership and pride can sustain a shared asset.

Skyler then proposed a conceptual “Commons Restoration Act” for Vermont, structured around three steps. First, “clear the path” by designating college campuses as Commons Restoration Zones and allowing campus owners to create mixed villages with a commons as-of-right. Second, “fund the foundation” by providing seed capital for the commons and infrastructure financing for the campus village. Third, “protect it permanently” by transferring the commons to an independent trust representing the community and “fanbase,” with profits reinvested in the place.

He closed by returning to Dante and the idea that the journey out of the dark wood is not solitary but communal, oriented toward something better and larger than ourselves. Vermont, he suggested, can create “beacons of life” on its campuses that spread across New England “like wildflowers.” The question, he said, is whether we are ready to “give it the old college try.”



## Panel: Campuses Transitioned and in Transition

**MODERATOR:** Joyce Judy, President of CCV

**PANELISTS:** Kris Gruen, *The Creative Campus at Goddard*  
Kalya Yannatos, *Marlboro Music*  
Linda Ramsdell, *Headwaters Community Trust*  
Michael Cohen, *Alfred Weissman Group*  
Kristin Cantu, *Greenway Institute*  
Denise Smith, *Vermont Council on Rural Development*

Joyce Judy, President of the Community College of Vermont, opened by noting that Vermont has seen multiple college closures and campus vacancies in recent years, and that this panel offered a chance to hear from those who are “in the thick of it” trying to steward these places into their next lives. She asked each panelist to introduce themselves with a brief story of their campus project and to share early successes and challenges.

Kris Gruen described his path from Goddard student and local educator to Director of The Creative Campus. When Barbara Vacarr arrived as president, Kris was running a community radio station and helped transfer the college’s broadcast license to a new central Vermont community radio entity. In 2024, he was invited to join the “Great Wood” project, an effort to purchase the campus. Although that initial purchase attempt did not succeed, local developer Mike Davidson ultimately bought the campus in the fall of 2024 and asked Kris to stay on as director.

Kris emphasized that one of the core elements of what is working at Goddard is a genuine, reciprocal relationship with the Town of Plainfield. The new owner hired local people with deep ties to the campus and community, and the team has worked intentionally to invite Plainfield residents onto the campus and integrate the campus into the village. Since November 2024, he noted, there has been a steady effort to make the campus more a part of community life. In the wake of the 2023–24 floods and the college’s closure, the campus became more of a resource for the community, which was part Tim Pitkin’s (founder of Goddard College) original vision. With a small but dedicated team supported by the owner, The Creative Campus has seen a dramatic increase in programming and unsolicited interest from partners, driven in part by clear communication that the campus is open and welcoming.

Kalya Yannatos spoke about Marlboro Music’s evolving role on the former Marlboro College campus. Coming from a background in dance, arts education, and development, she described her work as grounded in an understanding that “brain and body are holistically part of who we are” and that

learning is embodied. Marlboro Music, a nonprofit arts organization, has called the campus home for 75 years, but did not originally intend to become its owner. After the college's closure and the subsequent legal troubles of the initial purchaser, the community experienced grief and anger, compounded by the impending loss of the local elementary school. There was a deep need, she said, "to become whole again."

In that context, Marlboro Music stepped forward to acquire the campus, recognizing both its long relationship with the place and the meaning the campus holds for alumni and neighbors. The organization created "Potter's Hill" as an interim name in respect to Marlboro College alumni and is moving toward a future in which the campus will be known as the campus of Marlboro Music. Kalya emphasized that success is rooted in relationships, with neighbors, the town, and partners beyond, and that there is "no one recipe" for campus transformation. She spoke explicitly about love as a core ingredient: love for the place, for the community, and for the possibilities that can ripple outward from a strong center.

Linda Ramsdell, President of Headwaters Community Trust (HWCT), shared the story of the Sterling College campus in Craftsbury. HWCT is a community land trust serving Albany, Craftsbury, Glover, and Greensboro. When Sterling announced its closure, local businesses and residents, along with HWCT, advocated for an open and transparent process. HWCT convened a public meeting facilitated by Paul Costello, where stakeholders and community members could imagine a mixed-use future for the campus that would serve the community and future generations.

Initially, Sterling's trustees, HWCT, and the Town of Craftsbury were aligned around a shared outcome: community stewardship of the campus. Donors, the Northern Forest Center, Preservation Trust of Vermont, and developer Sam Dunn helped assemble an offer that would settle the college's mortgage and transfer the campus to HWCT. However, as Sterling's insolvency deepened, the trustees' duty of care shifted toward protecting creditors, and the offer was deemed insufficient to satisfy them. The trustees decided to test the national market to demonstrate that they had fulfilled their fiduciary responsibilities. Linda described the current moment as a threshold: what is at stake is not only the campus itself, but the future of Craftsbury Saplings (a local childcare program), ongoing programming, and the community's ability to have agency in shaping the campus's future. The question she said, is whether the campus will be put fully on the market, and whether the community is ready to step forward again to protect this asset.

Michael Cohen, representing Alfred Weissman Real Estate, spoke about the Southern Vermont College campus in Bennington. After the college went bankrupt in 2019, a receiver rented the campus to a camp that did not act as a good neighbor. When the campus went to auction, Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, a Dartmouth-affiliated hospital across the street, decided it needed to have a say in the campus's fate and purchased it. The hospital then partnered with Alfred Weissman Real Estate to rezone the property and develop a destination-oriented resort focused on spa, wellness, and leisure travel, as well as corporate retreats and weddings.

Michael described a multi-year process of working closely with the town, neighbors, and the Vermont Land Trust (which holds an easement on trails on Mount Anthony) to shape a plan that could succeed under Act 250. A key lesson, he said, has been the importance of communicating "often and early" with neighbors and adjusting plans before entering into the formal permitting process, rather than during. The project aims to create 120–180 jobs and bring a world-renowned brand to Bennington, with the goal of strengthening the local economy and supporting local farms and businesses. After three and a half years of planning, they hope to secure approvals in 2026, begin construction in 2027, and complete the project by 2029.

Kristin Cantu, Business Manager for Greenway Institute, described the organization's work on the former Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) campus in Montpelier. Greenway Institute is an educational nonprofit with a bold vision: in four years, students can graduate with a job and zero debt. The Institute has run two pilot semesters to test its model and is now fundraising intensively to launch its first full engineering cohort. In the meantime, it has inherited a campus with significant physical assets and a rich history.

Kristin said Greenway Institute feels a responsibility to use the campus in ways that respond to current community needs. Recognizing Montpelier's housing crisis and the vulnerability of downtown office space to flooding, Greenway has converted dorms into medium-priced, affordable housing, renting over 100 rooms with a sizable waiting list. The residents are diverse, and the emerging community is "special" in its own right. Greenway is also partnering to open an early childcare center on campus, after a two-year search for the right operator, and has reactivated the former New England Culinary Institute commercial kitchen to serve the community. She recalled the "gut punch" when VCFA announced it was moving its programs out of state without meaningful community engagement and noted that Greenway has tried to do things "in the right order" by holding community gatherings and staying in constant communication with local stakeholders.

Denise Smith, Executive Director of VCRD, spoke about VCRD's role as a convener at local, regional, and statewide levels. VCRD is often called into communities at catalytic moments, before or after closures, disasters, or major transitions, to help residents and leaders come together, ask hard questions, surface concerns, and identify shared priorities. Denise emphasized that these moments could feel overwhelming, and that "we have to slow down to speed up." When communities are brought in early and often, she said, alignment emerges, new leaders step forward, and "social and political wealth" is built that can sustain long-term work. She underscored that process design and inclusive facilitation are as important as any single project outcome.

In the second half of the panel, Joyce asked about challenges and recommendations. Kris reflected on the "luck of the draw" inherent in campus sales: communities cannot count on a buyer who loves the place and the community. He argued that we cannot leave the future of campuses to chance; we need statewide readiness and preparedness, including structures that do not depend solely on the vision and capacity of a single owner. Campuses, he said, were built for mixed uses and for the "health and wealth" of their communities; we need to preserve that history and be ready for the next mixed-use chapter.

Kalya noted that Marlboro Music's seasonal presence creates both opportunities and constraints. The organization inhabits the campus in the summer, which limits its ability to create year-round housing or mixed-use development. However, it has turned this challenge into an opportunity by providing affordable seasonal housing for workers at the Brattleboro Food Co-op, Mount Snow, and other employers. She also named the challenge of being perceived as a large, wealthy arts institution, when in reality the organization's year-round staff is small and much of its activity is seasonal. Part of the work ahead, she said, is to deepen Marlboro Music's year-round local grounding and to let the economic and cultural impact of the summer season ripple out more fully into the community.

Linda strongly endorsed the idea, raised earlier in the day, of a statewide "jump team" that could respond when campuses or other critical institutions are at risk. Right now, she said, each community experiences a closure like a medical emergency, with the "bill" and the burden falling on them alone. HWCT is learning in real time, in a high-stakes environment, how to navigate legal, financial, and community processes. A jump team with experience in orderly transitions, community engagement, and financing would be a welcome support.

Michael highlighted structural challenges in Vermont's development process. There is no formal site plan approval process that allows for early conceptual review; instead, developers must invest in near-complete plans before learning whether a project is viable under Act 250 and local regulations. He also described the tension between historic preservation and energy efficiency on the Southern Vermont College campus, where buildings were constructed as summer homes, later winterized with radiators, and now require creative solutions to meet both preservation and climate goals. He pointed to C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy) as a useful tool for long-term, low-interest financing of energy improvements.

Kristin spoke candidly about the financial and regulatory hurdles of starting a new college and reusing an old campus. Greenway needs to raise approximately \$30 million overall, including \$9 million to launch its first class. The campus buildings have significant deferred maintenance and are energy-inefficient, and the site is subject to Act 250. She captured a sentiment many in the room recognized: "Vermont wants change as long as everything stays the same." She called for state and federal agencies to work together to align policies with the shared goal of making Vermont a vibrant place where people can age in place, where the college system is viable, and where communities can welcome new residents and enterprises.

Denise closed the panel by lifting up two themes: first, that campuses are resources for the whole community, not just for their institutions; and second, that there is a "synergistic energy" when organizations, residents, and public partners work together. She also named the "power of love" for place and community as a real driver of the work, noting that love and hard work are often the same thing in practice.

Audience questions focused on financing, coalition-building, and the idea of a statewide network or land-bank-like structure to hold campuses in transition. Panelists agreed that partnerships are essential and that Vermont would benefit from a shared "house" where campus stewards, communities, and statewide organizations can find each other, share tools, and coordinate action.



## Panel: Resources and Policy Initiatives to Support Campus Transformation

**MODERATOR:** John Broderick, *The Creative Campus*

**PANELISTS:** Chris Saunders, *Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC)*  
Ted Brady, *Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT)*  
Dan Smith, *Vermont Community Foundation (VCF)*

The final panel of the day turned toward policy, funding, and systems-level responses. Moderated by John Broderick, a Plainfield resident and community development consultant, the panel included Chris Saunders (Federal Co-Chair, NBRC), Ted Brady (Executive Director, VLCT), and Dan Smith (President and CEO, VCF).

John opened by acknowledging his own journey, from attending a university with 40,000 students to living in Plainfield for the past 20 years, and by noting that Vermont State University (VSU) was intentionally not the focus of the day because of the complexity of its situation. He referenced McClelland Hall in Johnson, where Downstreet Housing & Community Development and Lamoille Housing Partnership are working with Community Development Block Grant funds to convert classrooms into housing, as an example of the kind of work underway.

Chris Saunders reflected on what he has seen over years of working with Senator Patrick Leahy and now at NBRC. Nearly every institution that has gone through economic and human capital crises, Trinity College, VCFA, and others, has “knocked on Senator Leahy’s door.” One consistent indicator of success, he said, is the presence of a community partner willing to step up with human or financial capital to hold the campus or parts of it. At St. Joseph’s College in Rutland, for example, the ability to acquire facilities for athletics and community space made a difference. What is often missing, he argued, is an institutional or community partner with the capacity to articulate and hold a vision collaboratively from the outset.

Chris also described the experience of Green Mountain College in Poultney, where community members spent a great deal of energy on factors outside their control, such as institutional decisions and market forces, rather than on what they could do to strengthen themselves. Institutional leaders, he said, often lack tools to unwind an institution in crisis; they are focused on day-to-day operations and legal obligations, not on long-term transition planning. He suggested that Vermont needs tools and support that can be deployed earlier, before institutions reach the point of closure.

Dan Smith, drawing on his experience as a former college president and now head of the Vermont Community Foundation (VCF), spoke about the broader context of change in Vermont. On the one hand, he said, there is a national conversation about how the “civic crisis” we face, which includes polarization, mistrust, and fragmentation, may be best addressed at the local level, in places where people share values and can solve problems together. That requires gathering spaces, campuses, libraries, community centers, where people can come together. On the other hand, he was candid that Vermont’s demographics are “sideways,” its economy is out of balance, and its social challenges are pushing people away.

Dan argued that change will not come on any single institution’s terms. Campuses that want to remain relevant will need to be part of solving statewide challenges like housing, workforce, childcare, climate, and that will require openness to collaboration and compromise. He emphasized that VCF is a willing partner, but that philanthropy alone cannot be a business model; it can catalyze different conditions, but long-term sustainability must come from alignment with public priorities and community needs. He also noted that success will be shaped by conditions outside any one community’s control, and that Vermont is on a “ten-year journey” to attract and retain people who want arts, culture, recreation, housing, economic opportunity, and confidence that civic institutions can solve problems.

Ted Brady spoke from the vantage point of Vermont’s municipalities. As head of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) and former Deputy Secretary of ACCD, he has seen more colleges close during his career than remain open. In each closure, he said, he has not felt effective in helping communities “get out of the hole” left behind. There is “no one there to help you do this,” he said, and while colleges and schools have been closing since we started opening them, we have not built systems to support communities through that process.

Ted described colleges as businesses that are often “stubbornly resistant” to change. They are committed to their missions such as poetry, arts, liberal education, and may struggle to adapt to shifting demographics and economics. He argued that institutions need support to think about the future before a crisis hits. He also pointed out that when a major employer closes, Vermont often mobilizes significant resources for redevelopment; we should consider similar multi-million-dollar efforts for campuses, especially given the decade ahead in which more closures are likely.

The conversation turned to the idea of a “jump team” or structured response mechanism. Chris noted that the federal government already invests heavily when things go wrong in other sectors, through Economic Development Administration disaster recovery, base closure programs like the Presidio Trust, and industry transition support. He suggested that Vermont could develop a similar model for campuses: a team or institution that can bridge between owners, communities, and funders, helping to collate a community vision and attract resources. He pointed to examples in Maine, where a group has come together to facilitate a vision for Millinocket after mill closures, and in Windham County, where expertise has been brought in to support a farm-based redevelopment. NBRC, he said, is interested in being part of such efforts on the “back end,” but there is a need to get “upstream” with tools and examples.

Dan reiterated that no higher education institution is free from crisis right now. He urged Vermont to think proactively about how to use unique pieces of infrastructure, campuses, mills, hospitals, to meet community challenges and to line up investments over the next decade, rather than simply letting demographic and economic forces play out. He asked what it would take to move beyond resilience, merely bouncing back, to a place where Vermont is thriving again, rather than “getting older, smaller, and poorer.”

Ted emphasized the immediate pressures on municipalities. Many towns, he said, are so consumed with basic responsibilities, roads, water, wastewater, that they have little capacity to engage in complex visioning or redevelopment conversations. When a campus closes, there is often no time to plan; campuses can be “snapped up” quickly, and communities are left attending “wakes” rather than shaping futures. Towns need practical support for survival in the short term, even as longer-term visions are developed.

The panel also explored regulatory and financial conditions. John asked how the state is making it easier to build housing and reuse campuses in a “resource-rich” but highly regulated environment. Ted responded that Vermont has, in fact, made significant investments in infrastructure through programs like CHIP, and that towns and cities are increasingly willing to adapt zoning bylaws to allow mixed uses on campuses. The question, he said, is often less about resources and more about whether a project is a good idea and whether neighbors can be convinced.

Dan pointed out that it is dramatically more expensive to build in Vermont than in many other places, and that public aversion to debt in small towns can limit the ability to invest in transformative projects. He suggested that Vermont may need to rethink its relationship to public debt, especially for projects that address demographic and economic challenges. School renovations, for example, make little sense if there is no plan to create housing where families can live. He also noted that VCF’s place-based grantmaking must be tied to projects that have a clear likelihood of driving progress; funders cannot commit indefinitely to projects that do not address systemic challenges.

Chris shared that NBRC is working with partners like the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and Preservation Trust of Vermont to create toolkits for community-supported enterprises and to explore what kinds of supports, jump teams, static resources, or both, would be most useful to communities facing the loss of major employers or institutions. He invited those in the room to help shape these tools.

In closing, Sarah Waring (from the audience) mentioned a New Hampshire law that gives residents time and a first option to purchase manufactured home parks when they go up for sale, with support from the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund to organize resident ownership. She asked whether a similar model could be applied to campuses. Dan responded that such an option would be valuable to include in a state plan, with clear context and purpose, and that Vermont needs to have a broader conversation about community love, creative entrepreneurship, and collaboration in the face of overlapping crises.

# Key Takeaways

Across the day, several themes emerged:

## **Campuses are more than real estate.**

They are civic, cultural, and economic infrastructure that hold relationships, memories, and possibilities. When they close, communities lose not only jobs and tax base but also places of belonging and imagination. Any response that treats campuses solely as assets to be liquidated will miss their deeper value.

## **Timing and process matter.**

Many institutions and communities see closures coming for years, but lack tools, support, or permission to act early. Trustees are often focused on legal obligations; communities are often brought in only after decisions are made. Participants called for earlier, more transparent processes; shared playbooks; and “pause with a process” mechanisms that can temporarily hold campuses while communities and partners develop plans.

## **Relationships and trust are foundational.**

Successful transitions, whether at Goddard, in Craftsbury, in Bennington, or elsewhere, depend on strong relationships between owners, municipalities, residents, and statewide partners. Trust is built through early and honest communication, inclusive engagement, and a willingness to share power and responsibility. Conversely, when communities feel excluded or disrespected, trust erodes and opportunities are lost.

## **Vermont needs integrated, not siloed, approaches.**

Funding streams for housing, economic development, historic preservation, energy, workforce, and infrastructure are often separate, yet campuses sit at the intersection of all these domains. Participants called for more coordinated statewide responses that braid funding, align policy, and recognize campuses as multi-use, multi-benefit assets.

## **There is a hunger for shared structures:**

Shared structures like jump teams, land-bank-like entities, commons trusts, and statewide coalitions that can support communities and institutions in transition would not replace local leadership, but would provide expertise, capital, and process support so that communities are not left to reinvent the wheel in moments of crisis.

## **Vermont is at a threshold.**

The demographic and economic trends are real and sobering, but so is the energy, creativity, and love for place evident in the room. Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that Vermont can choose to “manage decline” or to intentionally shape a future in which campuses are reimagined as creative commons, places where people live, learn, create, and belong together.

# Conclusion and Possible Next Steps

Vermont's college campuses are at a turning point. As closures accelerate, communities across the state are grappling with the loss of institutions that have long served as cultural, economic, and civic anchors. The symposium made clear that while these transitions are challenging, they also present a rare opportunity: to reimagine campuses as multigenerational, mixed-use community assets that strengthen Vermont's resilience and quality of life.

Participants emphasized that Vermont cannot continue responding to closures as isolated emergencies. Instead, the state must adopt a coordinated, proactive approach that preserves options, supports communities early, and aligns public, private, and philanthropic partners around shared goals.

The symposium surfaced a clear set of **possible next steps**, each directly reflecting ideas, concerns, and recommendations voiced by participants throughout the day. These steps are not prescriptions but opportunities for statewide collaboration, grounded in what Vermonters working on the front lines of campus transitions said they need most.

To work through the following possible next steps, a group could form to gather additional information, determine who needs to be involved in identifying actions and resources, define roles and goals, explore coordinated strategies, and make recommendations to policymakers, funders and community builders.

## 1. Create an Early-Intervention “Pause with a Process” Mechanism

Participants repeatedly emphasized that closures happen too quickly and without community involvement. Trustees, parents, and local leaders described the harm caused when decisions are made behind closed doors and announced only after options are gone.

Possible next step: Establish a structured pause period when a campus enters financial distress, triggering early notification and allowing time for community engagement, feasibility analysis, and exploration of community ownership or mission-aligned stewardship.

## 2. Form a Statewide Jump Team and Develop a Campus Futures Playbook

Panelists noted that trustees often lack tools, support, and guidance in moments of crisis. Communities also struggle to know where to begin.

Possible next step: Create a rapid-response, cross-sector jump team—state, philanthropic, legal, financial, and community development partners—supported by a clear playbook outlining fiduciary responsibilities, redevelopment pathways, funding tools, and best practices for inclusive engagement.

## 3. Explore a Campus Stewardship or Holding Entity

Multiple speakers described the “luck of the draw” in campus sales and the need for structures that can temporarily hold campuses while communities organize.

Possible next step: Assess the feasibility of a statewide trust or land-bank-like entity that can acquire, stabilize, and transfer campuses to long-term stewards, preventing distressed sales and preserving public-interest outcomes.

#### 4. Align Policy, Regulation, and Funding Tools

State leaders and developers highlighted regulatory barriers (including Act 250), infrastructure gaps, and the need to braid funding across housing, childcare, preservation, and economic development.

Possible next step: Convene a cross-agency working group to modernize regulatory pathways, streamline redevelopment processes, and coordinate funding tools to support mixed-use, community-serving campus transitions.

#### 5. Build a Network of Campus Stewards and Community Partners

Campus leaders from Goddard, Marlboro, Montpelier, Bennington, and Craftsbury all expressed a desire for ongoing peer learning and shared problem-solving.

Possible next step: Establish a statewide network for campus owners, nonprofits, municipalities, and community partners to exchange lessons, coordinate efforts, and strengthen Vermont’s collective capacity to steward campuses.

#### 6. Strengthen Community-Centered Engagement and Communication

Speakers emphasized that successful transitions—at Goddard, Marlboro, and Montpelier—were rooted in trust, transparency, and early community involvement.

Possible next step: Support local visioning processes, host regional conversations, and share information broadly so communities can participate meaningfully in shaping campus futures.

#### 7. Reconvene in 2027 to Track Progress and Advance Shared Priorities

Participants expressed interest in continued statewide collaboration and accountability.

Possible next step: Host a follow-up Vermont Campus Futures Summit to report on progress, highlight emerging models, advance policy proposals, and sustain momentum.



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TCC Team and Symposium Hosts (left to right): Shannon Alexander, Kris Gruen, Lauren Geiger, Barbara Vacarr, John Broderick, Zak Fugazy (kneeling), Mike Davidson, Kristina Lear, Kristie Farnham, and Georgina Castelazo

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*This report, produced by the Vermont Council on Rural Development, reflects a synthesis of the day's proceedings and is intended to support ongoing conversation, collaboration, and action around the future of Vermont's campuses and rural communities.*

*The photos were taken by Shannon Alexander, Director of Storytelling at the Creative Campus at Goddard.*