



“Making It Happen!” Summit

Local Leadership for the Future of Vermont Communities

October 1, 2018 | Castleton University

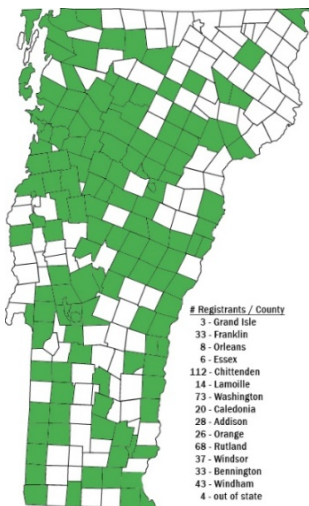
Interim Report: Summit Findings and Next Steps

A. Introduction

What is leadership—how do we define it? In democracy, leadership is a process; the act of stepping up for one’s community, listening and adding up potential priorities for action, and working with others to promote the common good. For us at the Vermont Council on Rural Development leadership is about sharing power and supporting community members who step up in service to community progress. Local leadership is the key ingredient to build unity, set direction, and achieve progress in the face of the daunting economic and demographic challenges that confront Vermont communities today. In democracy, all citizens are called upon to lead, not just those who have formal leadership positions. Where leaders step up, towns achieve great things. Motivated by a wonderful and binding patriotism of place, local leaders in all their diversity and throughout Vermont are constructing a future, building momentum, and making democracy real.

This **Summit Findings and Next Steps** report is an **interim** report! It shares what VCRD and the Summit planning team heard through the Summit on goals, values, and principles for advancing community leadership in Vermont, and key ideas that could be moved forward. The team will be evaluating these ideas toward action and working over the coming months to prioritize and develop strategies to address them. We’ll share these back to participants in a final report and action plan before the end of the year.

B. Purpose and Description of the “Making it Happen” Community Leadership Summit



Convened on October 1, 2018 by the Vermont Council on Rural Development in partnership with key leadership organizations in the state, the “Making it Happen!” Community Leadership Summit brought over 500 local leaders together to learn, share, and work together for their communities and for the future of Vermont.

Vermont communities are galvanized by leaders who identify local needs, rally partners, and implement projects ranging from developing community day care centers to building town economic development committees or local agricultural networks. At the Summit, current and emerging leaders from more than 130 towns and cities throughout Vermont came together to learn new skills from each other and from statewide experts, to address key community issue areas, and to frame new ways Vermont can systematically support community progress.

The Summit was designed to help support leaders, but also asked: “*In the face of the challenges before our society, our economy, and our local communities, what should be done to better encourage, inspire and train leaders with the skills they need to succeed?*” This document is our starting point in gathering together the answers of participants.

These findings will contribute to a strategic planning process, led by VCRD with our planning partners to further prioritize ways we could collaborate to advance opportunities, training and support to meet the needs of different populations of leaders as they address local needs throughout Vermont.

C. Goals, Values, and Principles Espoused by Summit Attendees

▶ **“Not about us, without us.”**

Several participants shared this idea: We must not objectify the targets of our leadership, but share leadership, share power, and include everyone in planning and implementation of actions.

▶ **“Making it Happen”**

One participant shared the idea to, “do something, it almost doesn’t matter what.” Taking leadership and driving local community projects builds momentum and partnership. As Mary Parker Follett put it almost a century ago, “Agreement happens at the motor level.” We build community when we work together.

▶ **Remove Barriers and Improve Access**

Expand community engagement and participation at the local level by providing childcare, transportation and food, and work to accommodate those with diverse schedules. Intentional and personal outreach to people of all socio-economic backgrounds is crucial. Make participation in local community progress fun for everyone!

▶ **Leading for Civility**

In an age of tension and division, community leaders in all their diversity have a crucial role to play in advancing and modeling positive civil dialogue, actively listening and promoting respect, while promoting mutual understanding and working to disarm and prevent negative and destructive attitudes and behaviors.

▶ **Invitation is Crucial**

We all need to engage, constantly, in inviting others to leadership. Whether it is inviting more women, diversity and youth onto statewide boards, or fully welcoming the broad diversity of our communities in setting priorities and engaging together in projects, we need to be more than passive, but actively and energetically inclusive! Building a pipeline for emerging leaders is vital to community success.

▶ **Trust**

Leaders build relationships that catalyze the trust that is the essential ingredient in successful collective action. Building these relationships takes time and requires both patience and persistence.

▶ **Encourage Equity, Engagement, Inclusion and Local Power**

We need to include and share power with others with different backgrounds, voices, ages, and ideas. One of the most profound findings from the summit was what we learned from one another. The range of sessions on diversity and inclusion were packed, and the overall tone of the conference centered more on recognizing and promoting inclusive leadership, than it did on practical leadership strategies to address particular local problems.

▶ **Youth!**

The Summit issued scholarships for young people, and held several sessions devoted to discussion of youth leadership. Youth influence went way beyond their numbers, however: the bottom line of the summit was all about youth and engaging them and their leadership today for a stronger Vermont future. They need to have more power to shape and lead future dialogues.

- ▶ **Local Leadership**
Local leadership and local capacity building is fundamental to the progress of Vermont. Actively growing the power of local leaders, and helping new leaders step up is a priority that will require collective action. Local leadership is the foundation of any response to local needs, and is essential to democracy itself.
- ▶ **Leaders Can Drive Investment**
Individuals, municipalities, businesses—each can take leadership to spur projects that leverage mutual investment. Community revitalization projects throughout the country are being built on public/private partnership.
- ▶ **Power is not a Zero Sum Game**
Leadership can make power. When local people step up to improve life in their communities, they don't diminish the power of the city council or select board, or take power away from their neighbors; they add to the power for progress in the community. When residents do not take (or make) power, or when elected or hired leadership stymies the creative leadership of community members, the community can stagnate and lose energy and potential.
- ▶ **Lead From Today**
One participant said, "All of us can leave from the summit to take action, even a small action, today." We can engage in one thing we are excited about for our community. We can approach one thing that is bothering us—we can walk into that discomfort...and potentially find growth ourselves, along with helping our community solve problems.

D. Action Ideas: For Further Reflection, Strategic Prioritization and Potential Implementation

These are the ideas for action that the Summit strategy team heard from Summit participants. Some may be already moving forward. Some may have more powerful leverage for progress than others. Some may require deep cultural change that will require long-term leadership attention from individuals and organizations from throughout Vermont. Others may fit into the work plan of any number of organizations today. VCRD and the Summit Planning Team will evaluate these ideas toward potential action, and will report back to all participants as work plans and partnerships are developed in this arena. For today, we want to report what we heard:

- ▶ **Build a Statewide Leadership Institute for Youth**
Student leadership already contributes powerfully to Vermont communities. Vermont should systematically support youth leadership by developing an institute designed to strengthen leadership skills and help young people design and implement key projects for the good of their communities, Vermont, or the world beyond.
- ▶ **Hold a Vermont Youth Leadership Summit**
Create a space where youth lead the dialogue and where rural and urban youth can communicate and potentially work together on key issue areas.
- ▶ **Advance Youth Leadership by Statute**
Vermont should advance statute through the legislature that builds a requirement for every high school student to participate in a practical way in the civic life of her community—by serving on a municipal or non-profit board, by participating in a major community task force or by developing a leadership project outside the school.

- ▶ **Build a Community Leadership Education Program**
Develop an institute to train facilitative leaders; to teach people how to facilitate public conversations and connect community voices with decision making and the skills needed. A roving program that hits all geographic corners of the state with regular informal guidance for local leaders, tools and research to share (and to obtain through an online portal), and lists of facilitative partners and resources available. This program could take the lead on statewide or regional forums to teach meeting management, facilitation skills, public engagement, agenda setting, budget development, fundraising, building unity and collaboration, outreach and communications, and more.
- ▶ **Build a Vermont “Community Resource Guide”**
The guide would include sections on facilitation and meeting skills, budget development, and resource and technical assistance lists for implementing on the ground projects such as building redevelopment, recreation projects, agricultural development, and much more. It could have simple resource sheets on topics like “Planning a Community Meeting or Event,” “Tips for Welcoming All,” and many other useful subjects for local conveners.
- ▶ **Develop a Clearinghouse for Community Leadership**
A clearinghouse would share information, provide technical assistance, recommend facilitative help, and provide place-based supports to local leadership. The clearinghouse could provide ‘Side coach’ supports for new, emerging, and veteran leaders in all their diversity throughout Vermont.
- ▶ **Advance Inclusion Today**
Build the inclusion of diversity and youth into every board, every process; start today! Don’t just build special processes for specially targeted participants; engage them in leadership first. Work with people and organizations with power today to recognize blind spots, create space for diversity in leadership, and actively engage and include diversity. A program could be developed to provide people in positions of power and leadership with inspiration and training on how to acknowledge their power and privilege and break down barriers to diverse community involvement and encourage participation and leadership from others.
- ▶ **Advance Civics Education in K-12**
Expand the Civics curriculum in grade school and institute place-based service learning opportunities for all Vermont youth. In-school curriculum should be connected to out of school experience participating in public meetings, boards, and community and youth driven projects. “We need to instill a civic responsibility with our students; teaching our children through example and opportunity to participate in their community.” Flexible pathways and student centered learning can naturally facilitate connection of students with leadership opportunities in the community...this can become common practice.
- ▶ **Hold a Vermont Summit on Diversity, Inclusion, and Immigration**
A Summit could be convened to bring together new Vermonters, people of color, and the full range of Vermont diversity. The event could plan ways to encourage and attract immigrants to Vermont especially people of color from other parts of the US and internationally.
- ▶ **Host a “Leadership Innovation Network”**
Invite Summit participants and people from throughout Vermont to join a sharing network with a web and social network centerpoint for mutual sharing; and convene leadership regionally for regular meals, talks and events. The network would work without curricula, but would allow leaders and emerging leaders to connect regularly, share, brainstorm, and work together in shared directions.

- ▶ **Build a Mentoring Program for Youth and Emerging Leaders**
Peer partnerships and mutual support can help new leaders grow their skill and benefit from other's experience. "I would love to see a structured, equitable, affordable mentoring program to help grow new Vermont leaders."
- ▶ **VCRD Community Leadership Visit Process**
VCRD could build a version of its Community Visit process designed to engage, train and support local community leaders in towns that apply for the service. VCRD could engage numerous partners to bring their services, trainings and expertise to lend skills, experience and support to local leaders as they work in place based projects for the good of their communities.
- ▶ **Build a Youth Council to Define the Future of Vermont**
Invite a team of young Vermonters together to evaluate their vision and to publish their ideas for advancing Vermont's future.

E. Next Steps and Conclusions

The strategic planning team assembled by the Vermont Council on Rural Development is reviewing the key potential directions coming from all the thinking at the table of the "Making it Happen!" Summit. Together, they will consider ways to build initiatives, or engage others to lead, around the goals and ideas of Summit participants and will be back in touch with all participants.

F. More Thoughts???

We're reporting what we've heard so far and will be in touch as the work goes forward. We welcome your involvement in this process. Please be in touch with VCRD and our Strategic Planning Partners if you have something you would like to contribute. If you have specific additional ideas to share, please email them to us at info@vtrural.org.

"Making it Happen!" Strategic Planning Partners

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- **Thomas Hark**, *Civilian Conservation Corps, USA*
- **Sue McCormack**, *Creative Discourse*
- **Chuck Ross**, *UVM Extension Service*
- **Dan Smith**, *Vermont Community Foundation*
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