



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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## Summit addresses Vermont's digital economy

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MONTPELIER -- Vermont is on the right track toward developing a digital economy and has more to do, Gov. Peter Shumlin told an audience at the Statehouse on Tuesday.

Shumlin gave the keynote speech at a daylong summit in Montpelier organized by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Vermont Connected drew about 275 attendees for more than 30 sessions that covered education, community building, business and policy.

In his keynote, Shumlin praised the state's congressional delegation for securing \$400 million in federal stimulus funding to build out Vermont's broadband infrastructure, which he dubbed the biggest public-private partnership in state history.

Shumlin acknowledged and dismissed an ongoing debate about whether the broadband it has produced is fast enough.

"Listen, if you were where I live, on a copper line, running a business, or trying to keep your mom connected, or trying to keep your daughters connected, if you think that 4G wireless isn't seen as the savior, the second coming, you got something else to bet on," Shumlin said from the lectern in the House chamber. "Because I can tell you, it got my daughters and my mom off my back."

Shumlin got a laugh in the moment, but a bit of pushback in a session immediately following his speech.

When asked what communities and businesses need to foster new technology industries in Vermont, one person responded that they need broadband to start.

"That hasn't been uniformly deployed throughout Vermont," he said.

Shumlin had said in his speech that fiber optic cable to every home in Vermont would be ideal, but he hasn't found "\$1 billion under the pillow yet." That's one rough estimate floated by Department of Public Service telecommunications director Jim Porter of how much it could cost to bring fiber technology to every address statewide.

In the session on what the state could do to foster more technology business, cost was acknowledged as a factor, but discussions broadened to focus more on Vermont's brand out of

state.

"I think an image makeover is really needed," said John Burton, president of Network Performance Inc.

Many others agreed. Images of Vermont's wholesome values and pastoral quaintness are well burnished. Quality of life in the state is not in dispute. What people need to hear stories about, they said, is the feasibility of starting and growing a tech business here.

Katie Taylor, of the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce, said she hears concerns about losing some of Vermont's traditional brand if high-tech or manufacturing assets are added to Vermont's out-of-state marketing messages.

In the meantime, several attendees agreed, policies like the state's "cloud tax" impair the aspirational brand of Vermont as a business-friendly state. The resulting damage is not worth the "pennies" in revenue it stands to generate, they said.

Secretary of Commerce Pat Moulton took notes during the talk, facilitated by Vermont Council on Rural Development executive director Paul Costello.

Costello said after the session that he tried to keep conversation focused more on what's working well than what barriers people run across. He said it's the approach that infuses all the community organizing work the Council does.

"It doesn't make any difference if you just add up a list of problems," Costello said. During the sessions, he repeatedly tried to draw out specifics about what businesses need and any solutions they envision that will help digitize rural Vermont's economic future.

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