



February 4, 2009

## Study notes Vt. trends over two decades

*By Tim Johnson  
Free Press Staff Writer*

COLCHESTER -- Agriculture in Vermont depends more heavily on a single commodity -- dairy -- than in any other state. Yet despite efforts to diversify the farm sector, sales of most nondairy products have remained relatively flat since 1991.

These are among the findings of "Vermont in Transition," a 156-page book filled with data on everything from population and affordability to education, crime and energy use over the past two decades. The report suggests that popular fears of Vermont's youth brain drain might be exaggerated, and that Vermonters no longer fall far beyond the rest of the country in median family income -- thanks in part to an above-average employment rate for women -- but that Vermont still has a cost of living well above the national norm.

Many of the 160 trends come as no surprise -- Vermont's demographic homogeneity, for example (96 percent white, non-Hispanic in 2006, compared with 67 percent for the nation), or the relatively low student-teacher ration in public schools (about 11 to 1 in 2005, compared with 15.5 to 1 nationally). In some cases, the book represents an affirmation of statewide characteristics that have been widely reported elsewhere.

What's unusual is the breadth of the data collected in one volume. The research was spearheaded by two faculty members at St. Michael's' College -- Vince Bolduc, a sociologist, and Herb Kessel, an economist -- and will provide some of the substrate for a final report on the future of Vermont to be released in April by the project's sponsor, the Council on the Future of Vermont. Created in 2007 by the nonpartisan Vermont Council on Rural Development, the Council on the Future has spent the past year and a half convening Vermonters to discuss the state's challenges and surveying them about their expectations. These activities are expected to culminate May 11 in a statewide summit on the state's future.

Vermonters value the working landscape, poll results show, so one of the key challenges over the next 20 years will be to promote the growth of new agriculture, said Paul Costello, executive director of the Council on Rural Development. Yet in the face of a dairy-dependent sector accounting for about 77 percent of the state's agricultural sales, Kessel said, agricultural diversification still has a long way to go. Meanwhile, Vermont's dairy farms are dwindling, and those that remain are getting bigger on average, the data indicate.

Kessel and Bolduc were on hand Tuesday for a news conference releasing the book. They offered several caveats: The data are mostly statewide, Kessel said, offering a broad view but little insight into intrastate distinctions. Bolduc pointed out that good data are hard to find on such things as quality of life, corporate malfeasance and white-color crime.

Still, the hope is that this compendium will be useful for legislators, policymakers and residents alike, said Sarah Waring, program manager for the Council on the Future of Vermont.

Among other findings: The volume of tourists has been flat in recent years; Vermont has become more forested in the past half century; and an above-average percentage of Vermonters are older than 65.

On the brain-drain question, Bolduc pointed out that young, educated people tend to be highly mobile and that other New England states have experienced similar out-migration. A higher share of Vermont's population than the national average have bachelor's degrees, however, and about 73 percent of B.As. in Vermont are held by people who came from other states.

RESOURCES "Vermont in Transition: Social, Economic and Environmental Trends" is available free, online, via the Council on the Future of Vermont at [www.futureofvermont.org](http://www.futureofvermont.org). Contact Tim Johnson at 660-1808 or [tjohnson@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:tjohnson@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com).

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