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Vermont's future starts today

By STEVE GOLD

Times are tough and news is bleak. One response is to bury our heads in today's details and sit on our hands in fear of tomorrow. While an appealing approach for some, inaction won't solve our current problems or bring us any closer to the Vermont we hope our children and grandchildren will live in.

I can say this with certainty, based on my recent position as a member of the Council on the Future of Vermont. This group of volunteers, representing a spectrum of ages, occupations, parts of the state, and political interests, spent 18 months listening to Vermonters' long-term hopes and dreams as well as their fears and challenges.

The CFV asked the same questions to thousands of people: students in Poultney, VFW members in Hyde Park, child-care providers in Bennington, farmers in Alburg, solid waste planners in Brattleboro, artists in White River Junction, and chambers of commerce in the Northeast Kingdom. We layered this with opinion polls and research from the University of Vermont and St. Michael's College. We spoke with Vermont's leaders, past and present.

The council wrestled with this unprecedented input, trying to capture the major themes we heard repeatedly and to articulate a comprehensive picture of the place Vermonters told us they wanted to see for their children's lifetimes. These are captured in CFV's just released final findings, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future."

CFV was launched by the nonpartisan and nonprofit Vermont Council on Rural Development and asked to identify points of unity among Vermonters. We have attempted to do so with full understanding of our diversity and the richness of political, social, and individual differences. Among the many powerful experiences that I had as a CFV member was hearing again and again from very different individuals how much they love this state and how they share a common set of values that transcends the divisive day-to-day issues that seem to put us at odds with each other.

"Imagining Vermont" captures the crucial priorities Vermonters should pursue to meet the future with confidence. If not addressed, the discrepancy between our vision for Vermont and the challenges we face can lead to the destruction of what we say we love most about the state. The council members are aware how easy it would be for Vermonters to put this report away, to be worked on "in better times." But, the truth is the things that we need to do to bring us out of the current recession are the same ones that will lead us to the future we hope for.

We could have guessed that Vermonters value community, the environment, hard work, independence, respect for others, and the small scale and unique identity of our

state. But we didn't have to, because at public forums and roundtable discussions these are the characteristics that surfaced repeatedly. Based on everything we heard, CFV's report describes an economy, quality of life, environment and civic life we collectively hope to see 20 years from today. We recognize that our 18 months of gathering, synthesizing, and analyzing information does not, in itself, chart the course of Vermont's future. That will be up to all of us.

I invite you to look across party lines, past regional differences, and to our common purpose in advancing our best interests today and for the next generation of Vermonters. One step will be to attend the Summit on the Future of Vermont, May 11, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at the Davis Center at the University of Vermont. The CFV will also be returning to communities around the state to discuss its findings and promote action.

As Tom Debevoise, CFV chairman and South Woodstock dairy farmer, summed up so well during CFV's day at the Statehouse: "There's a saying in the farm community of which I'm particularly fond: An hour in the morning, is worth two hours in the afternoon. As we look at something 20 years out, then this year is the 'early morning.' Let's not waste it."

For anyone interested in what Vermonters — young and old, native and newcomer, rich and poor, urban and rural — think about the state and want for its future, CFV's Web site holds the broadest and deepest inquiry and information compiled in the last 100 years. For any Vermonter who is concerned about the state's future, the site is an invaluable resource. Go there, read, think and get involved.

Imagining Vermont, Summit details and registration, and other project information are available at www.futureofvermont.org or call 223-6091.

Steve Gold of Montpelier is a member of the Council on the Future of Vermont. He is a former commissioner of employment and training and commissioner of corrections.
