



Strengthening food system in Vermont

Rep. Carolyn Partridge
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Last year, the Legislature established the Farm to Plate (F2P) Initiative, which asked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF) to do a comprehensive inventory of the food-related assets and resources in the state including producers, processors, distribution systems, waste management, suppliers, sales and support systems.

The question they were asked to answer is, "how can Vermont strengthen its local food system and stimulate development in the farm and food sector?"

Eight local food summits were held throughout the state, including one in Brattleboro, to get input from people with "boots on the ground."

Recently, the VSJF convened the F2P Statewide Local Food Summit in Rutland to unveil its draft preliminary findings -- the results are impressive and it was exciting to see more than 300 interested, energized people in attendance on a busy Saturday.

Agriculture has long been an important part of Vermont's economy but is often overlooked when economic development opportunities are considered. In recent years, with milk prices low, our conventional dairy industry, which represents 78 percent of our agricultural economy, has suffered and many farms have gone out of business.

At the same time, with nationwide scares involving tainted food from "agribusiness" and increased

concern about healthy diet, our opportunities for farm diversification and market development have increased. People are much more interested in what they are consuming and where it comes from.

We are at a crossroads and assistance in the form of vision and a strategic plan is needed to help make the transition. The F2P Initiative offers critical information that will assist Vermont farmers and food infrastructure entrepreneurs make investments that will pay dividends in the future.

Preliminary findings indicate that the elements of the food system mentioned above represent more than 54,000, or 20 percent, of the private jobs in the state of Vermont. Also, more than 9,000, or 31 percent, of the private establishments in the state are connected to the food system.

These are impressive statistics that indicate the importance of agriculture -- it is an industry critical to the well-being of Vermonters.

This, however, is not a new conversation. In 2002/03, the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) made agriculture one of its research priorities. It established the Vermont Agriculture Viability Council (VAVC) "to develop a 'strategic plan' that would further the continuing evolution of Vermont's vital dairy industry and foster the continuing growth of Vermont's 'diversified' agricultural enterprises."

The Council made many recommendations regarding governmental policy, farm profitability, marketing, agricultural transitions and education. Some of the recommendations were acted upon, but many weren't and that, unfortunately, has slowed our progress toward a more successful agricultural economy.

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One of the value statements included in the VAVC report states "Vermont's agricultural industry deserves the commitment of coordinated leadership and adequate resources."

When Paul Costello, executive director of the VRCD, visited the House Agriculture Committee this year, he indicated that Vermonters place agriculture in high regard and importance, however, we, as a state, do not fund agricultural endeavors in a manner commensurate with that sense of importance.

This coming year, the VSJF will complete its work on a 10-year strategic plan for the future of agriculture. Preliminarily, it is estimated that if we produced 10 percent of all the food consumed here in Vermont, we would keep an additional \$191 million in the state. That would be a significant boost to our economy.

The work of the VSJF on the F2P Initiative offers us another chance to look at our resources, assets, and strengths, and determine what we need to do to produce more of what we consume and how we can improve our agricultural markets.

From many standpoints, including health, carbon footprint, and economic, this is a win-win opportunity and we should be prepared to make investments in agriculture that will take Vermont into a more prosperous future.

Rep. Carolyn Partridge , D-Windham, is chairwoman of the House Agriculture Committee.

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