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Future of Vermont study finds second wind

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Supporters believe the Council on the Future of Vermont's 2009 report on concerns facing the state in coming decades was ahead of its time. But that wasn't why Governor-elect Peter Shumlin and some 300 local and state leaders gathered to consider one of its main findings just last week.

Shumlin and several of his Cabinet appointees squeezed into a packed Statehouse on Friday to discuss maintaining the environmental and economic vitality of Vermont's farms, fields and forests — one of several ways council leaders are aiming to transform yesterday's recommendations into tomorrow's results.

"We're not interested in presenting a report and stepping away," said Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, which sponsored the future study. "When Vermonters have expressed their values, someone needs to say, 'How do you build a plan that's really going to change things?'"

The nonprofit, nonpartisan future group surveyed almost 4,000 people at more than 100 local meetings in 2008 before unveiling the 112-page report "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future" in 2009.

The document — available on the website www.futureofvermont.org — concludes with a long list of recommendations, be it streamlining government, improving communication technology or "Building A Vermont Economic Strategy."

It adds that people surveyed spoke most about the "working landscape," with nearly 98 percent saying they valued woods and pastures more than any other of the state's features.

Several organizations — including the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, school Superintendents Association and regional planning and economic development officials — have since been considering ways to make government more efficient.

The Council on Rural Development, for its part, is leading an e-Vermont Partnership that's tapping \$3.7 million in federal stimulus and private matching funds to provide 24 communities with computers, training and technical assistance for municipal offices, schools, libraries, civic groups and local business networks.

But the council is investing most of its time into the challenge of balancing the environment and the economy. Last week's Working Landscape Summit in Montpelier drew a crowd that featured Shumlin, incoming state Agriculture Secretary Chuck Ross and Natural Resources Secretary Deb Markowitz, and hundreds of farmers, foresters, food producers and representatives of tourism, recreation and philanthropy.

"We're not surprised," Costello said of the turnout, "because we think this is absolutely core to Vermont."

Friday's meeting centered on the unveiling of a Working Landscape Partnership Action Plan — available on the website vtrural.org — drafted by a council steering committee that includes outgoing Agriculture Secretary Roger Allbee and Natural Resources Secretary Jonathan Wood.

The plan recommends the formation of a Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Corporation to offer low-interest loans and grants through private funds and enough of a sales tax increase to annually reap at least \$15 million.

Second, the proposal calls on the governor to gather his heads of agriculture, natural resources and commerce into a Development Cabinet to "unify state efforts in support of strategic working landscape conservation and enterprise development."

Third, the plan seeks to give farm and forest owners the option of designating property as "Working Lands" that would provide financial and regulatory incentives to protect it from development.

And finally, the proposal urges the creation of a media campaign to promote the importance of farmland and forests to the state's wellbeing.

"It is time to systematically raise the flag that Vermont is the national leader in working land-based enterprise development," the plan says, "that Vermont is the leader of America's local food systems and forest products development, and the place for young entrepreneurs, both local and from outside of Vermont, to grow businesses."

Summit participants didn't limit the term "working landscape" to milk or maple but also spoke of meat, microbreweries and solar and wind energy.

Vermont House Speaker Shap Smith said although some businesses complain about environmental regulations, such laws help preserve a landscape that's important to the tourism and recreation industries.

"It is a competitive advantage to us for every other aspect of our economy," Smith said. "It is what allows us to be marketable when we are not competitive on other issues."

Organizers used Friday's meeting to start gathering interested individuals and groups into a partnership to advance the action plan over the next year and a half.

"We're not talking about a new bureaucracy," Costello said. "We're talking about using existing resources as much as possible."

But the administrator wants action. He knows past reports on the state's future not only are part of its history but also helped shape it.

The one-time Vermont Commission on Country Life, formed after the disastrous flood of 1927, funneled its discussions into a report that called for the creation of the state police and enlargement of the state Board of Education.

In 1968, the state's first modern Democratic governor, Philip Hoff, chaired the Vermont Planning Council whose "Vision and Choice — Vermont's Future" study helped spur the pioneering Act 250 land-use law.

In 1988, the state's first female governor, Madeleine Kunin, created the Governor's Commission on Vermont's Future that sparked the Act 200 growth management law.

"Clearly the latest report is an important set of statements," Costello said, "but we feel you have to go to implementation. We can't do it all at once, but we'll be saying, 'What's the next core need?'"

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