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Plan seeks to preserve Vt.'s open landscape

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Created Dec 16 2010 - 3:38pm

MONTPELIER — At a summit in Montpelier this past Friday, members of the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Working Landscape Partnership laid out a plan that they hope will preserve and bolster the state's agricultural and forestry economy.

The more than 300 people gathered at the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape summit included planners, legislators and governor-elect Peter Shumlin. Among the faces were many from Addison County who are interested in sustaining the area's agricultural way of life and the culture surrounding it.

"The summit was to share a five-point draft platform to really change the condition for agricultural enterprise in Vermont," said Paul Costello, executive director of VCRD.

He cited the organization's research, which predicts the slow demise of Vermont's agricultural economy.

"Unless something is done, we could lose the working landscape within a generation," said Costello.

The Working Landscape Partnership's action plan set out five items designed to increase the viability of Vermont's agricultural markets. Among these were proposals creating a corporation to fund agricultural and forestry business improvement efforts and a marketing campaign to promote Vermont products.

A PLAN OF ACTION

The summit's agenda sprang from research of the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership, a group assembled by the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

Following the Council on the Future of Vermont's 2008 and 2009 research, which found that 97 percent of Vermonters consider the state's agricultural economy and culture to be a key to the future, the VCRD assembled a group to develop a plan of action that would support local agriculture and forestry, develop and attract farm and forest entrepreneurs, and conserve the state's working landscape.

The day's events included opening speeches by Shumlin and future Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Ross, and a number of panels featuring members of Vermont's agricultural and forestry industry.

Finally, the day included the presentation and a discussion of the working landscape action plan and breakout discussions with the attendees on ways to advance that plan.

The Working Landscape Partnership's plan outlined five initiatives designed to support the agriculture and forestry industry in Vermont.

The first was to build a campaign to celebrate Vermont's distinctive scenery, products and culture.

"We have an historic opportunity to lay claim to leadership in food products and forestry for an expanded brand identity," states the action plan.

The second item calls for the creation of a Vermont Agriculture and Forest Products Development Corporation, which would be charged with making investments in that sector.

Among other things, the corporation would invest in projects designed to strategically develop the state's infrastructure and to distribute funds to entrepreneurial projects. Funding for this plan would come from another item in the plan, a small increase to the Vermont sales tax. By many accounts, however, that item did not receive a great deal of support from summit attendees.

The third item aims to create a "working lands," designation, backed by financial incentives for landowners who choose that designation for their land. The program would discourage development and make it easier to pursue conservation easements.

The final item suggests the creation of a state planning office to orchestrate and regulate working landscape enterprises.

BRINGING IT HOME

While the summit discussed mostly statewide matters, many local attendees agreed that the bulk of the work they must do to carry out the working landscape vision must be done right here in Addison County.

"Addison County is one of the two central counties for Vermont's agricultural industry," said Costello. "It's a center for traditions of farming and forestry."

Claire Tebbs, a land use planner with the Addison County Regional Planning Commission, said any plan to bolster Vermont's agricultural economy will necessarily have a large impact on the county. She added that it's important for her to stay up-to-date on all that is happening around the state concerning working landscapes. By following the activities of the VCRD and other state institutions, the ACRPC is better able to coordinate with statewide efforts.

"As a land use planner, it's really helpful to know who the players are, not just in Addison County but in neighboring counties, too," she said. "We're making vital connections by being a part of this summit."

But many who attended the conference said they had the lingering feeling that the bulk of the work that must be done is local, not statewide.

Sam Burr, who owns Last Resort Farm with his wife, Eugenie Doyle, said he feels the biggest benefits for Vermonters will come "if we each do what we can, especially if we're just trying to work on our local level."

Burr, who serves on the Monkton Agriculture and Natural Areas Committee, said land designations like current use are an important factor in supporting farmers while preserving that way of life. His committee sets aside two cents on the town tax rate that gets put into a fund dedicated to preserving agricultural land, which he said serves as a substantial resource for farmers who are struggling or are looking for finances to expand. The fund contributed money that helped to preserve two farms this past year.

Burr, who served as a legislative council for agricultural issues in Montpelier for a number of years, said he sees real forces in change coming from efforts like those of the Addison County Local Foods Coalition, which is working to build a food storage and processing infrastructure in the county. While the national agricultural system is highly complicated, he said it's efforts like these that will make Vermont's agricultural economy self-sustaining.

And from his planning work in Monkton, Burr said the most important aspect of any working landscape initiative, local or statewide, is clarity of goals and the message that the public is receiving.

"Communication, education and collaboration. I think that's really what needs to happen," said Burr.

"That's been the difficulty, whether it's zoning or just trying to conserve farms," he said. "Unless you really have outreach and an ability to communicate with neighbors, to get them involved, you're not going to be able to get things done."

Bill Suhr, owner of Champlain Orchards in Shoreham, was one of the panelists at the summit. He said he was asked to speak as a vegetable and tree-fruit grower, and as a business actively working to provide more jobs.

"We're representing an agricultural business that might be trying new things and making an attempt to add value to our raw product," said Suhr. "And, while doing that, creating jobs so that folks living in this rural landscape can be employed here."

With him on the panel were meat farmers, cheesemakers, forestry representatives and soy producers. The panel's goal, said Suhr, was to demonstrate how local businesses are working to expand and integrate additional jobs to bolster the economy. Suhr described his own business model, which has grown from simply growing apples to storing, processing and marketing them right on the Shoreham farm.

Suhr said his contribution to the action plan will also be on the local level.

"My best contribution can probably be to continue to grow this business and have it be successful," said Suhr.

Even with the panel of agricultural and forestry representatives, Rep. Will Stevens (I-Shoreham), said he was somewhat disappointed in the proportions of farmers to policy makers in the crowd at the summit — and he said that though it provided a useful look back on policy in the past and looking to the future, placing too heavy a concentration on policy and planning can at times obscure the real issues farmers have.

"What wasn't talked about was profitability," said Stevens, who owns Golden Russet Farm in Shoreham with his wife, Judy.

He added that the term "working landscape" runs the risk of further obscuring the purpose of

these discussions.

“Working landscape has come to mean that scenery that we ride through on our bikes, in our cars,” he said. “We pass through it but we’re not engaged with it.”

Stevens said that a rebranding of the entire issue, as “cultural landscape,” could help to address this.

“We want to expand the conversation to say Vermont isn’t a theme park,” he said. “It’s one thing to say, ‘how do we ensure that the land is not developed.’ It’s another to say, ‘let’s make sure that farmers can make a living from the land.’”

Tebbs said she hopes ACRPC will be able to bring the statewide discussion back to Addison County on that practical level. The organization in September hosted a discussion on the dairy industry in the county, and it hopes to continue to hold community discussions and conduct educational outreach programs about the health of county land and waterways.

“We’re trying to be a common ground for the agricultural community in Addison County,” she said, “from the folks who have been in the dairy industry for generations to new farmers who are trying ... to diversify their farms.”

Burr said that whatever the course of action that state and local groups take, it will be important to be watching closely in the coming years.

“It’s about the connection of Vermonters to our land, and how it affects our culture and communities,” he said. “There are some real threats to it.”

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