



Maintaining balance

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Wednesday, August 20 For more than a year, the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV) has been going around the state listening to Vermonters and striking up a dialogue on where we are, where we are going and the forces that will shape our future.

The Windham County meeting will be held on Thursday at 6 p.m. at the Robert H. Gibson River Garden in Brattleboro. Just in time for the Brattleboro session is news of a new survey by CFV, the Vermont Council on Rural Development and the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies.

The survey, conducted in March, asked Vermonters what was most important to them. The results weren't surprising.

- * 97 percent of those who responded valued Vermont's working landscape and the heritage around it.
- * 94 percent took pride of being from or living in Vermont.
- * 93 percent valued the state's spirit of independence.
- * 91 percent valued the privacy they have in Vermont.
- * 87 percent appreciated the small size and scale of Vermont.
- * 86 percent said they trusted their neighbors.

When asked what were the top challenges facing Vermont in the coming years, there were also no

surprises.

- * 96 percent said the increasing cost of living in Vermont, such as transportation, heating, electricity and health care.
- * 92 percent said the continued viability of agriculture in Vermont.
- * 86 percent said the tax rate in Vermont.
- * 84 percent said the development of an adequate workforce for the future, and an equal percentage said the current and future condition of the state's infrastructure.
- * 83 percent said a shortage of affordable housing, and an equal number said they were concerned about the way Vermont finances education.

So, while large numbers of residents love the values of Vermont, equally large numbers are concerned that, as wonderful a place as Vermont is, they may not be able to afford to stay here.

Certainly, the values of independence, community ties and a working rural landscape are cherished by Vermonters. But affordability and the future health of the state's economy were ranked as the top two priorities by two-thirds of respondents.

These values and concerns are what CFV says it has heard at its forums. Its Web site, www.futureofvermont.org, is also soliciting public comment.

One thing the group has found is that the younger the people who participated in the forums or online, the more optimistic they are. They see opportunities where others see danger, and are more solution-oriented than older Vermonters.

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That bodes well for the future. The people in their 20s and 30s are the future of Vermont. Most are here by choice, attracted by those values of independence and community. Most want to stay here, and it will be critical to build a state that is worthy of the deep love so many have for it.

We love and protect our landscape, but we also want better roads and development that will create jobs. We are willing to settle for a little less than those in neighboring states to enjoy the life we live here, but not at the expense of a pinched and impoverished future. We want cellphones and broadband Internet, but we also want fields and farms.

It's been often said that Vermont is a special place. The challenge is adopting policies that preserve what we love about Vermont, while making sure future generations will be able to enjoy it.

So, come down to the River Garden on Thursday and be prepared to answer these questions. What does Vermont mean to you? What do you see as our challenges and opportunities? What should our priorities be for the future? And what does all this mean for our community?

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