

The following chapters are the synthesis of public forum notes and interviews, statistical polling, written comments, trend line research, and the many other contributions from Vermonters described in the Introduction in Part One of *Imagining Vermont*. They reflect, to the best of the Council's ability, the essence of what Vermonters shared. The Council's purpose in these chapters is to reflect what we have gathered about important subjects, whether they are emotional, divisive or matter-of-fact. All of the information was organized into ten key issues areas: *Vermont Culture; Population; Natural Environment; Working Landscape: Agriculture and Forestry; Built Environment: Development and Land Use; Economy; Education; Human Services, Health, and Safety; Infrastructure; and Energy.*

While each chapter encompasses a wide range of research and discussion, a common framework is used. Quotes from Vermonters illustrate specific points or show a range of opinions, and research and polling provide balance to the individual voices, lending authority or illuminating contradictions in the ideas expressed. All references, unless otherwise noted, are from the St. Michael's report *Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends*, the companion volume to this report. When UVM's Center for Rural Studies web and telephone surveys are referenced, these percentages and data are found in the *Looking Ahead: Vermonters' Values and Concerns* reports.

The Council invites every reader to think about conclusions from the data and what directions it might suggest for Vermont. These chapters summarize what the Council heard; the Council's own conclusions can be found in Part Two of *Imagining Vermont*.





Vermont Culture



Culture is who we are, how we live, what we think and what we care about; it is patterns of thought and behavior that are learned over time. Culture is expressed in myriad ways including the arts, literature, traditions, how people relate to the land, participate in civic life, and spend their leisure time. Vermont culture and civic life today face tensions between rural values and traditions and the complex demands of modern life. Vermonters value the small scale and rural nature of the state, but recognize that it poses significant challenges for residents. They look to a future where the state has grasped the best opportunities ahead without destroying what is most essential to and most valued about Vermont.

“Vermont is its own deal.”

– High School student in southern Vermont

The Vermont Identity

“People are very intense about being Vermonters.”

– High School student in Manchester

Most Vermonters believe that the state has a unique identity. The Council took testimony from thousands of Vermonters about what Vermont meant to them. Hundreds of them began their testimony by describing their family history here in Vermont, or when and why they moved here. Their words typify some of the common feelings Vermonters have for their state, and for being Vermonters.

“I’m a newcomer. I’ve only been here eleven years.”

– Bennington

“I was born a Vermonter, and no matter where I go, I will be a Vermonter.”

– Middlebury

“I moved here because of the ideals of the state.”

– North Hero

“I’m imported to Vermont, but I don’t want to go back.”

– Middlebury



One man said he was attracted by what he saw as a unique direct connection to nature and the “viable small town ethic” of the state; “I’m not a native Vermonter, but I came here for a reason.” A Newport resident described the Vermont cultural underpinnings of simplicity, common sense, neighborliness, and pragmatism as core elements in the Vermont identity. “If you’re born here, you have it, and when you come here, you get it.”

The sense of identity is not always inclusive: Vermont has a reputation of being fierce about who gets to be a “Vermonter.” It is a tension that citizens joke about; “just because your cat had kittens in the oven doesn’t make them biscuits” – even though you move here and your children are born here, you may not be recognized as Vermonters by those of your neighbors whose families have been here for generations.

Some newcomers do not feel valued. An immigrant from Canada with twelve years in Vermont related that, “I feel like a Vermonter...but not really.” Many complain of an “us and them” attitude within communities between newcomers and natives. While Vermonters celebrate tolerance, some may be less enthusiastic about acceptance. For many newcomers, it feels as though it can take years to be considered a Vermonter. Many “flatlanders” who move up from the relatively flat states to the south, describe themselves as still somehow feeling like outsiders thirty years after having moved north.

On the other side, some Vermonters are concerned that the influx of newcomers to the state has changed Vermont in their lifetimes and that Vermont’s distinctive identity is rapidly disappearing into a modern and fast-paced way of life. As one forum participant put it, “As folks move in from the outside, they want to bring what they left.” Some towns in Vermont are primarily made

up of native Vermonters; in others the majority of residents have come from elsewhere. Tensions between groups can be exacerbated when newcomers bring resources out of scale with local standards of living, build out of scale houses, post their newly acquired land, or unconsciously violate other local cultural traditions.

“People are very proud and hardworking and sometimes it gets carried to a fault.”

– Brighton

“I think it’s a lost cause! I think it’s like trying to bring people back to life; [Vermont’s] going downhill all the time.”

– Middlebury

“There used to be a strong feeling that you had to be born here to be a Vermonter.”

– St. Albans

While some may not feel included in their community, others describe ways to become Vermonters. One new arrival to Vermont said, “I moved to Brookfield and joined the fire department.” A St. Johnsbury resident also noted the tie between acceptance and contributing: “I am accepted as a Vermonter because of my involvement and willingness to participate in community.” Others report that rolling up their sleeves and working to help the community was the best way to get connected. Vermonters value hard work and respect hard workers and those who want to contribute.

“There’s a closeness here, a willingness to take people in, a great sense of community. Everybody gets, ‘well, you’re not a Vermonter,’ but that’s OK. As an outsider I feel very welcomed. When people recognize things I’ve said, as an outsider, it really makes me feel at home.”

– St. Albans

One non-native described the two groups as "True Vermonters versus ideological Vermonters." In his estimation, true Vermonters were born here, and ideological Vermonters choose to move to the state because of its land, people, values, and opportunities. The dynamic and ongoing challenge to Vermont's social fabric? To him, "they need to be integrated."

Vermont Values

The highest rated value from the Council's telephone poll was "the working landscape and its heritage." The next six top values demonstrate other elements of the state that connect to the character of the state.

These values, particularly the connection to the land, were reflected in all the public forums across the state. Vermonters shared their strong feelings about the environment; whether they were relating stories of working the land, enjoying recreation on it, or just admiring the view. Vermonters also gave voice to some distinct ideas that were highly valued: sense of community, sense of history, small scale, regionalism, civility and tolerance.

Sense of Community

Vermonters are engaged in community. Vermonters tend to trust their neighbors much more than other Americans do, and they volunteer to support the less fortunate or work toward the progress of their communities at rates well above most of the rest of the country. One tenth-grade student in Randolph called community the "essence of Vermont." A Middlebury resident makes the claim that "Vermont is community in all its aspects," and an attendee at a Waitsfield forum put it even more succinctly: "Vermont means community."

Remarks like these are borne out by scientific quality of life studies of Vermonters' attitudes toward their communities, their feelings of safety (84 percent feel safe in their neighborhoods, versus 41 percent nationally) and reported feelings of trust: where Vermonters feel "most people can be trusted" more than twice as much (71 percent) as Americans in general do (34 percent). One forum attendee in Newport said, "To be a Vermonter is not to be anonymous."

When people talked about community, they often refer to attributes of small scale, care and neighborliness, civil discussion, hard work, isolation and privacy. Vermonters at the public forums frequently articulated how it feels to live in a place where community members know one another, where government is accessible, and where socio-economic differences are not obvious. There is a sense of responsibility that comes with living in a small place. In St. Albans, a forum participant described it as accountability to neighbors and townspeople. "[We] feel a sense of personal responsibility. We think things should be taken care of, so we do it ourselves." Another citizen said, "In Vermont, if you don't do the good work, someone else will. Everyone's taking care of the important things."

Some Vermonters discussed trends in contemporary life that challenge the definition of "real Vermonter" as participation in or dedication to community. They spoke with concern about what they see as a growing cultural gap between those people who work from home or commute to work regularly and have little to do with their communities and those who still connect locally, seeing and interacting with their neighbors. One participant from the Rotary Club in North Hero told the Council that Vermonters in the twenty-first century suffer from "time poverty." To him, people are being crushed by growing hours

Vermont Values: Highest percentage of "agree" and "strongly agree" responses:

Statement	Percent
I value the working landscape and its heritage	97.2
I am proud of being from or living in Vermont	93.6
I value Vermont's spirit of independence	93.1
I value the privacy that I get in Vermont	91.0
I believe Vermont's creative communities are valuable to the state	89.2
I value the small size and scale of the state	87.9
I trust my neighbors	86.2

of work, growing commuting hours, the expansion and increasing speed of communications, and other complex time commitments inherent in modern living. As a result, people have less leisure time and more busy and stress-filled lives. They have less time to participate in or contribute to the community, and town government and society can suffer.

The ideal of picturesque farms, quaint villages, and small shops held together by a small school and local church has its reality, but can also be romanticized. Like any place, Vermont has its share of social ills such as crime, domestic violence, drug abuse, poverty, and hunger. Some attendees warned about having a false romanticism about old attitudes, holding that while Vermont needs to celebrate the state's heritage, it should be "adaptable, not ossified." Vermont is complicated, not simple, and an idealized view of the past can unrealistically portray the lives and contradictions of history as a false guide for how Vermonters choose to live today. Many Vermonters in the twenty-first century, telecommute, work in relatively urbanized settings and live contemporary lifestyles, even in small towns.

As citizens, Vermonters are dedicated to community, but also fiercely defend and celebrate the freedom of the individual. The state motto, "Freedom and Unity," epitomizes these values but also points to the perennial challenge to define the balance point between the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the needs and interests of the community. A school superintendent from the North East Kingdom told the Council, "Vermont values are a paradox...the individual has a sense of autonomy and the community has a sense of importance. Vermont has to balance an appreciation and respect for self-reliance and individuals, and still have collaboration and community initiatives."

For many Vermonters, the success of Vermont depends on the preservation of the vital sense of community; it may not answer all the state's problems, but it could be a pre-condition to solving them. A caller to a Council on the Future of Vermont live WDEV radio show typified this common attitude saying, "Sustainability will result from shared community."

Sense of History

Whether they are new to Vermont or have lived here all their lives, residents are proud of the history of the state. This came out in the CFV forums as a particular pride in the state's many 'firsts.' Residents claimed the following examples, and others, as proof that this small state has been and could continue to be a leader for the nation.

- The first independent state to have a written constitution.
- The first new state to join the nation under the U.S. Constitution.
- Leading the first victory of the American Revolution in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga by the Green Mountain Boys.
- The first state constitution to ban slavery; first in opposition to the fugitive slave law; highest in per capita participation and casualties in the Civil War.
- The first to ban billboards.
- The first to build a bottle return law.
- One of the first in leading environmental and land use planning legislation (Act 250).
- The first state to pass a Civil Union law.

A factory manager in Middlebury put it like this: "Remember where Vermont comes from. Social responsibility is our hallmark.... History affects our present and the future; it gives you a clue where you want to go."

Innovation, Arts, and Heritage

One of the research chapters of *Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends in Vermont* provides an overview of the role of arts and culture as economic drivers through the 'Creative Economy.' In public forums throughout the state Vermonters pointed to the high value that the arts play in community life. Vermont is a good place for arts and artists. The natural beauty of the state and its scale, and the authentic communities, each with a wealth of historic buildings, attract and inspire artists and provide material for their work. Because Vermont is so rural, theatres, community art centers, and libraries serve critically important roles as centers of community life; without them many Vermonters would be more isolated. They are an essential part of the quality of life in Vermont, called by one forum participant the "spirit of Vermont" – the cultural assets that make this an attractive and dynamic place to be. For example, in 2002, nearly 6.5 million admissions to cultural events were recorded in the state. The New England Foundation for the Arts also records that Vermont ranked thirteenth nationally in terms of the percentage of artistic workers in the labor force in 2002. To many Vermonters, the combination of arts, culture, authentic communities, and heritage provides a foundation for the state's economic future.



Vermonters often celebrate the connection between arts, community, and economic creativity. Vermonters have a long history of invention; from agricultural products and techniques to industrial scales and machinery; from specialty cheeses to snowboards and software. That reputation for innovation serves as a magnet that attracts creative people to the state. Many Vermonters told the Council that the state can serve as a center for innovation and an incubator of new social advances, inventions, political experiments, and economic development ideas, especially in the economic recession of 2009.

The scale, climate, and economy of Vermont have required people to be adaptable and creative just to survive here. Many rural Vermonters have a reputation for their ability to fix, mend or adapt to get the work done in the farm, mill, or quarry. One participant claimed that adaptability and creativity constitute the story of Vermont history, and wanted to see it move forward, “I want Vermont to lead the country in policy,” to resolve the health care challenge, to advance clean energy development, to expand the local economy. To one Vermonter, Vermont is, “an oasis of possibility of the best things in America.”

On the other hand, tradition and heritage can connect to the more conservative side of Vermont characteristics. Vermonters will often resist change that seems to violate traditions. A Hyde Park resident told a joke to illustrate the difficulty that many towns have in accepting change: “How many Vermonters does it take to change a light bulb? Three – one to change it and two to complain about how they liked the old bulb better.”

Small Scale and Quality of Life

Vermont’s size makes it an intimate place, a homey place; instead of six degrees of separation, a Champlain Islander told the Council, “we have one-half degree of separation.” Vermonters everywhere love the smallness of the state and recognize it as a huge asset, even while seeing the contradictory challenges associated with it. Vermonters point to the small size of the state and claim that Vermont’s small population and geographical size encourage adaptability that can help the state continue to be a leader for the nation.

“Our advantage of a small scale is something that we should play to – be able to network very effectively. It’s a lot more difficult in other areas of the country – they rely on someone else to do it – we have to rely on ourselves.”

– St. Albans

“We do have a great sense of place here. That feeds in to the community that everyone is talking about: you can walk around downtown... and you know everyone – it’s still small. It’s a nice feeling. The accessibility of government; this you really don’t have anywhere else in the country or maybe even in the world.”

– Brattleboro

People say they love the simplicity of life in Vermont and that Vermonters don’t rush about in a rat race to keep up with the Joneses. Vermont is “un-manufactured,” “authentic,” safe, trusting, and family-oriented. They say people come here because they decide to trade their faster-paced lifestyle for a Vermont lifestyle.

“I see Vermont as slow, which I like, and is why I live here. Not everything is in a hurry. Relatives outside of Vermont say it takes us an hour and a half to watch 60 Minutes, and I like that.”

– St. Albans

One forum participant made the claim that the quality of life is tied to low expectations; Vermonters accept dirt roads, some lack of services, and minimal infrastructure because that's what it means to live in a rural area. Conflicts can arise based on demands for services that work well in more urban settings or that newcomers expect to see as municipal services; things that other Vermonters might not have traditionally paid for, may not feel are needed, or do not want to support.

Sometimes, small, tight-knit communities can feel insular and parochial to residents, which is a challenge that contradicts the 'innovative incubator' view of Vermont. This can be especially so for youth. Rural areas across the country see the flight of youth – a Randolph teen can't wait to leave: "Vermont is a horrible place to live." Another high school student from Orleans who wants to stay told the Council, "Vermont is peaceful and calm. There's not much going on."

Local and Regional Identity

Vermonters are passionate about the state identity, but they are even more connected with their local community. There are distinct regions in Vermont, each of which has a sense of identity separate from the rest of the state. Whether a resident lives in the Northeast Kingdom, the Upper Valley, Chittenden County, the Champlain Islands, or Southern Vermont, there is a resonance with the way of life in that specific place. The issues on the table in a small town are close to the hearts of the residents there, as are the community activities, the vitality of village centers, and the ongoing quality of life in small towns and communities. Many of Vermont's cities maintain an important human scale with vital neighborhoods and strong downtowns. Because of this local focus and the smallness of the state as a whole, many forum attendees described the state as one big small town.

This local or regional identity sometimes is marked by a sense of division from other areas of Vermont.

"I'm not sure the state knows there is a southern Vermont," remarked one forum attendee. "The Northeast Kingdom is different from the rest of the state," said a Community College of Vermont student. Chittenden County residents sometimes feel divided from the rest of Vermont and vice versa. This was a concern that could be heard in many of the smaller towns that the Council visited, from Island Pond to North Hero to Guilford to Poultney.

"Vermont is what the USA used to be; the Northeast Kingdom is what Vermont used to be."

– Jay

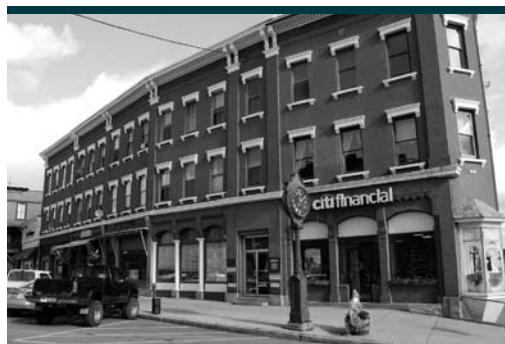
"Vermont is Chittenden County and then the rest. We need to address the fact that this split exists and figure out the challenge and the opportunity."

– Burlington

"In the Upper Valley, the border disintegrates with New Hampshire. There's a multi-state feel."

– White River Junction

Municipalities exert unparalleled leadership in Vermont, in part because Vermont lacks significant county-level government. Regional development corporations and planning commissions provide effective services, but do not have the authority of regional organizations in other states. Many forum participants remarked that there is sometimes a provincial mindset in local municipalities; that it is hard to get collaboration going between towns or communities. A common thread running through the forums was a call for the state to cherish the differences between regions, but also to build on opportunities for common action between communities willing to support regional approaches.



One Vermonter described the paradox of local control versus regional efficiency in government; he claimed that the old joke “you can’t get there from here,” sums up some of the local attitude that undermines cooperation between towns, regions, and the state. Some believe that local control and the heritage of local participatory government are critical to the “grassroots of maintaining the mechanics of democracy,” in an era when mass communications and big money dominate national decision-making. To others, the “small town attitude” around local control impedes efficiencies and undermines regional and statewide progress.

Civic Engagement and Civility

Vermonters are tough on their state government. Because they have such pride in local communities, they want state government to leave them alone, get on board, or lead; but certainly not get in the way of local initiatives. Vermont’s scale means citizens have unprecedented access to their representatives in the legislature and other government officials. There is still no metal detector at the State House, the governor can be called by first name, most Vermonters know their state representatives, and research shows that Vermonters participate in elections 30 percent more than most Americans. Vermonters express their frustration when political partisanship overwhelms civil discourse. One citizen told the Council that Vermont faces a major challenge in that there is “less civility in government both at the state and the national level, and a complete lack of bi-partisanship. There’s much less common ground than there used to be.” Others praise the civility of Vermont’s political culture that allows for vigorous debate on contentious issues, while remaining respectful.

Vermonters engage in participatory government. They struggle to maintain the tradition of town meeting and work together for their communities. Participatory government in Vermont, while strong, faces challenges. The technical nature of modern life makes municipal management more complex every year. The current plight of communities that rely on volunteer fire departments is one example. Volunteer firemen used to involve a strong cross section of town. Now, with many working outside the community they live in, it is harder to have the consistent volunteer coverage needed. The expectation for technical skills has also grown to where a fire department may require over 100 hours of training as part of the volunteer responsibility.

Where government fails to act, Vermonters turn to non-governmental associations. Vermont has more nonprofits per capita than in any other place in the country, and is a leader in volunteerism. “There’s no community problem that can’t be looked at with many eyes and worked on with many hands,” relates one forum participant. Committees proliferate and processes are long, but, as one man testified, these are the “micro-institutions of democracy.”

School and select board and municipal management complexity is increasing in like order and it is more and more difficult to find candidates for local school boards, planning commissions, and town offices. It can be hard to recruit the volunteers for the numerous boards and committees that hold community programs together. There is also the challenge of the complexity of governance around the multiple layers of regulation and mandates, which can undermine local control and the financial capacity of local communities. Some believe that this complexity has and will further compromise local democracy and citizen participation in civic life.

The diversity of Vermont’s political life is built on a functional dynamism of conservatives and liberals, natives and newcomers, regional differences and perspectives on the future of the state. The state has a “blend of conservative pragmatism and liberal progressivism,” said one participant. Several others described the state as a liberal society with conservative principles.

Vermont civic culture revolves around enduring dialogues. One example is the juxtaposition of the ideals of open land, the working landscape and the anti-sprawl attitude prevalent in the state with efforts to attract new businesses and retain or develop jobs for Vermonters. This political issue is also a central cultural dialogue that has continued for decades in the state as Vermonters wrestle with finding the balance point between growth and development. Often the state looks to a “third way,” like that proposed by Governor James Douglas: not environment or development alone, but a unique and positive balance between them. Where that balance point is located is the topic of endless, and probably inevitable and necessary, debate. Another example is the dialogue about a very contentious issue: the passing of the Civil Unions bill. Although the topic was passionately debated, people were given their chance to speak and others listened. Ultimately, the passage of this legislation led the nation.

Another cultural contradiction and continuing dialogue involves the idea of Vermont exceptionalism. “Vermont is the soul of what is good about the United States.” At almost every forum Vermonters expressed a strong sense of the uniqueness of the state. Yet at the same time, the Council heard respondents say ‘our common values aren’t different from anywhere else,’ or ‘these things are true of other places too.’ Vermonters want the conversations about this state to be real and authentic – not overblown with self-satisfaction, smugness, or boastfulness. The Center for Rural Studies poll shows that Vermonters second and third ranked values are “pride in being from or living in Vermont,” and “Vermont’s spirit of independence,” (see the table at the beginning of this chapter). At most forums Vermonters expressed a sense of balance between recognizing and celebrating a pride in Vermont and realism about the state relative to the larger world around it.

Tolerance

When Vermonters listed their values at the public forums, they pointed to tolerance as a common trait. Many participants also point to the neighborliness of Vermonters – neighbors will help each other out when they need it, but also point to privacy – people are left to live their own lives. Many citizens here expressed satisfaction with Vermonters’ willingness to tolerate and live with a wide range of ideas and life styles; that many voices, opinions, and people can come together and work on a common issue. One citizen from Rutland said: “Vermont means tolerance. It’s not about your lifestyle, as long as how you live doesn’t hurt others, but what you do that counts.” Another from Franklin County echoed, “Tolerance and acceptance of other people for whatever they are. People are equal – gender, race, sexual orientation, we’re equal. I think this is all over Vermont.”

*“How many
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bulb better.”*



Although tolerance may be an ideal value for citizens here, many Vermonters worry that growing socio-economic disparity strains this tradition and ideal. Vermonters said that modern life and a growing socio-economic gap in the state was responsible for a change in tolerance. Vermont’s gap between the wealthy and the poor has been rising in the past decades. Though income inequality is considerably less in Vermont than in the rest of the nation, people here worry about it. Residents praise a history of “socio-economic inclusion” but many express fears that divisions will

grow in Vermont as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and people of different groups live in less connected circles – disconnected within communities, and disconnected between wealthy and less well off towns. In the commuter culture that is increasingly common across Vermont today, people of different means and lifestyle do not come into constant contact at the store, the post office, the gas station, or the farm as much as they once might have.

“There is a different perspective from people who are at the bottom looking up. The real view is not what the outsiders want to see.”

– Bennington

Vermonters also express concerns about how welcoming the state is to the non-white and minority groups in the state. In public forums, Vermonters, especially those in and around Chittenden and Washington Counties or those involved in education or social services, noted that Vermont has a hard time addressing the needs of an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse population. Vermont has had difficulty anticipating and supporting the needs of people who speak languages other than English, or who have family structures and religious or cultural practices that are unlike those of the majority. From foreign language translators to diversity training for school teachers, there is a wide range of structures that the state has increasing need of. Many Vermonters said that growing racial and ethnic diversity should be celebrated and supported, rather than allowed to become a source of tension.



Points of Unity

"We are independent minded and strong willed. If there's an issue, Vermonters will have an opinion on it," a citizen from Marlboro told the Council on the Future of Vermont.

At CFV forums, Vermonters spoke at length about the quality of life, the arts and creativity, hard work and agrarian heritage, and the independence and self-reliance of Vermonters.

Defining the 'Vermont way' is crucial to citizens of this state, especially to avoid the destruction of Vermont's cultural values and community values. Everywhere, Vermonters want to maintain their distinctive culture and sense of place, but not at the expense of "progress." Vermont is an activist state: Vermonters do not want to be defined by an idea of progress imposed from the outside, but to define themselves and their own future.

Protecting culture and community is not just a passive feeling for forum attendees. Vermonters are calling for action in response to the threat to the sense of community. They describe the atomizing tendencies of modern life, with commuting and new technologies that challenge the social fabric so vital to local communities. They share concerns about the challenge of socio-economic divisions in towns throughout the state. All of these things are threats to what Vermonters repeatedly testified that they cherish about community.

Many participants praised the Council on the Future of Vermont dialogues, pointing out that it would be hard to produce such a process in most other states. When the Center for Rural Studies poll asked about the first step to achieving one's most important goal for the next generation, over 30 percent of respondents identified an increase in civic action as the important next step. Vermonters believe that the state is just the right size to come together, recognize the contradictions and paradoxes inevitable to our society and culture, and still succeed in setting common goals and acting together toward an envisioned future. As one respondent commented, "Vermont is at a point where we have to work together." Recognizing the challenge of the entire Council on the Future of Vermont effort, one Vermonter reviewed the difficulties ahead but hoped that as a state, "we have the courage to agree with each other and move toward action."