

# INVESTING IN VERMONT'S FUTURE

## Report on Community Conversations

Vermont has a once in a lifetime opportunity to make significant investments that will transform and shape the future of our state. To prepare for the influx of federal stimulus funds and state revenues during the 2022 Legislative Session, House Speaker Jill Krowinski and Senate President Pro Tem Becca Balint hosted Investing in Vermont's Future, an unprecedented public engagement process to identify bright spots, chronic challenges, and opportunities to invest in Vermont's future.

Over 1400 Vermonters from all fourteen counties answered three questions about their communities and/or Vermont: 1) What's going well? 2) What challenges are you facing? and 3) What investments could have the greatest positive impact? through an online questionnaire (888 respondents), regional town hall meetings in each county (395 participants), and intentional conversations<sup>1</sup> to engage voices not typically heard in the Legislative process (240 participants).

This report seeks to elevate the insights and priorities of Vermonters and help ensure Legislative work is informed by their voices and the experiences of their day-to-day lives, rather than to make specific policy recommendations.

Below, findings are organized by question and include summaries of key themes that emerged, followed by supporting comments in the words of participants. This report provides only a snapshot of the conversations held across the state. To learn more about these themes through an interactive visual, [click here](#). To learn more about the process of collecting and analyzing feedback from these conversations, [click here](#).

## 1. WHAT'S GOING WELL IN YOUR COMMUNITY/VERMONT?

Participants identified many bright spots and agreed broadly about these themes:

**Vermont communities are strong and resilient.** During the pandemic, Vermonters saw increased civic engagement, mutual aid, shared resources, and new partnerships focused on community needs. Participants said:

- In our small community of Thetford, there is a feeling of having each other's backs. In the Upper Valley community as a whole, nonprofits are reaching out to each other to collaborate in supporting community needs (Orange County).
- The pandemic has shown us that our community is still very connected despite nationwide political divides. People from all ends of the political spectrum are stepping up to help their neighbors (Bennington County).
- I've been thinking a lot about the people who step up and keep our communities functions – pulling together a community event to save Halloween during the pandemic, stepping into a new selectboard role. We need to keep supporting these people (Lamoille County).
- I'm grateful for local libraries and how they are community resources, and are even more important since the

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<sup>1</sup> Intentional conversations engaged 240 individuals in 19 conversation groups and included members of Vermont's Abenaki, Koasek & Missisquoi tribes, early childhood educators, youth, young farmers, restaurant owners, Parent Child Center families, Adult Education & Literacy Network Students, BIPOC Vermonters, members of VT's Professional of Colors Network, Vermont peer-run organizations, Adult Education Centers, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, Committee for Refugees & Immigrants, Women Business Owners Network, Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, and Windooki Small Business Leaders, as well as member organizations of the Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence, the Vermont Foodbank, their network and community partners focused on Vermonters facing hunger, and students of the Vermont Adult Education & Literacy Network.

pandemic (Caledonia County).

**Vermont's natural resources are among its greatest assets** and support healthy lifestyles, access to local food, and a thriving recreational economy. Participants said:

- We are so fortunate to live in a place where we have access to healthy air, water and food (Bennington County).
- The outdoor culture, the value Vermonters put in getting outdoors and enjoying the natural beauty of this state (Franklin County).
- The local food system is one of Vermont's crown jewels that is rooted in our heritage of small communities and caring for one another (Addison County).

**Vermont's early response to Covid was a bright spot** for many, particularly our high vaccination rates, care for each other, and investments in recovery. Comments included:

- Vermonters during the Pandemic seem to have really gotten together in a good way to fight COVID-19. I am proud of the community response, both on a grassroots and government level (Chittenden County).
- The pandemic has made certain aspects of government more accessible – all of the city councils and legislative committees that we can tune into on YouTube. Community engagement looks different now and we can learn how to make it more transparent and inclusive going forward (Franklin County).
- The expansion of school meals and Vermont encouraging schools to participate and be involved was great, especially compared to other states (Intentional Conversation).

## 2. WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU FACING?

Participants described complex, interconnected challenges related to these themes:

**Vermont is in the midst of a housing crisis.** Across the state and across populations, people are struggling with the cost, access, and stability of housing. Businesses can't recruit employees, workers can't fill jobs, and individuals, families, and communities suffer. Participants said:

- We need to figure out the housing situation... We need more people, but we don't have anywhere to put them. We need to find a way to make it easier for people to build an energy-efficient, affordable, and environmentally friendly state. Or our state will only be accessible to really wealthy people (Addison County).
- We need to build more houses because so many people are getting vouchers but there are not enough places for people to go. I was in a hotel for 5 months before I got help and I was on the verge of being kicked back on the street. What good is a voucher if there's no place to go (Intentional Conversation)?
- Where I live, in White River Junction, there have been a number of new housing developments in just a few years, nearly all renting out high-priced apartments. This includes a new building downtown, which was renting studio apartments for up to \$1800 a month. In addition to there being a shortage of affordable housing, I was shocked to learn that Vermont has very little protections for renters, and essentially none with regards to rent increases... The building I live in was sold, and the rent was raised by 15%. But even that was a relief; it would have been extremely difficult to find alternate housing if our lease had not been renewed - which was the case for other residents in the building. And there is nothing that would have prevented the new owners from raising our rent 30% or even 50% (Windsor County).
- People in transition with mental health challenges and substance use issues are in need of transitional housing with services. We're still in the midst of a significant opioid and mental health crisis and need to let people live in the community and services right where they lived (Rutland County).

To explore additional participant comments related to housing, [click here](#).

**At the root of many of Vermont's challenges is systemic injustice.** From health care, mental health services, access to broadband, to housing and transportation — members of our communities are not served by our current systems. Participants said:

- People (including children) don't have what they need to live healthy lives. We don't have enough money to pay for health insurance, food, rent, childcare, and transportation and many of us (not just me!) are in debt for the rest of our lives with student loans. We work in a system that doesn't work for us, yet we have to keep working without pause in order to survive (Washington County).
- [Indigenous people] have one of the highest health disparities in the state... People who don't qualify for Medicaid or Medicare don't go to the hospital until the last minute, to the emergency room, and get hit with a \$30K bill, which becomes bad credit so they can't rent a house, buy a car. It ruins the rest of their life (Intentional Conversation).
- Folks of color and queer folks don't exist in rural communities. One of the reasons our farm exists is to show people we are here. When we invest money to foster community/farming in rural communities, we need to figure out how to make it a place people want to live in, where people feel welcome (Intentional Conversation).
- I volunteer at our local soup kitchen. A lot of the guys can't get assistance because they're living in the woods. They have to have a physical address to get assistance and can't get a post office box because they don't have an ID. How do we bridge those gaps so we can get them assistance and get them a job (Intentional Conversation)?
- When Vermont was deinstitutionalized and there was the promise of integrating Vermonters with disabilities into their communities, except for a brief time after that closing, there has never been a commitment to building the resources, services, expertise to support that. Everyone is left to fend for themselves (Intentional Conversation).

To explore additional participant comments related to systemic injustice, [click here](#).

**Our workforce shortage crosses sectors** – hospitality, trades, health, services – with profound impacts on our economy and community wellness. Participants said:

- We're recruiting all levels of staff and have 40% vacancy right now. [Our clients] are struggling with minimal support and our staff are stretched thin and overworked. But we can't recruit people, can't pay them enough, and can't find them housing (Orange County).
- The hospitality industry is struggling. This year is the first time in 14 years of owning a restaurant that I haven't been open 7 days/week. We went down to 5 days/week entirely due to staffing shortages (Addison County).
- We need better workforce development pathways that would keep people here and attract more young people. It is really important to highlight that there is a bright future here that is open to everyone. There are fields that could be more open for people if there were more educational opportunities (Youth Participant).
- Something that feels very alarming is that we seem to be running out of skilled labor – plumbers, electricians, are all at retirement age and it doesn't seem like there's anyone coming up behind them (Bennington County).

**Our systems of care and wellbeing don't meet Vermonters' needs.** Across the state, hospitals and care providers are struggling to recruit and retain staff, Vermonters are waiting months for needed care, and services remain inaccessible and unaffordable for many. Participants said:

- We overinvest in the most restrictive and oppressive institutional mental health interventions... which can compound mental health challenges and result in a revolving door to emergency departments. Many people

would choose a peer respite situation if they knew that was available (Intentional Conversation).

- Even if we enhanced the ability to pay for primary care, there are no doctors available to see patients... There are no open primary care physicians in Windsor County (Windsor County).
- Since leaving my job to stay home with my son I no longer have health insurance. Our premiums and deductibles are enormous and we are making difficult choices as a family to stay healthy. We are right at the middle class place between eligibility for Medicaid and being able to afford private health insurance (Intentional Conversation).

**Vermont's infrastructure holds us back from meeting many of our challenges.** We need upgrades to broadband access, transportation resources, the electric grid, and municipal water/sewer systems, to support economic growth. Participants said:

- [We must] improve the grid to enable renewable energy to move more efficiently around Vermont and the Northeast (Chittenden County).
- We will not be able to attract young people to this state unless they have access to the internet. We can't get out of our vehicles, we can't work, telehealth, unless we have broadband access. It's a critical piece of the puzzle to get this right (Washington County).
- We need water and sewer investments. Vermont has been promoting the development of villages and downtown but many don't have infrastructure to support that development (Caledonia County).

**Vermont's natural resources impact all areas of our health and economy.** They need protection through climate action, land preservation, air and water quality solutions, and clean energy investments. Participants said:

- Climate change is the #1 biggest issue facing all of us. I would like landowners who conserve forest land and limit timber harvesting to be encouraged with lower taxes. Allowing forests to grow and encouraging trees to act as carbon sinks helps with global warming and climate change (Windham County).
- Energy is one of my big concerns. At the highest level I see too much concern about energy production and too little concern about where it goes. Most energy goes into transportation and heating homes. We have old building stock. We could lead the nation by lowering the bar for severe energy retrofits for our buildings. Continuing to crank \$ into an old farm house that uses lots of wood and oil is wasteful. We have to make hard decisions about what housing to keep and what to let go of. But we could lower energy needs by creating efficiencies (Orange County).
- Let's invest in cleaning our waterways, including Lake Champlain, for a healthier human population, ecosystem, and outdoor tourism industry (Rutland County).

**Our child care system is failing our economy.** Vermont has an alarming lack of child care options, prohibitively high costs for families, and a workforce that is among the lowest paid in the state. Participants said:

- The cost of childcare is staggering for families, however the salary for teachers is below the livable wage often without healthcare. We have experienced huge amounts of turnover in the last 2.5 years of our son attending daycare (high turnover pre-pandemic as well). Early childcare needs better funding so they can pay their staff and teachers fairly, provide benefits and help with things like loan forgiveness, advanced education etc. Additionally, all families need better funding support as well - not just below a certain income. If we want to encourage people to move to Vermont we must support young families- with lower wages, high cost of living and high daycare costs families either must decide to not have children or perhaps to move out of the state (Washington County).

- Although our state has realized the importance of early care and learning, the response to supporting a sustainable workforce is going at a turtle's pace. Programs are going to and have already closed due to the limited workforce. It is critical that Vermont recognize and immediately implement programs to grow, attract and validate the teachers of young children (Chittenden County).

### 3. WHAT INVESTMENTS COULD HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT?

Participants suggested investments to address each of the themes identified above, and made suggestions about *how* to invest in Vermont's future, including the three themes below. To explore these themes and related comments further, [click here](#).

**Build on existing bright spots.** Strong models exist to address many of Vermont's chronic challenges. Investments should build on working models, scale local solutions, and adapt outside efforts to meet Vermont's needs. Participants said:

- Telemedicine – integration pre pandemic was very slow, but a silver lining is how quickly access was expanded. It made it a lot easier for working parents, working folks, those without sick days or flexibility in their jobs. I recently did a telemedicine appointment with a specialist in Dartmouth that would normally be a half day including travel, wait time, and appointment. I really appreciate the flexibility and more access to care that people need. It's working wonderfully and I hope that if the pandemic ever winds down that telemedicine is something that won't wind down with it and that insurance companies and Medicaid will continue to support it when it makes sense (Essex County).
- What I've noticed in our community in the Northeast Kingdom is that collaboration is working really well. We have several Collective Impact groups that have been here a long time and others that are just starting. I see that kind of work being strengthened by different funding streams. Working together in different ways is something that is going to get us where we need to be (Intentional Conversation).
- I think VT could be a huge beneficiary of a work from home trend where people can live here and work elsewhere. Continuing to have remote work policies beyond COVID will start to allow people to live outside of Burlington or Montpelier or right on the highway. Those places are expensive, and people love VT's natural beauty (Essex County).
- Affordable housing should be incorporated into all luxury housing. In Burlington, if you build 8 units you must build 1 subsidized unit (sliding scale). This works so well. I come from rural Vermont and couldn't afford my home anymore. I heard about this program and applied in Burlington and was able to live in a beautiful apartment within walking distance to everything I need. Excellent; there should be more (Chittenden County).
- Our local food system. Through the pandemic the resilience of our local food systems has supported our businesses, kept people employed and fed, brought us together in extremely challenging times, and created hope (Orleans County).

**Invest in community-led solutions.** Covid emphasized how communities in crisis can come together to address collective problems in novel ways. Investments should engage the people most impacted by Vermont's challenges in identifying needs and possible solutions. Participants said:

- Invest in ongoing opportunities to involve Vermonters of all ages, including children and youth, in the planning and implementation of plans going forward. I hope community organizations that support children and their families, libraries, and schools will be included in ongoing conversations, planning, implementation, evaluation (Grand Isle County).
- The most important place to invest is people – giving money directly to people is the best way to lift everyone up, the most direct way to build an economy for the bottom up. Things like the stimulus checks, universal basic

income, is the best return for investment (Orange County).

- Build on efforts already underway in our communities. Do not conduct more studies, or hire consultants. Work with community leaders who are engaged in community and economic development. Fueling current initiatives (in both policy and budgetary decisions) validates current work and fuels the capacity to achieve results (Lamoille County).
- Sometimes very local communities take it upon themselves to meet a need – starting a teen center, mutual aid program, food backpacks. Make funds available to community organizers who are already doing things like that (Chittenden County).
- It's not just about the money, it's about giving the money to the people most impacted to decide the criteria, decide how the money is going to be spent. It's not just about where the money is going, but who is making decisions and how we are dispersing that power. People of color and Black people get used on panels or task forces as a token person. Still, majority white, educated, wealthy people make decisions about how money gets spent. How do we go beyond listening to empowering and letting people make decisions around policy (Intentional Conversation)?

**Take an integrated approach to change.** Vermont's greatest challenges – workforce, housing, child care, health care, climate – are deeply interconnected. However, our approaches to address them often advance in isolation. Solutions should work across systems to address the intersections and root causes of problems. Participants said:

- We need affordable housing with on-site staff to help tenants access medical and mental health services, employment support, and other needed services (Chittenden County).
- Funding for Career & Technical Education programs in renewable energy to address climate concerns and grow opportunities for high paying, high growth careers (Intentional Conversation).
- One of our biggest challenges is losing population – that's a definite. Part of it is because we're lacking entrepreneur development. There's lots of business opportunities in the outdoor recreation economy, but we don't have the supports for people to learn how to run a business, secure financing, etc. If we could teach some of the people who work here already how to run a business, it would open up jobs for other people coming up. We're not going to get a factory in this rural area – we have to find a different way to build local business. We're trying to figure out a solution of how we're going to keep this town surviving. I've talked to people who would love to open a store in the town, but they don't have the first idea of how to stock or run it (Essex County).
- At the state level, we need to think about how we engage and tap into the immigrant and refugee communities to be part of our workforce for child care and afterschool programs. One of the most difficult things we deal with is turnover in our afterschool program – which is staffed predominantly by white college students. Incentives to hire people with college degrees are tied to subsidies for the program. We have a lot of families with moms at home who would want to be part of the workforce, but we haven't created a quality improvement and subsidy system that incentivizes bringing them in (Intentional Conversation).
- Weatherization checks so many boxes: it keeps people warm in their houses, reduces fuel use, helps low income owners with incentives and rebates. It needs to be taken to scale - 50x what we've done in the past. We need to include people who rent, because there's a reverse incentive if the landlord pays the fuel bill (Statewide Conversation).
- We need some sort of a new deal. Something that puts the public good, public works up front and incentivizes people to work together on that, truly incentives, to get people together to make things happen. Convert old homes into new houses and build a greater sense of community in the process (Washington County).