

## Rural Communities & Climate Resilience Stakeholder Workshop Summary

Wednesday, September 15, 2021 6:00 to 8:00 PM ET

Co sponsored by: VT Climate Council, Association of VT Conservation Commissions, VT League of Cities and Towns, VT Association of Planning and Development Agencies, and VT Planners Association

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*This summary is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather captures key themes raised by participants. For more details, the agenda, presentation materials, and recording can be found on the [calendar event](#) on the [ClimateChange.vermont.gov](#) website.*

### Attendance

Approximately 60 individuals, including state staff and invited speakers, participated in the Workshop.

### Workshop Objectives

The workshop was organized to discuss the needs/issues in rural Vermont and ideas that could be considered the Rural Resilience and Adaption Subcommittee as it prepares to present their actions to the Vermont Climate Council to inform the formulation of the Climate Action Plan (CAP).

**Welcome Message and Objectives**, Erica Bornemann, Rural Resilience Sub-Committee Co-Chair  
Erica Bornemann gave an overview of the Workshop's agenda as well as the goals and objectives to be met by the Climate Action Plan (CAP). She emphasized that the objective for the workshop was to understand the needs of those in rural Vermont. The Rural Resilience and Adaption Subcommittee will then work together to use what they've heard today in their development of strategies.

### I. Overview of Climate Action Planning Process, *Marian Wolz, GWSA Coordinator*

Marian Wolz provided an overview of Global Warming Solutions Act with the requirements of the Vermont Climate Action Plan (CAP). The Vermont CAP requirements are:

1. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation, building, regulated utility, industrial, commercial, and agricultural sectors;
2. Encourage smart growth and related strategies;
3. Achieve long-term sequestration and storage of carbon and promote best management practices to achieve climate mitigation, adaption, and resilience on natural working lands;
4. Achieve net zero emissions by 2050 across all sectors;
5. Reduce energy burdens for rural and marginalized communities;
6. Limit the use of chemicals, substances, or products that contribute to climate change; and
7. Build and encourage climate adaptation and resilience of Vermont communities and natural systems.

She continued with laying out the sequence of work and timeline for completing the CAP. She gave a brief overview of the Guiding Principles for a Just Transition.

### II. Remarks by VT League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), *Ted Brady, Director*

Ted Brady gave a brief overview of VLCT and provided examples on how VLCT and local government can help implement rural resilience measures in Vermont. Mr. Brady described the successful efforts of the Mad River Valley Planning District, Brandon, Vermont, and Brattleboro Tri-Park Mobile Home. He noted that the Local Fiscal Recovery Funds from ARPA, with nearly \$200 million, is there to help towns fund infrastructure needs and VLCT is also working with towns by providing guidance on how to leverage the ARPA funds and invest in long term recovery

### III. Rural Resilience Subcommittee Pathways, Catherine Dimitruk, Rural Resilience Subcommittee Co-Chair

Catherine Dimitruk gave an overview of the pathways developed by the Rural Resilience and Adaption Subcommittee which include:

- **Pathway #1- Capacity:** Increase local, regional, including community and civic networks, and state agency capacity, for resilience planning and implementation, and address inequities of under-resourced communities.
- **Pathway #2- Infrastructure:** Proactively and strategically invest to enhance resilience in transportation, communications, water/wastewater, and energy infrastructure statewide.
- **Pathway #3- Fossil Fuel/Rural Use:** Support the reduction of municipal, school district, residential, university, and hospital fossil fuel use in rural areas through equitable best practices that address the unique challenges of rural communities.
- **Pathway #4- Land Use:** Change Vermont's land-use policies so current and future land development will be adaptive and resilient to climate change impacts by promoting compact development, enhancing the capacity of natural and working lands, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Pathway #5- Housing:** Ensure that all people have access to safe, accessible, energy efficient, and affordable housing in location-efficient, compact, and mixed-use neighborhood areas with diverse housing types and equitable access to jobs, services, schools, recreation, and diverse transportation options.

As a reminder, she provided definitions for adaption and resilience which are:

- **Adaptation:** reducing vulnerability and advancing resilience through planned and implemented enhancements to, or avoiding degradation of, natural and built systems and structures.
- **Resilience:** the capacity of individuals, communities, and natural and built systems to withstand and recover from climatic events, trends and disruptions.

### IV. Breakout Groups Summary

*Four simultaneous breakout groups formed to allow more discussion from participants; the topics and questions were the same in all groups.*

### Questions to Guide Discussion:

- What are the challenges rural municipal government face around GHG emission reductions?
  - What do you see as the greatest opportunities to reduce GHG emissions in your town?
  - What does your community need to achieve success in this area?
- What are the challenges rural municipal governments face around resilience to climate change?
  - What do you see as the greatest opportunities to increase resilience in your town?
  - What does your community need to achieve success in this area?
- What are the challenges rural municipal governments face around adaptation to climate change?
  - What do you see as the greatest opportunities to successfully adapt to climate change impacts in your town?
  - What does your community need to achieve success in this area?

Below is a summary of key themes that emerged across the groups arranged by major topics.

### **GHG Emissions Reductions**

- **Transportation:** This subject was a recurring theme through each breakout. Many rural communities face similar issues with lack of public transportation as well as long commutes.
  - **Electrification:** Many community members discussed a need to switch to alternative fuels (electricity and/or biofuels) for both commuter and public vehicles. In addition, many cited the lack of public transportation for many of their areas. There were multiple suggestions ranging from more funding for public transportation to working on a more local level to plan transportation hubs with nearby towns. Multiple participants are hoping for more charging stations in their towns to help the switch to electric vehicles.
  - **Cost:** Ultimately, many are concerned that the cost to switch to electric vehicles including the cost for transitioning the police vehicles, municipal trucks and equipment will be a major barrier.
- **Downtown Redevelopment:** Participants discussed the role of downtown and district redevelopment as a strategy for reducing vehicle miles travelled and the importance of planning for businesses that meet the needs of the community and the idea of adding incentives to draw businesses into compact development. Another idea suggested for encouraging compact development is a “neighborhood hub” with support from the city to locate critical services. A participant that has seen their move from a rural community to a larger town urged others to anticipate growth and plan ahead for a compact downtown hub.
- **Broadband:** Participants highlighted that having better broadband could help lead to more home businesses, more remote work, reduced commutes, and less vehicles on the road. Better broadband could also lead to information being more accessible to understand climate related issues affecting their community. One participant mentioned that the Northeast Kingdom has trouble with outreach as they estimated that nearly 15% of people in the region do not have access to broadband.
- **Buildings:**
  - **Weatherization:** Many suggested that more attention should be given to building weatherization to reduce thermal energy needs. Some participants mentioned that there are challenges in reaching the people who need weatherization the most. In addition, a core

of “navigators” should be created to help building owners navigate the “red tape” to access programs.

Some rural communities do not have the funding for weatherization projects. The [PACE program](#) and ARRA funds were suggested as sources of funding to help residents meet the cost of improvements.

- A few participants also emphasized the importance of working with landlords to implement building weatherization and installing heat pumps to address the needs of renters. Case needs to be made to landlords and homeowners how increased efficiency is going to benefit them, given the high up-front costs, and incentives provided where needed.
- Investment in workforce development for building efficiency improvements is sorely needed to reach the scale of implementation needed.
- Participants suggested that net-metering rates could be raised to increase incentives for homeowners to install solar power to meet increased building electricity demands.
- **Window-Dressers Project:** A few participants mentioned this initiative as an instant and measurable difference in thermal insulation. Community comes together and builds window inserts to put into drafty windows which is more cost-effective than window replacements and builds social capital by bringing people together.
- **Electricity sector:** Community solar was highlighted as a way to provide clean energy to low/moderate income households. A challenge noted is getting the initial capital to meet the project down payment.

Several participants noted challenges meeting increased electricity demand because the electricity distribution system is particularly vulnerable to hazardous weather. They suggested updating the current energy infrastructure and co-locating utilities (road, electric, etc.) and implement combined permitting processes to facilitate rebuilding power lines when needed.
- **Capacity:** Rural communities often do not have enough people to identify mitigation opportunities, conduct the outreach needed, and oversee programs to implement the measures. Many towns are hoping to hire new staff or to look for help by creating networks of towns closely connected to each other.

### **Resilience and Adaption**

- **Updating by-laws and zoning:** Some rural communities are looking at opportunities to incorporate conservation overlays, zero stormwater discharge requirements for new developments, river corridor protection standards in by-laws and zoning regulations. Education of town officials will be needed to make these changes. Some of these changes, such as river corridor protection may be best implemented at the state-level.
- **Regional approaches:** Watershed-wide planning could help address many cross-jurisdictional challenges. Regional Planning Commissions are another institutional framework for regional planning.
- **Capacity:** As with the conversations around GHG emissions, many rural communities face a problem with capacity at the government level. Due to capacity challenges, adaption and resilience projects generally take a long time, never start, or a town can only focus on smaller items rather than the bigger projects.

- **Education and Information:** The need for getting data and understanding the data was a central message. Rural communities do not fully understand climate risks and impacts at the local level. Workshops and resources from the state are needed to support resilience and adaptation planning.
- **Staff/Volunteer training:** Nearly every breakout group recognized that many towns simply do not have adequate staff to tackle the big problems. Many towns have committees made up of volunteers that do not have the time nor the expertise needed. Resilience and adaptation trainings for volunteers would also help marshal the passion volunteers can offer.
- **Pooling resources** among towns to address issues collaboratively can help towns while maintaining some local control. Restructuring the incentive programs could help reduce the barriers to participation.
- On a larger level, there is a feeling among participants that climate change responses cannot be tackled with the **current local government structure**. Many are looking to ways to enhance their towns government to be able to handle climate related issues outside of the normal day to day process. An idea was pitched of “climate adaptation teams” as a useful structure for municipalities.
- **Infrastructure:** A recurring theme among participants was the need for rural communities to improve infrastructure to be more resilient to extreme events. For instance, noting that electricity distribution is particularly vulnerable in storms, participants suggested investment in micro grids as a potential solution and develop more local energy sources. GMP is piloting microgrid projects in Grafton and Panton that could serve as models for the rest of VT. Another breakout talked about the vulnerability to flooding of Vermont’s main roads, which calls for investment in getting people out of their cars.
- **Food Systems:** A town could work toward making the local food supply more sustainable to reduce dependence on importing food from outside the region.
- **Housing/Development:** To advance resilience, downtown construction needs to focus on higher density, mixed use development, and relocation away from rivers. Others also suggest that development in hilly areas could worsen flooding problems in rural areas. Rural communities should look at their regulations and zoning laws to see if anything can be done there to improve resiliency and adaption for new development and adaptation for existing development, such as putting homes on stilts and planting trees and adding more green space.
- **Biodiversity:** Participants stated that one of the biggest problems rural Vermont faces is the loss of biodiversity as the climate changes. Encouraging compact development and protecting core forests is critical to storing carbon and protecting connectivity and allowing species to migrate.

## V. Next Steps, Marian Wolz

Marian Wolz explained that the Subcommittees will take these ideas and everything they have heard from today as they continue to develop their actions for the CAP. In addition, she mentioned that everyone is welcome to be a part of the process and that the Vermont Climate Council meetings are open to the public. There are several public engagement events coming up, in-person and online. The in-person events have a broader focus on engaging the public outside of rural resilience. The online events are less broad and includes one BIPOC event as well. For further information, you can go online at [climatechange.vermont.gov](http://climatechange.vermont.gov). Erica Bornemann and Catherine Dimitruk thanked everyone for coming and being a part of the process.