



Vermont Climate Action Plan

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

October 2021



Overview

A total of 1,602 Vermonters were engaged in the Climate Action Plan process by Climate Access and Rise Consulting in partnership with the Agency of Natural Resources.

Public events were held between September 21 and October 12, 2021 and an online survey was conducted between September 20 and October 15, 2021. ANR summarized [public comments](#) submitted from July 2 and October 7, 2021.

In addition, Climate Access and Rise Consulting interviewed stakeholders from a broad range of stakeholder groups to inform the public engagement plan. Stakeholders shared concerns related to climate impacts and solutions to include in the Climate Action Plan.

The breakdown of participation via channel is as follows:

- Interviews & Roundtables: 37 participants
- Public Engagement Events: 521 total attendees
- Public Opinion Survey: 679 responses
- Public Comment Form: 365 comments

Public engagement events

In partnership with the Agency of Natural Resources, Climate Access and Rise Consulting facilitated 7 engagement events; 4 in-person and 3 online sessions. The events brought together a total of 521 individuals from across Vermont in a conversation about their concerns about climate impacts and priorities for the Climate Action Plan and Comprehensive Energy Plan.

The events were promoted via climatechange.vermont.gov, social media, Front Porch Forum and local and statewide digital and print news outlets, including VT Digger, Seven Days, Barton Chronicle, Caledonian-Record, Newport Daily Express, Bennington Banner, Vermont Newsguide, Colchester Sun, St. Albans Messenger and Essex Reporter. Additionally, the events were amplified across the stakeholder groups identified by the subcommittees and the partners who participated in the interview and roundtable engagement process. The engagement events were also covered by a range of media outlets including [WCAX](#), [WVNY/WFFE](#), [VT Digger](#), and the [Manchester Journal](#).

Public engagement event dates, location, attendance

- Sept 21, 2021: Elmore State Park Pavilion, Elmore (46 attendees)
- Sept 22, 2021: Emerald Lake State Park Pavilion, East Dorset (81 attendees)
- Sept 23, 2021: Lakeside Pavilion, Island Pond (33 attendees)
- Sept 26, 2021: Airport Park Pavilion, Colchester (48 attendees)
- Sept 30, 2021: Online public meeting (151 attendees)
- Oct 6, 2021: Online public meeting (152 attendees)
- Oct 12, 2021: Online meeting for BIPOC communities (10 attendees)



Collateral - Outreach Materials

The consulting team developed a collateral package including a partner event planning guide, event facilitation guide, online event presentation deck, promotional poster, press release, social media strategy and content, event feedback form and background document to provide participants with information on the planning process and the actions being considered including a summary [Overview & What's at Stake and What Can be Done](#) document and [Draft Climate Actions](#) handout.

Public Opinion Survey

Concurrent with the public engagement events, the consulting team also developed and fielded a [survey](#) to gather additional input. The survey resulted in 679 responses across eleven counties. The survey was posted on <https://climatechange.vermont.gov/getinvolved>, shared via social media and amplified by stakeholders identified during Phase 1 of the public engagement process.

Public Comment Form

Individuals also shared their input through the [public comment form](#) which yielded 365 comments from June to October 2021.

KEY FINDINGS

Looking across all input gathered via the range of channels, there are a number of themes that stand out. They include:

- ▶ **Vermonters who participated want bold action on climate change. At each event, participants expressed strong support for solutions on scale with the challenge.**
- ▶ **There is great hope the Climate Action Plan will live up to what it is intended to achieve and significant concern that it will not.**
- ▶ **Top priorities for community members include tackling climate change through transportation improvements that provide access to cleaner vehicles and public transit, scaling weatherization efforts and efficiency upgrades for buildings and affordable, local sources of clean energy.**
- ▶ **Equity is a core concern. This came through at all events, via the survey and public comment portal. In particular, the impact of climate change and energy transition on youth, low-income Vermonters and BIPOC community members was expressed.**
- ▶ **The mental health impacts of climate change were raised as a key concern, particularly for youth.**
- ▶ **Accessibility of climate solutions. Vermonters want bold action yet wonder how solutions will be paid for and who will be able to afford and have access to them.**
- ▶ **Many who participated in the in person and online events are very interested in staying engaged in the process and appreciated being connected to other community members who feel strongly about the issue.**

Findings: Interviews & Roundtables (Phase 1)

In June-July 2021, Climate Access and Rise Consulting conducted a series of interviews and roundtable dialogues with target stakeholders to inform the development of the engagement plan. Participants were asked about how climate change is impacting their work and communities, what their primary concerns are about climate change, in their communities and what actions are needed to cut climate pollution and build resilience to climate impacts. The following core concerns and solutions emerged from those conversations:

Climate concerns

- The uneven and inequitable burden of climate impacts and lack of access to solutions for Vermonters with less financial resources and BIPOC Vermonters.
- The impact of climate change on the environment, farms, forests and outdoor recreation.
- Lack of trust in state government or resistance to new regulations is an issue with some Vermonters.
- Concerns regarding the impacts of and preparation for climate migration including impacts on land and affordable housing access.
- The way in which the problem of climate change is defined affects how we will try to solve the problem.

Climate solutions

- Equitable approach to planning. Vermonters want their diverse experiences and points of view represented in a plan that offers accessible solutions and protection from uneven impacts.
- Vermonters want a just energy transition. Ensuring access to solutions was raised as a critical issue for consideration.
- Food security and sustainable consumption. Climate-friendly agriculture, improved food access, and strong local food systems that feed all Vermonters were identified as key priorities as well as promoting more sustainable consumption of goods and services.
- Land management and carbon sequestration. Forestry, conservation, and land management solutions.

Findings: Public Engagement Events

In September-October 2021, Climate Access and Rise Consulting in partnership with the Agency of Natural Resources, hosted a series of public engagement events that gathered individuals from across the state in conversation about the Vermont Climate Action Plan and the Comprehensive Energy Plan. Participants provided input on their experience with climate impacts, including the following most frequently mentioned concerns:

Top climate impact concerns

1. Health
2. Mental Health
3. Climate refugees/migration
4. Food
5. Housing
6. Water quality
7. Drought
8. Air quality
9. Invasive species
10. Storms

Event participants learned about the six draft action areas being considered (Efficient Transportation Systems and Vehicles; Better Buildings and Homes; Clean, Reliable Energy; Resilient Working and Natural Lands; Strong Rural Communities; and Low-Carbon Products and Processes) and provided input on their top priorities, the core barriers and what they saw as missing from the action areas. The following section provides an overview of that feedback with priorities, barriers and missing elements listed in order of frequency.

ACTION AREA INPUT: Priorities, Barriers and What's Missing

► EFFICIENT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS AND VEHICLES

PRIORITIES

Frequent:

- Join the Transportation and Climate Initiative (TCI)
- Increase the focus on equity in TCI
- Encourage EV adoption (rebates especially for low-income individuals to make EVs more affordable), incentives including for secondary market, fast charging stations
- Reduce vehicle miles driven, encourage carpooling/ride sharing, digital ride boards safe bike lanes
- Electrification of public systems, including school buses
- Ensure compact land use, smart development
- Increase public transit options, enhance use of existing transportation networks, expand commuter rail network with bus connections, efficient freight
- Enforce speed in rural areas, especially for heavy industrial traffic
- Invest in transport infrastructure via workforce development
- Funding for safe paths/corridors for active transport/mobility

Outliers:

- Fuel rationing, increase gas tax, ban sales of fossil fuel vehicles, stop airport expansion

BARRIERS

- EV access is cost prohibitive
- EV availability, range and battery issues, lack of charging stations
- Hesitancy to adopt technology, resistance to change
- Lack of public transportation in rural areas
- Reliance on personal vehicles, land use policies and lack of incentives for dense development
- Lack of pedestrian infrastructure, insufficient bike safety
- Tourism encourages driving
- Lower income individuals have a higher transportation cost burden
- Lack of analysis of long-term impacts of various modes of transit

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Efficient convenient public transit, ultra-light electric rail
- Speed management
- Alternative fuels (biodiesel)
- Land use planning for safe, pleasant, infrastructure for walking and biking, including bike racks on buses and hard infrastructure for pedestrians
- Subsidized ride sharing
- Charging stations
- Improved broadband to allow for remote work
- Incentives for e-bikes
- Mandatory education on bike and road safety for all

BETTER BUILDINGS AND HOMES

PRIORITIES

Frequent:

- Weatherization and efficiency incentives, prioritizing affordability for renter and low-income properties, focusing on oldest housing stock first, increase workforce to provide weatherization
- Efficient requirements for new construction, updated building codes for all construction that establishes minimum standards efficiency systems, code enforcement, green retrofitting
- Educational resources for contractors, workforce training
- Net zero standards for new construction
- Reduce the use of high carbon building products, increase use of green materials,
- Green roofs and water capture
- Fuel switching options, electric heat pump installation
- Performance standards for fossil heating providers

Outliers:

- Smaller high-density housing and cohousing
- Support community resilience zones
- Installation of composting toilets in new construction

BARRIERS

- Lack of affordable climate-resilient housing
- Financial burden and limited options for renters
- Weatherization costs, lack of funding for efficiency rebates
- Labor shortage, workforce is lacking capacity and training
- Zoning that prohibits higher density development
- Affordable housing investments are not making it to BIPOC people
- Standards that are not enforced
- Lack of political will
- NIMBY opposition to affordable housing, density and infill development

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Policy that explicitly prioritizes creation of affordable, carbon-neutral housing built by laborers with union-protected, fair-paying jobs
- Affordable safe housing for farmworkers
- Affordable, safe, efficient, walkable, beautiful, denser housing
- Using existing housing stock to assist people experiencing homelessness
- Workforce investments
- Promoting personal behavior modifications, such as thermostat management
- Electrification of buildings, ability to prohibit extension of natural gas into new or remodel construction
- Rebates for home EV chargers

► **CLEAN, RELIABLE ENERGY**

PRIORITIES

Frequent:

- Make renewable energy affordable and accessible to low-income Vermonters
- More in-state renewable electricity generation, increase RES requirements, 100% RES
- Local clean energy generation, expand small-scale community-owned solar, distributed solar, rooftop solar, solar mandates on new construction/parking lots
- Incentivize solar and wind, prioritize environmental justice where energy is generated
- Optimize, modernize, and increase resiliency and storage capacity of grid
- Promote resiliency through microgrids, modernizing substations and increased electricity storage

- Accurate GHG accounting
- Need to account for the carbon emissions and loss of carbon sequestration from the increase in wood energy
- Expand net metering, smart metering
- Consider local community input when planning / siting energy sources, avoid environmental impacts of industrial wind energy
- Emphasize conservation, energy efficiency
- Prohibit fossil fuel infrastructure development
- Good paying, green jobs with benefits and training

Outliers

- Make PUC independent
- Agriculture and landfills as sources of renewable natural gas
- Reduce military use of fossil fuels
- Increase accessibility of biofuels

BARRIERS

- Energy transition costs
- Clean energy still has environmental impacts
- Hydroelectric power from Quebec produces flooding, mercury pollution, causes displacement and shifts the emission burden to Indigenous communities
- VT legislature has made it more difficult to incentivize solar
- Political efforts to obstruct net metering and community solar
- Account for biomass as source of carbon
- Corporate greenwashing

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Conveying science and data to Vermonters so they can make informed energy choices
- Asking people to take personal responsibility for reducing energy use
- Impact on people whose jobs will be lost in an energy transition
- Accounting for the carbon emissions and loss of carbon sequestration from the increase in wood energy

► RESILIENT WORKING AND NATURAL LANDS

PRIORITIES

- Support workforce development / training within forest economy and other natural environment sectors
- Help farmers meet goals, protect, preserve and maintain ability to farm, subsidize regenerative agriculture and carbon sequestration
- Create local food hubs, incentives for local gardens, community gardens, CSAs, Farmers Markets and agricultural processing, storage and distribution
- Invest in BIPOC land access and farming

- Focus on soil health
- Manure management for emissions reductions
- Invest in nature-based solutions
- Conserve land for farming, wildlife, wetlands protected and restored, protect biodiversity.
- Protect the natural systems that support carbon sequestration
- Re-establishing stream banks for ecosystem functions and sequestration, strengthening riparian zones
- Stop forest fragmentation, development impacts from climate refugees
- Leave Vermont's forests wild

Outliers

- Biomass for energy production

BARRIERS

- Lack of affordable land
- Land Trusts shouldn't get more money- not accessible to BIPOC
- Lack of recognition of ecosystem complexities
- Crops may change in the future
- Some policies will slow down progress in other areas (e.g. land conservation may make housing access more difficult)
- Ensure capacity of wastewater / water infrastructure can support development while maintaining intact, healthy ecosystems
- Impacts of sprawl on agricultural and forest lands, climate migration causing people to be priced out of the housing market
- Economic constraints
- Zoning laws
- Capital cost of land and equipment

MISSING

- Allocations to BIPOC communities to ensure they are directly and equitably benefitting from investments/incentives
- Concerns about current use and lack of income sensitivity - so many second homeowners are getting incentives and benefits and people with less resources aren't even able to access the land
- Migration corridors for wildlife

► STRONG RURAL COMMUNITIES

PRIORITIES

Frequent

- Broadband access and regional digital infrastructure
- Remote work opportunities
- Small business development – training, mentoring, health care
- Funding for regional planning and action
- State investments in regional infrastructure
- Land use that reduces emissions and increases carbon sequestration.

- Planning for climate refugee populations
- Programs to help rural communities focus on their economic vitality,
- Create systems of mutual aid for the most vulnerable especially after weather events
- Move away from high consumption lifestyles and localize economies
- Nucleated development to improve walkability and reduce vehicular use, hubs that connect to transport

BARRIERS

- Not enough funding or expertise
- Social injustice
- Reliance of wage/labor capitalism
- Local vs state tensions – lack of trust, unrealistic reliance on state and federal help
- Lack of internet
- Weekend / absentee owners causing an erosion of community
- Climate migration exacerbating job and housing insecurity, potential to increase racial tensions

WHAT'S MISSING?

- Social capital, how to stay connected, community building events to bring people of all ages together to promote local resilience
- Involve rural residents in decision-making
- Emergency shelters for the unhoused especially during environmental hazards (storms, power outages) in each municipality

► LOW-CARBON PRODUCTS AND PROCESSES

PRIORITY

- Carbon removal technology, beneficial at the large plant level
- Corporate responsibility
- Strong extended producer responsibility laws
- Prioritize financial incentives to buy local

BARRIERS

- Biomass is not a renewable resource

MISSING

- Reduce personal energy use
- Offset food miles
- Incentivize changes in standards for asphalt and concrete
- Incentivizing industries to view all waste streams as resources
- Accountability for major polluters

BIPOC Public Input Session

In recognition of the fact that BIPOC communities experience differential vulnerabilities to climate change and that in Vermont we have seen disparities in environmental justice, health outcomes and other state systems, the outreach strategy included convening a special input session for Black, Indigenous and people of color in Vermont. This session was contested by some members of the public and had to be rescheduled to ensure the safety of participants and the overall viability of the session.

BIPOC event – Key Findings

- Systemic issues at the state level that have not been addressed will be exacerbated by the climate crisis and felt disproportionately by BIPOC
- Concerns for disproportionate climate impacts on BIPOC communities, include: lack of affordable and climate resilient housing, land, and lack of access to affordable health care and clean energy
- Lack of representation and inclusion of BIPOC voices on the Climate Council and Subcommittees
- The rushed plan development timeline undermines the ability for meaningful BIPOC engagement
- Priorities identified in the climate plan uphold a corporate profit model that will not financially benefit BIPOC
- Due to lack of representation and outreach there are concerns over the legitimacy of CAP process from an equity point of view and a lack of trust that plan will be successfully implemented

BIPOC event – Climate Action Plan

Gaps:

Across ALL sections CAP was found to be lacking

- BIPOC involvement/agency in decision-making
- BIPOC representation and opportunities to lead
- Prioritization of equity and shifting of power dynamics

Recommendations:

- Independent body including BIPOC to report on actual performance/ effectiveness of this CAP
- More BIPOC control of funding
- More representation on the Council that BIPOC can join in real time- or open doors for Abenaki and BIPOC Earth Stewards to participate in these decision-making rooms
- Focus on thinking outside the box with regards to climate adaptation and green jobs

Findings: Public Opinion Survey

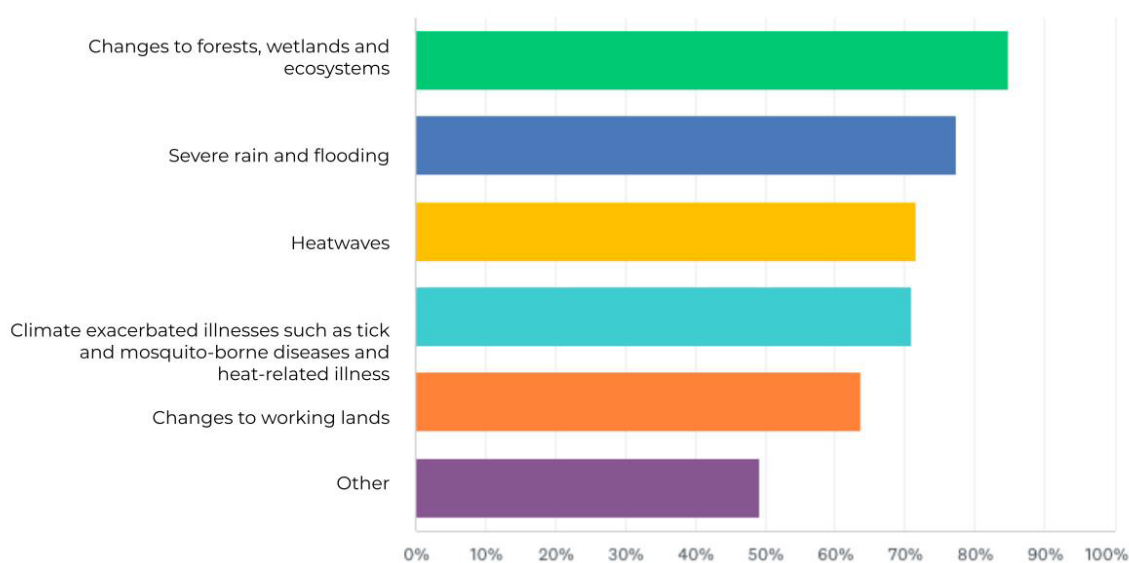
In September-October 2021, a public opinion survey was fielded to gather additional public input on climate concerns and solutions.

A large majority of survey respondents (71%) say they have been personally affected by climate change. Flooding, climate refugees, storms, heat waves, seasonal changes, droughts and ticks/pests were frequently mentioned impacts.

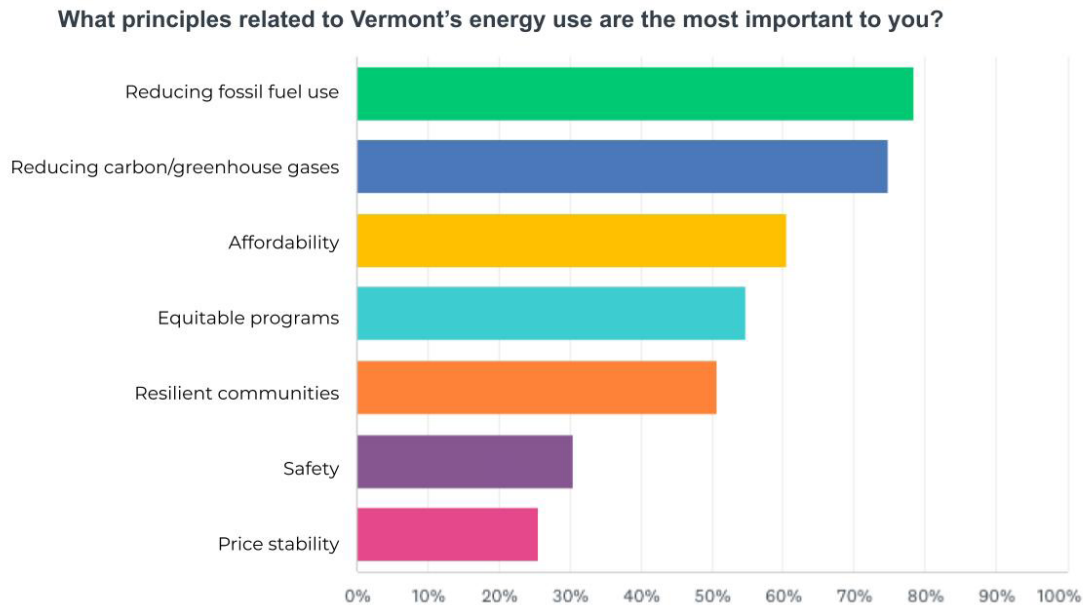
CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS OF MOST CONCERN:		
For the state	For your community	For you personally
Flooding Forests Climate refugees/migration Drought Ecosystems Tourism Agriculture Maple industry Heat waves Invasive species	Flooding Drought Climate refugees/migration Heat waves Extreme weather Water quality Economy Invasive species Agriculture Air quality	Children/future generations Heat waves Flooding Ticks Quality of life Drought Health Climate refugees/migration Water quality Air quality

A majority of respondents were interested in a range of climate-related issues, principally changes to forests, wetland and ecosystems and severe rain and flooding. Followed by heat waves, climate exacerbated illnesses and changes to working lands.

What climate-related issues are you concerned about? Choose all that apply



In terms of energy use, a majority of respondents want to reduce fossil fuel use, reduce carbon/ greenhouse gases and increase affordability programs that increase equity and access.



Respondents identified the following support or resources they or their community need to reduce your consumption of fossil fuels, adapt to an already-warming world and become more resilient:

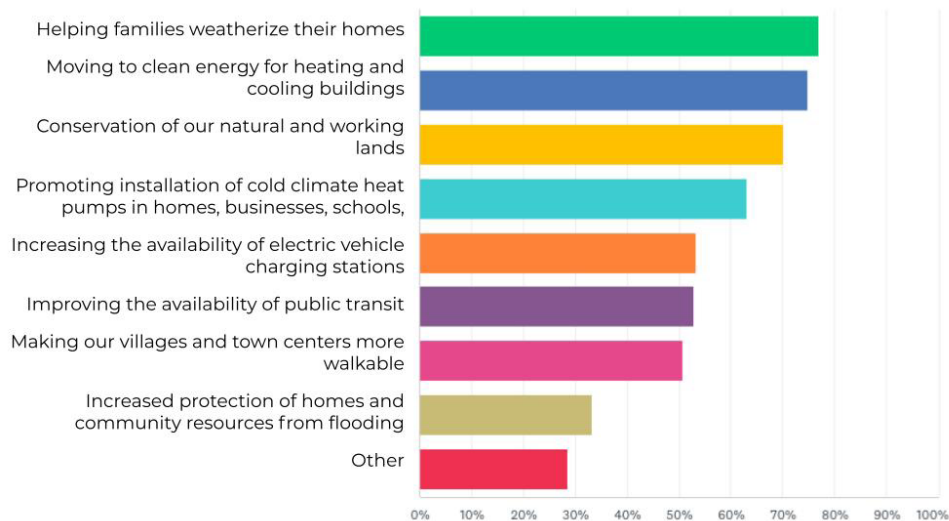
- Incentives and subsidies for EVs and charging stations
- Public transportation and transportation alternatives
- Energy audits and financial support for weatherization, housing upgrades
- More rights as renters
- Inclusion/ representation of BIPOC in decision making
- Infrastructure improvements
- Education to prepare for impacts and reduce personal emissions

Respondents want to see the following issues prioritized in the Climate Action Plan:

- Affordable weatherization of buildings
- Subsidies for energy efficiency
- Access to public transportation and transportation alternatives
- Increase in local renewable energy sources, microgrids
- Storm/ extreme weather resilience building
- Replace and reduce fossil fuels
- Incentives for electric vehicles
- Equity and a just transition for low-income and BIPOC community members
- Sustainable farming and food production
- Infrastructure improvements

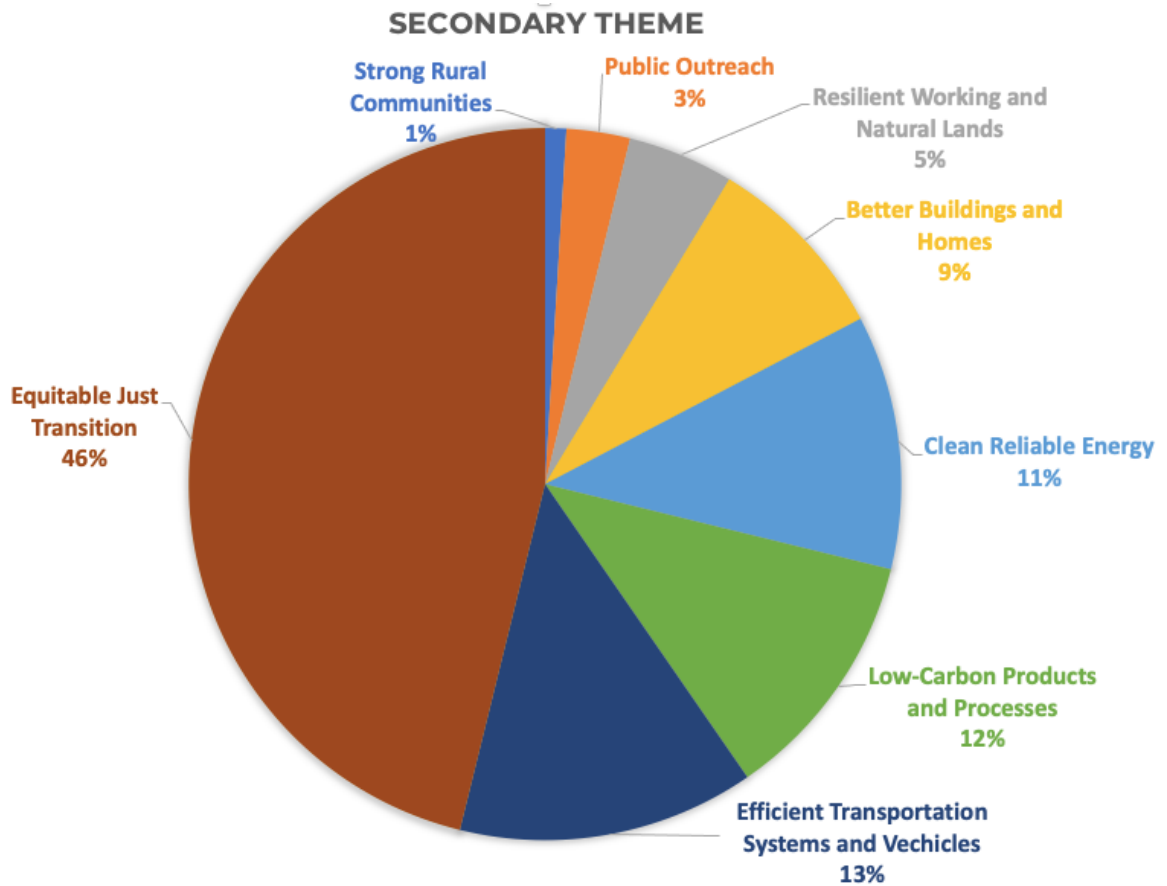
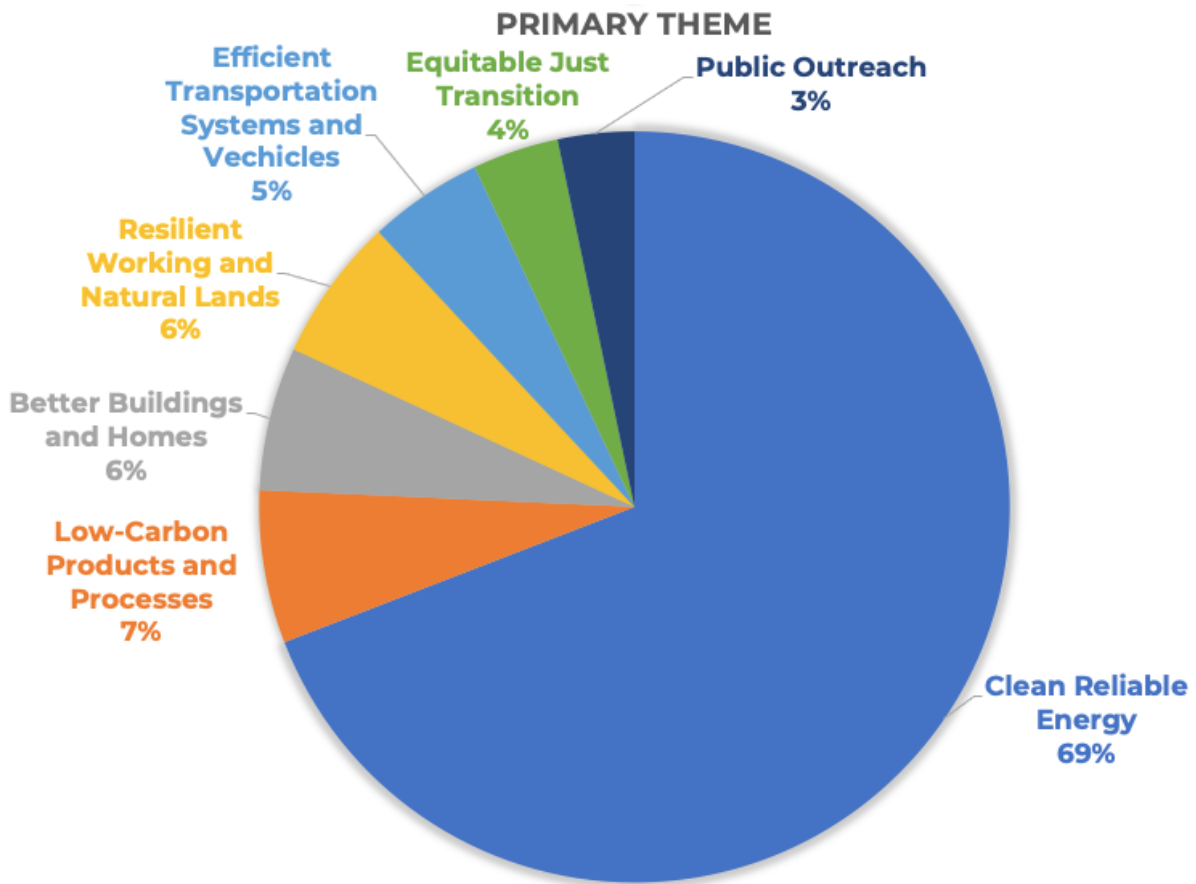
A majority of respondents are interested in weatherization, moving to clean energy and promoting heat pumps in buildings, land conservation, increasing EV charging stations and improving public transit.

Which of the following types of actions would you most like to see more of in your community?



Findings: Public Comment Form

Clean reliable energy was the overwhelmingly most common primary theme, with concerns that tracked with what was heard around that action area at the events and through the survey. An equitable just transition was the most common secondary theme across the public comments. These comments included concerns about accurate emissions accounting and impacts of Hydro-Quebec on Indigenous communities.



Gaps

As part of this process, Climate Access and Rise Consulting have identified a number of limitations that affected the public engagement process. The first of these gaps is the nature of the accelerated timeline for the release of the initial Climate Action Plan. The velocity of the process influenced the participation level of groups that are likely to be more highly impacted by climate change including low-income communities, BIPOC communities and disability advocacy groups in particular. The public engagement plan outlined additional opportunities for broader partner outreach and support that were not fully realized during this phase due to the lack of time to build trust and respectfully coordinate with multiple partners.

Additionally, there were public engagement challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The in-person events likely had lower attendance as a result of varying levels of physical access as well as comfort levels and public health concerns Vermonters may have had gathering in person during this time.

Other accessibility gaps included the location of the in-person, which were held in open-air park settings in order to mitigate the risk of COVID transmission. This posed challenges for physical access, visibility, sound, weather conditions and transportation access to the meeting sites. In addition three of the meetings were held on weeknight evenings which posed barriers for people with work, community, or family obligations between 5-7 pm.

The online meetings may also have posed challenges for those with limited computer or internet access.

Next Steps for Public Engagement

December 2021 - February 2022

- Promotion (press release and media support, website and social media content)
- Launch the Education and Engagement Platform
- Facilitate three additional online public engagement events
- Provide support to partner organizations
- Summary of findings

February - March 2022

- Continued promotion (press release and media support, website and social media content)
- Evaluation report