

Key Themes in Stimulating and Supporting Future Economic Development



A Report on the Public Engagement Process to the Commission on the Future of Economic Development

October 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the spring and summer of 2008, The Snelling Center for Government designed and implemented a robust public engagement process on behalf of The Commission for the Future of Economic Development (CFED). The goal of the engagement process was to gather information and feedback critical in the development of a strategic statewide economic development plan that reflects the experiences of 12 distinct regions of Vermont. The Regional Development Corporations were essential partners in identifying and recruiting participants, planning and hosting the events in their regions to ensure that this process reflected both the depth and diversity of the region.

The engagement process included focused discussions with local employers and businesses, structured dialogues with economic development and community stakeholders, and open public meetings. This three-part process sought to: identify assets and existing innovative approaches that currently bolster economic development; determine key issues and challenges facing communities and employers; and gather a wide range of perspectives and expertise regarding strategic investments and priorities for the future.

This report provides a summary of the key themes that emerged from the engagement process as participants described current conditions and offered suggestions for the future. Documentation of the participants, process and materials used can be found in the appendices.

Key Underlying Factors Participants in each of the three segments and throughout all regions of the state spoke of a three important factors that influence current success and future prospects for economic development. These factors need to be considered in the formulation of future economic policies.

- Vermont's scale must be used to our advantage
- Quality of life is essential to entrepreneurial interest in business development, workforce recruitment, and commitment to keep jobs here
- Current demographics pose challenges to workforce, service demands and civic participation

Employer/Business Themes Employers were fairly consistent in their recommendations for strategic investments and policies that would support businesses and therefore promote economic development.

- Invest in businesses committed to being here
- Focus on small business
- Create predictable and streamlined permitting process
- Invest in multi-generational workforce development and match training with growth opportunities
- Invest in and build basic (physical) infrastructure needed
- Encourage (workforce) housing development
- Address key costs of doing business– Energy, Health Care, Workers Compensation, Taxes

- Continue technical assistance support given now through regional economic development partners and state programs
- Recognize vitality and needs of manufacturing

Stakeholder Themes The stakeholders spoke of many of the same issues as the employers. The themes above therefore should be considered as the baseline for the stakeholders as well. Following are additional themes culled from the 12 sessions with economic development stakeholders:

- Align Policies and Resources to Support Downtown, Village Centers and Growth Centers
- Consider More Sensible Regionalization of Infrastructure and Services to Support Economic Development
- Improve Efficiency and Consolidate Expertise at the Regional Level
- Support Higher Education
- Recognize Social Infrastructure Contribution to Economic Development

Public Themes The themes heard in the business and stakeholder session were often echoed in the evening public sessions—this is likely attributable, in part, to the open invitation and the participation of employers and stakeholders in the evenings. Below is a quick review of the key themes which were either of primary importance and/or unique to the evening public sessions.

- Focus on Economic Development Ideas and Sectors that are Related to VT Values—green technology, energy efficiency and alternative energy, sustainable agriculture, creative economy
- Be Cautious in Rely on Tourism
- Create Jobs Accessible to all Residents
- Provide (Social) Infrastructure Needed To Support Workers And Families
- Invest in K-12 Education: The First Workforce Investment

Tensions + Potential Paths for Moving Forward

As we move forward, it may be particularly important to pay attention to the following themes where contrasting viewpoints were offered. Direct acknowledgement of these differing viewpoints will be important in the formulation of future policy directions.

- Economic Development: Positive or Negative
- Strategic Direction: Focus on Small Business, Invest in a Few Large Employers, or Pick the Winners
- Invest here or recruit outside?
- Education and Workforce Investments: Where to Focus?
- Key Sectors for the Future: Green Economy, Energy, Agriculture, Manufacturing, Second Home Ownership (Positive and Negative), Tourism (Positive and Negative)

Regional Themes

In large part, the themes noted above were echoed in each of the regions. Differences among the regions tended to be based on historic land use and economic sectors, access to natural resources, and geography. Interestingly, almost all regions defined their

geographical areas based on their proximity to business markets and infrastructure beyond the state's borders (e.g. Canada, NH, airports). Future economic development plans should recognize opportunities and obstacles beyond Vermont's borders.

Moving Forward. A basic path emerged from the conversations for developing an economic plan that reflects the insight and experience shared in the outreach process:

- Create A Shared Vision And Definition of “Economic Development”
- Focus “Economic Development” action and message on “creating the good we want”
- Address Tensions and Areas of Differing Opinion
 - Path Forward:* Create incentives for the kind of development we want (e.g. workforce housing, critical infrastructure)
 - Path Forward:* ensure diversity in VT's portfolio of business sectors to weather changes in broader economic environment
 - Path Forward:* Don't use limited financial resources to “woo” outsiders but do make it easy for those who want to come to get established and grow here
 - Path forward:* Enhance linkages between educational system and curriculum with the skills needed by employers and future job opportunities
 - Path forward:* Ensure that the mix of economic sectors reflect the values, history and unique assets of Vermont.
- Create a Positive Story about VT –Perception Matters

This executive summary has attempted to consolidate the wealth of information and ideas gathered through the engagement process into a set of themes. We encourage readers to look beyond the thematic headings and review the wealth of ideas offered by over 600 participants in the engagement process on how to create a robust and vibrant economy that recognizes Vermont's scale and builds on our unique assets.