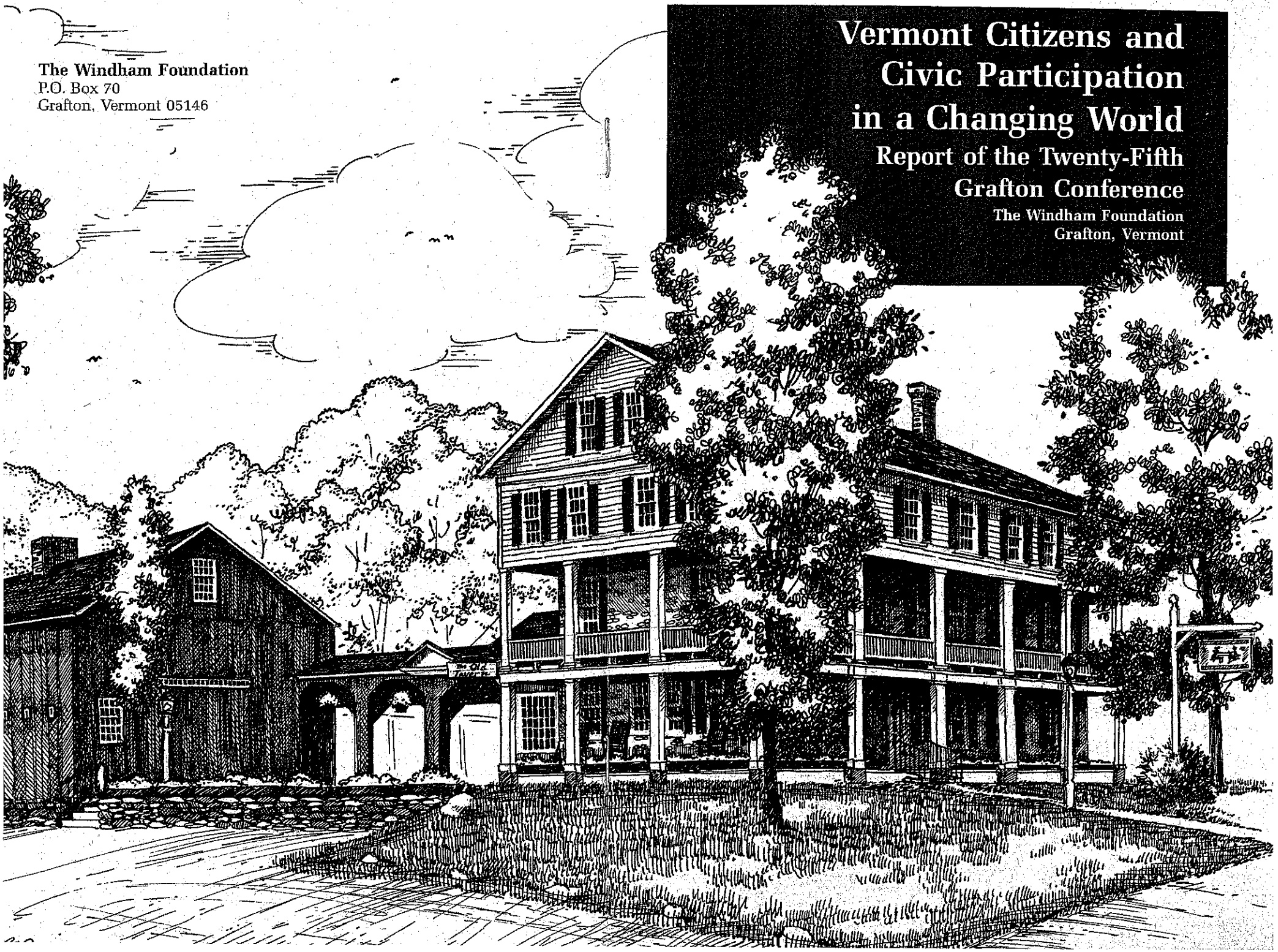
The Windham Foundation
P.O. Box 70
Grafton, Vermont 05146

Vermont Citizens and Civic Participation in a Changing World

Report of the Twenty-Fifth Grafton Conference

The Windham Foundation
Grafton, Vermont



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Report of the Twenty-Fifth Grafton Conference

June 11 - 13, 2000

The Windham Foundation
P.O. Box 70
Grafton, Vermont 05146

To the Reader:

The Windham Foundation is proud to sponsor the Grafton Conference Project and we are especially pleased to host the 25th Grafton Conference in conjunction with The Snelling Center for Government. Our mission is to provide the preparation, setting and resources to help our brightest decision makers debate subjects and formulate policies which have an impact on the way Vermonters live and work. Since its inception in 1984, the Grafton Conference Project has become a leading public policy forum in the state. We look forward to many more conferences to help develop appropriate answers to important topics facing the residents of this state.

Neither the trustees nor the employees of the Windham Foundation necessarily support the views or recommendations expressed in the following report. The Windham Foundation's sole interest is to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas on important issues.

The Windham Foundation is open to proposed topics for future conferences. Your suggestions and comments on the following report are most welcome. Additional copies of this and other Grafton Conference reports can be obtained without cost from:

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Process

Grafton Conferences take place from Sunday afternoon to noon on Tuesdays at the Old Tavern at Grafton. They are free-flowing discussions of the topics at hand. This booklet is not meant to be a transcript of the proceedings, but rather a summary of the participants' thoughts and the general consensus, whenever possible, of the group.

These conferences are self directed by the participants. While the Windham Foundation selects the topics from recommendations by the public at large and interviews and invites those knowledgeable of the issue, the proceedings are then open for the participants to decide on the manner in which they will pursue the discussion.

Conference participants are chosen for their knowledge and work on a particular topic and they are asked to question their own positions, challenge others and try to leave any preconceived solutions outside the meeting. Oftentimes, participants play devil's advocate to defend a position that is quite contrary to that which they have publicly espoused in the past.

On various occasions, the Grafton Conference Project has invited keynote speakers to outline the topic at hand. However, most of the work is done in a combination of small breakout groups at the beginning of the sessions and larger plenary meetings to bring about consensus. Hopefully, this process results in the development of ideas that can be used in the public policy arena for the benefit of all Vermonters.

Vermont Citizens and Civic Participation in a Changing World

Report of the Twenty-Fifth Grafton Conference

Preface

While the world anxiously awaited the technological ramifications of the Y2K crisis at the start of the millennium, an unforeseen offshoot of these phenomena was a refocusing of the role of the individual in the societal context. During the past year, several investigations were undertaken to theorize what had to be changed for society to continue to survive into the 21st century. The 25th Grafton Conference focuses on the concept of civic participation in Vermont, an issue that many feel separates that state from all others. Perhaps the lack of a recent technological catastrophe gave rise to new introspection about the humankind in Vermont.

Background

The Windham Foundation has convened 24 previous retreats at Grafton, Vermont to examine a variety of public policy issues. This year, for the first time, The Windham Foundation worked in partnership with another group, The Snelling Center for Government, to host a conference exploring the status of citizen participation in Vermont.

The spirited discussion and recommendations from the 25th Grafton Conference have generated fundamental questions about the current state of Vermont's democracy.

Vermont has a rich tradition of citizen involvement in public life. While attendance at town meetings and participation in formal political activities may be waning in some areas of the state, emerging informal networks and community partnerships are experiencing enthusiastic citizen support.

In order to better understand the experiences and attitudes Vermont citizens bring to the table when they choose whether or not - and how - they will participate in the public life of their communities, The Snelling Center for Government conducted a series of focus groups around the state.[1] The research suggests the following:

Citizens want to be involved in their communities, but not in politics

While neighborliness, volunteering, and community celebrations are highly valued, more formal avenues of public participation are largely disregarded;

[1] For a copy of the report, *Civic Participation in Vermont*, please contact The Snelling Center for Government.

There is a deep sense of distrust and frustration toward officeholders

Vermonters appreciate the accessibility of local and state officials, but feel that leaders don't listen to the concerns of citizens and, once elected, no longer have the community's best interests at heart;

Better communication is seen as key to engaging more citizens in Vermont's public life

Citizens yearn to build relationships with each other and community leaders through informal, one-to-one contact. Citizens also want better information about opportunities for participating in the public life of their communities.

These findings echo results of a study commissioned at the beginning of the 1990's by the Kettering Foundation (a non-profit organization whose major research focus is effective democracy). That study, Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America, soundly challenged the conventional wisdom of the time that citizens were largely apathetic and uninterested in public concerns. Instead, the research showed that Americans care deeply about their communities, but will act only if they have a "sense of possibility" that their participation will make a difference.

At the close of the decade, these sentiments were again confirmed in a major 1999 study commissioned by The League of Women Voters. Working Together: Community Involvement in America, shows that a majority of Americans (56%) are very involved in community activities and issues. However, citizens are much more likely to be involved in informal groups and individual action than in formal activities. Jane Gruenebaum, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters, describes what she calls a "new politics" based on informal groups of citizens "doing, not joining." She states that people "do not believe that change comes through the political system or established institutions of power."

The 25th Grafton Conference

It is within the context of these trends that The Windham Foundation challenged participants at the 25th Grafton Conference to consider the following questions:

1. What do we value about our traditions of citizen participation and how can we bring these values along with us in a world that is changing?

2. How might we integrate new concepts about community participation with our existing system of governance?

3. What structures and practices will encourage citizens to participate, and support their participation in local and state governance?

As conference participants grappled with these questions, they were able to identify many shared values. During the discussions, participants also became aware that leaders who are oriented toward traditional structures of governance and leaders who are oriented toward community-led initiatives see the world very differently. This produced some periods of conflict and frustration, but also provided a valuable opportunity for learning. This report will share the group's conversations and recommendations.[2] The results of the sometimes passionate discourse among Grafton Conference participants should offer a useful framework for further dialogue and action.

[2] Throughout the report, the direct comments of participants appear in italics.

Value of Citizen Participation

Participants held a wide variety of views about the appropriate role of citizens in public life. However, there was consensus on the following points.

The Value of Citizen Participation

All agree that citizen participation is a central component of a democratic, free system of governance. Effective citizen participation increases government's ability to be responsive. It also creates opportunities for better ideas and "synergy" to take place. In addition, citizen participation is part of our social contract and the act of citizen engagement is an important acknowledgment of our interdependence.

Characteristics of Effective Citizen Participation

Conference attendees agree that all citizens must have the opportunity to participate and that participation must reflect the diversity of the community. While citizens have a responsibility to participate, they must also be free to choose whether or not to participate. Citizens must be informed (by relevant facts as well as a variety of viewpoints) and they must have the authority to carry out actions they have identified as necessary. In addition, altruism, honesty and civility are necessary for effective citizen participation.

Citizen Participation

The consensus reached regarding citizen participation was that in order for government to be responsive and for communities to be vital, **public decisions should take place at the most local level possible.** Communities and their citizens need sufficient authority, information and resources to be able to identify and act on community interests.

Integrating New Concepts of Citizen Participation

Discovering a Disconnect

Despite many shared values, conversation at the Grafton Conference was at times difficult. Why?

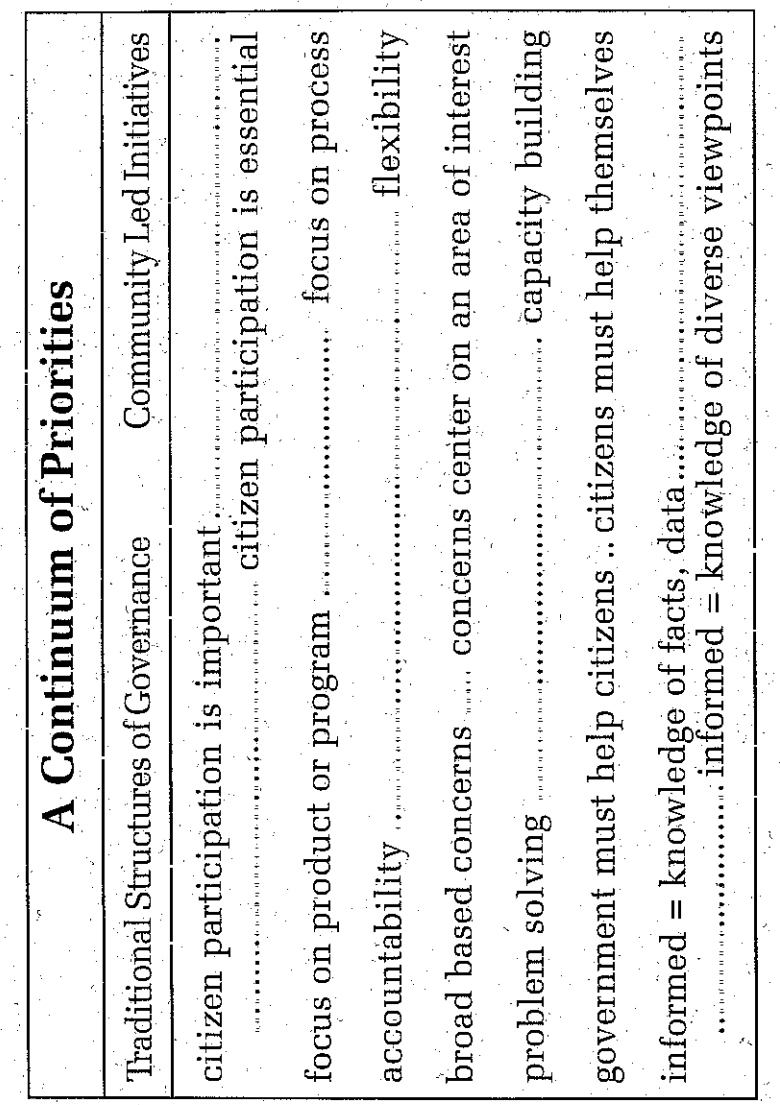
It might be useful to turn once again to The Snelling Center focus-group research to provide a context. That research strongly suggests that Vermont citizens are frustrated by, and profoundly distrust, officeholders. While they appreciate the accessibility of local and state leaders, they feel that officeholders don't listen to their concerns. As one focus group participant commented, *"How do you bridge that gap between community and politics...there is a genuine distrust of politicians and politics in general."* Another focus group participant stated, *"The people in office don't want citizen participation. They don't want people gumming up the gears."* Similar concerns emerged during the Grafton Conference. Conference participants were at times frustrated by a conversation which seemed to them to be missing the point in some way.

This is not to suggest that their colleagues actually weren't listening. Rather, the "disconnect" that many experienced during the conference seems to be the result of a differing set of priorities and even language that (at times) made genuine understanding quite difficult.

The purpose of this report is not to pigeonhole participants into overly simplistic categories. Differing priorities were not necessarily related to an individual's profession or position; in fact, some participants shared many of the same priorities regardless of their background. Nevertheless, there was a "disconnect." Even that, however, proved instructive. Indeed, it may provide a key to opening the lines of communication among citizens, community leaders, and officeholders. As a result of acknowledging the difficulties that were occurring during the discussions, Grafton participants began to identify different areas of concern.

The continuum of concerns revealed discernible contrasts between those whose focus is community-led initiatives and those whose focus is traditional structures of governance. For the former, citizen participation is not only important, but essential; the emphasis is on local rather than broad-based concerns, the development of individual capacities rather than governmental problem-solving. For them, to be informed is less a knowledge of data than an awareness of diverse viewpoints.

In fact, even the phrase "citizen participation" seems to encompass differences in both language and priorities. For some, the essence of citizen participation is serving in a formal way (i.e., on a local school or selectboard or in state government.) For others, citizen participation includes input from those who don't serve in traditional ways.



Questions

"In attempting to determine how we motivate more citizen participation in government, I saw us as two distinct groups each standing on opposite sides of a glass wall, seeing how each other operated but not being able to hear it, feel it or touch it... To shatter that glass wall, it would seem that the disconnects need to be carefully explored."

At the heart of the disconnect lie fundamental questions about the current state of Vermont's democracy.

What is the appropriate role for citizens in Vermont's public life?

What do citizens need to know in order to participate?

What kinds of decisions require citizen participation, and what decisions belong in the hands of elected leaders?

What is the appropriate role for local and state government?

Opportunities for Change

"I truly believe our perceptions have changed and that will lead to changed actions."

Vermonters with different perspectives have much to offer each other. Conference participants oriented toward community-led initiatives seem to possess a rich vision of the ability of individual citizens to participate in public life. They also recognize the capacity of local communities to identify and solve public problems "from the bottom up." Participants oriented toward traditional governmental structures seem to have an inclusive and pragmatic view of the broad range of issues communities must address in order to function. They also recognize the broad implications of local decisions and, conversely, the larger forces that may impact local efforts.

Integrating these perspectives may lead to a more complete set of shared priorities that could increase the ability of citizens, officeholders, and other community leaders to communicate and participate more effectively with each other about public concerns.

Strategies for Citizen Participation

Participants recommended three related strategies:

1. **Invest in Education for Students, Citizens and Leaders**

"Part of governance and leadership is informing people."

- Create student civics curricula emphasizing increased authority for students and student government organizations

"Need to put civics back in schools because people don't understand representative government"
"Have student government as a leading opportunity, not just another club."

- Provide civics education for teachers

- Educate citizens and local constituencies about their roles in the community and about the roles of their elected/appointed officials

- Provide public service internships and apprenticeships for students and citizens

"Don't put up a sign that says what boards need to be filled. Tell me what the boards do."

- Educate leaders about ways to build relationships with citizens

"[Don't] just educate people, but educate officials so they can close that circle of communication."

2. Establish a "Vermont Community[3] Responsibility Commission"

This commission would serve as a resource — providing clarity about decision-making roles at various levels, and gathering and disseminating information and tools to enhance the ability of citizens and local and state government to engage in appropriate public decision making. Specifically, the commission would:

Learn what public responsibilities individual communities are willing to take on

"What level of participation do we expect?"

Explore and define appropriate boundaries for decision-making

"Which decisions need inclusive stakeholder input, and which should be entrusted to leadership?"

"Each level needs to both abdicate and assume those decisions that are most appropriate for them."

Compile and disseminate user-friendly tools such as individual community profiles to illuminate the range of community concerns

[3] The word community refers to "a group of people who come together with common interests." The community could be a neighborhood or encompass several towns depending on the issue at hand.

"Once you have an idea that is your idea, you can act."

Encourage development of formal neighborhood/community associations around the state providing places to deal with public issues and coordinate civic activities. These groups should be fluid in structure, welcoming in tone, unique to individual neighborhoods, and responsive to shifting associations and concerns.

"It takes a village to raise a community."

Lobby for statutory changes when necessary to empower community-based decision-making and neighborhood associations

"If we know people are participating in "other" ways, how can we tap into that to encourage participation and ...incorporate this in the way government operates."

The Commission strategy was supported by many participants. However, the following concerns and questions were also identified:

There needs to be a mechanism for accountability at the neighborhood level

There may be funding conflicts between neighborhood groups and traditional structures

Who decides who gets to be at the table?

How are individual and community rights balanced?

Is this creating a parallel governance structure?

3. **Establish mechanisms that will level the playing field and encourage more diverse, representative participation in government.**

Term and spending limits were proposed as two possibilities for leveling the playing field.

"There is a privileged group of people who get to serve."

"In a lot of places and to a limited extent in Vermont, people cast votes to preserve [their] job, not to do what is best for Vermont."

Conclusion

"Democracy will fail if we don't find a way to listen to each other and find common ground."

Vermonters' views about the role of citizens in public life, which are often implicit, are central to both: 1) the policy choices made by officeholders and; 2) citizens' decisions about whether or not - and how - they will participate. This report is offered as a tool to foster dialogue about the fundamental and - as was discovered at the Grafton Conference - varied assumptions held by citizens, officeholders and other community leaders about civic participation.

We challenge the interested reader to use this report to continue the dialogue that was begun during the three-day conference at Grafton. We also invite the reader to evaluate, discuss and develop the strategies that are offered as a possibility for continuing Vermont's rich tradition of citizen participation in a changing world.

Appendix A:
Conference Participants

Lorraine Atwood
Royalton School Board

Nancy Cathcart
Cathcart/Special Projects

Jane Chadwick
Dover Board of Selectmen

Delia Clark
Antioch New England Institute

William Doyle
Vermont Senate

Karen Ducharme
Vermont Children's Forum

Isaac Evans-Frantz
Student
Brattleboro Union High School

John Follett
Vermont House of Representatives

John Gorczyk
Commissioner of Corrections

John Hall
Town Manager
Town of St. Johnsbury

Steven Jeffrey
Executive Director
Vermont League of Cities & Towns

Bonnie Johnson-Aten
Diversity Equity Coordinator
Burlington High School

Martha Maksym
Community Services Director
United Way of Chittenden County

Richard Mallary
Vermont House of Representatives

Deborah Markowitz
Secretary of State

Edie Miller
Executive Director
Vermont School Boards Association

David Reynolds
Executive Director
Northern Counties Health Care

Jason Simcock
Town Manager
Town of West Rutland

Barbara Snelling
Former Lieutenant Governor

Alan Weiss
Vermont House of Representatives

Appendix B:
Conference Advisors/ Advisor Interviews

Summary of Advisor Interviews for the June, 2000 Grafton Conference

Background

In preparation for the June, 2000 Grafton Conference, eight Vermont leaders were asked to help identify relevant issues to be discussed at the conference. The interviews were conducted in person or by phone and each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. The following summary outlines the key themes that emerged from these conversations.

Overview

When asked to describe citizen participation in Vermont, leaders take a broad view. They talk about a wide array of activities including voting, running for office, serving on boards, volunteering, attending meetings, communicating with elected officials, talking with other citizens about issues of concern, and acts of civil disobedience.

There is a strong consensus that citizen participation in public life in Vermont is declining. Leaders point to increasing distrust of public officials at both the national and local level and decreasing respect and civility for officeholders. Decreasing local control is another trend that leaders associate with the decline in civic participation. There is also a strong concern that people are not literate about civics, and that parents and schools

are not teaching civics or providing examples that encourage civic participation.

It is worth mentioning that one interviewee, David Reynolds of St. Johnsbury, has a very different assessment of what's happening. He sees strong evidence of ample citizen participation in his community. Instead of talking about citizen distrust of leaders, he points to leaders' distrust of citizen participation - a sense that including citizens will take more time and produce conflict. Reynolds acknowledges that involving citizens is time consuming, but believes that community involvement is the greatest strength of his organization.

Recommendations for the conference seem to center on three areas of concern: support for citizens in public service; civic education; and the state of affairs between citizens and state and local leaders.

Key Questions

1. How do we better support citizens involved in public service?

A majority of interviewees pose this question or issues related to it. Three main areas of concern include:

Training

The growing complexity of issues facing many Vermont communities necessitates technical training for citizens serving on local select boards, school boards, etc. Training is viewed as especially important for citizens serving in small towns with little or no staff support.

Protection from legal problems and complexities

There is concern about lawsuits aimed at individual office holders. There is also concern about lawsuits resulting from unclear charters and mandates, and an increasingly complex legal system.

Personal support

Many leaders express concern about the growing mistrust and lack of respect citizens show toward office holders.

"Can we expect to have citizen participation if we set up a legal system that is so complicated that it is difficult for volunteers?"

"How can we shelter people who do things in public life from lawsuits?"

"In small communities, how do we support, provide incentives and reward people for serving?"

"How do we make participation fit today's lifestyles?"

2. How do we better educate citizens, especially young people, about civic issues?

There is a sense that people don't value or understand civic participation and that both schools and parents are doing a poor job of effectively teaching this subject.

"Is there a level of pay that's reasonable [so] people think it is worth it to do the job, but where they aren't just running for the money?"

"Address lack of interest that young people have in government - if people don't feel it is important, how do you educate them?"

"Social studies needs to be taught more effectively in schools."

"How can we help people see that participation can be important to them personally?"

3. How do we improve relations/expectations among leaders and citizens?

Interviewees are concerned with how leaders can better understand "the true concerns of Vermonters." Leaders also wonder whether their colleagues communicate adequately with citizens.

"Today there is a feeling of distrust toward people serving in public life - how do you overcome that?"

"What do we really mean by citizen involvement and community participation?"

"Are we asking communities to do the right things and what are we expecting from government - are there inconsistencies?"

"How do leaders stimulate and promote community participation?"

Appendix C:
Windham Foundation Trustees

Samuel W. Lambert, III
Pennington, New Jersey
Chairman of the Board
Attorney-at-Law
Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP

Stephan A. Morse
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Zuccaro, Willis & Bent

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Advisory Director
Morgan Stanley & Co. Incorporated

Appendix D:
The Snelling Center for Government

The Richard A. Snelling Center for Government is a nonpartisan public policy institute in Burlington, Vermont. Founded in 1992, its purpose is to promote better understanding of government, broader citizen participation in public service, and improved administration at the state and local level throughout Vermont.

The late Governor Snelling believed that the institutions of Vermont's state government had been created to serve the needs and to act upon the ideals of its citizenry. Accordingly, he believed that the strongest voice in any debate over state policy, its creation and institution, must come from the public sector.

To that end, he promoted youth involvement in government through educational and community-focused programs. He believed strongly in improving the leadership skills of people already involved in state and local government, and in the responsible and effective training of Vermont's future leaders.

Governor Snelling believed that by making the workings of the government more accessible and efficient, more people could be better served, and that Vermont would have the best possible standard of living for all her citizens.

It is our mission to help craft these standards into a reality.

Appendix E:
List of Conferences, Topics, and Dates

The First Grafton Conference
Economic Development and the Environment of Vermont
January 22-24, 1984

The Second Grafton Conference
The Future of Health Care in Vermont
June 24-26, 1984

The Third Grafton Conference
Education in Vermont: Taking a Direction
December 2-4, 1984

The Fourth Grafton Conference
Economic Development in Vermont –
International Perspectives on Policy Issues
June 9-11, 1985

The Fifth Grafton Conference
Vermont's Cultural Resources
July 14-16, 1985

The Sixth Grafton Conference
Vermont's Housing Future
January 26-28, 1986

The Seventh Grafton Conference
Vermont Women in Transition
March 23-25, 1986

The Eighth Grafton Conference
A Review of Vermont's Tax Policies
June 22-24, 1986

The Ninth Grafton Conference
Vermont's Fourth Estate and Public Policy
August 10-12, 1986

The Tenth Grafton Conference
The Travel Industry in Vermont
December 7-9, 1986

The Eleventh Grafton Conference
Vermont's Cultural Resources: Two Years Later
May 31-June 1, 1987

The Twelfth Grafton Conference
Vermont: Who Are We Becoming?
July 19-21, 1987

The Thirteenth Grafton Conference
Growth in Vermont: Under Control?
November 8-10, 1987

The Fourteenth Grafton Conference
Governing Small Vermont Towns
March 20-22, 1988

The Fifteenth Grafton Conference
The Judicial System in Vermont:
Purpose and Performance
February 26-28, 1989

The Sixteenth Grafton Conference
Global Competence in Vermont:
An Educational and Economic Imperative
May 7-9, 1989

The Seventeenth Grafton Conference
A Strategy for Providing Maternal and Infant Care in Vermont
June 4-6, 1989

The Eighteenth Grafton Conference
Addressing Vermont's Solid Waste Crisis
January 7-9, 1990

The Nineteenth Grafton Conference
Public Safety: Adapting to Changing Times
June 3-5, 1990

The Twentieth Grafton Conference
Vermont's Transportation Needs
August 26-28, 1990

The Twenty-First Grafton Conference
Vermont's Education-To-Work Transition
March 10-12, 1991

The Twenty-Second Grafton Conference
Vermont's Health Care System for the 1990's
October 27-29, 1991

The Twenty-Third Grafton Conference
Preparing Vermont to Thrive in the 21st Century
November 9-11, 1997

The Twenty-Fourth Grafton Conference
Beyond Preservation: Keeping Vermont's Working Landscape
September 13-15, 1998

Acknowledgments

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