DOWNTOWNS SURROUNDED BY COUNTRYSIDE: WISDOM FROM THE PAST AND FOR THE FUTURE

FEATURE STORY BY TOM SLAYTON
From Vermont Farms to your Table

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website: ablakegardner.com
e-mail: abgphoto@sover.net
The Vermont Natural Resources Council, Inc., is a nonprofit environmental organization founded in 1963 to protect Vermont’s natural resources and environment through research, education, and advocacy.

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CLIMATE CHANGE:
IT’S ABOUT AFFORDABILITY

BY ELIZABETH COURTNEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over the past year and a half, I represented VNRC on the Governor’s Commission on Climate Change as the principal voice from the conservation community. Five other commissioners and I worked together to frame a strategy to address the challenges of a warming planet.

In late October, we released our report to the governor, with several overarching recommendations that will serve three primary functions: to reduce Vermont’s carbon footprint, to build our “green economy” and to save Vermonters money. And the bottom line we stressed, ironically, is that Vermonters cannot afford to ignore the threat of climate change.

What’s the irony?

The very day we released our climate commission report the governor released the findings from his summer-long listening tour. As a result, the governor declared affordability to be at the top of his agenda and climate change barely registered on the radar. Too bad the governor fails to see the relationship between affordability and climate change. His own, hand-picked commission has made the connection.

We need look no further than energy cost projections to see how climate change and affordability intersect. At nearly $100 a barrel, the highest cost for crude oil in history, heating a home with oil in Vermont this winter will average 22 percent more than last year, according to the federal Energy Information Administration. Clearly, that is not affordable. But, if we implement the climate commission’s top recommendation (expand the efficiency utility to include home heating fuels) we can help thousands of Vermonters have more affordable winters.

Other news items that unfolded this fall demonstrate how related these issues are. In late October, the head of the federal Centers for Disease Control told Congress that the CDC “considers climate change a serious public health concern.” Already, most Vermonters would agree that health care is not affordable. According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey, the average family plan for health care in Vermont is over $13,000 annually, not including deductibles which are often as high as $5,000. That means that the average Vermont family could be looking at $18,000, out-of-pocket dollars before they get any benefit from their health care plan. Add unanticipated climate change effects, and the costs could rise even higher. Again, clearly, not affordable.

Escalating costs like these — coupled with the loud and urgent call from the world’s leading climate scientists — are combining to create a critical need for action on climate change. Thankfully, as we prepare to tackle this monumental challenge, many of the issues relating to affordability for average Vermonters — whether it’s home heating, health care, housing, transportation, or food — can all be part of the climate change solution. But inaction on either front is not an option.

Failing to recognize that the crisis of climate change is intertwined with issues relating to affordability undermines Vermont’s ability to effectively address either one. Unfortunately, it appears that the governor views these issues as separate and unrelated. The sooner Vermont’s chief executive recognizes how deeply these issues are interconnected, the better off Vermonters will be.

I hope we Vermonter will continue to take action in our own lives and ask our leaders to be bold in their actions.

We need the governor to heed the advice of his commission and muster the courage necessary to implement the difficult but essential greenhouse gas reduction strategies we have put forward.

To turn the climate change crisis into opportunity, we need real leadership. And we need loud and clear calls from Vermonters, those who feel we can no longer afford to ignore climate change. I invite you to talk to your friends and neighbors and state and federal leaders about taking action on climate change now.

We can’t afford not to.
Is A European Conservation Ethic Growing in Vermont?

BY HEIDEMARIE HOLMES-HEISE

There is not much land to build on in the narrow valleys of Austria where I grew up. Many of the lower slopes of the towering and dramatic mountains can’t be built on because it’s not safe, due to the steep slopes that produce floods and rockslides. So from the earliest days, people had to be very careful and thoughtful about where they built and as a result, this region of Austria seems immune to some of the sprawling development that has afflicted the United States and threatens Vermont. Land, as in Vermont, is very precious. Putting homes where they do not diminish farm and forestland is very important.

In Austria, land management is by “surface dedication” — essentially zoning — and development plans lie in the hands of the provinces and the communities, with the provinces having responsibility for enforcing spatial planning. The typical plan is organized around the center of the town so that all the main shops are in the center. Every village has its primary needs taken care of in the village — if you want to buy something special or advanced you have to go to a city.

Some of the American influence of big box stores is coming to Austria, but on a much smaller scale (my home town now has a Maxi Mart which is about the size of a soccer field, or one-quarter the size of a Wal-Mart Super Store.) However, it is very difficult to build outside the town in open farm fields. The lots for residences are very small, they must be on a public road, with public water and sewer, and can be only a certain distance from the bus or train station and the village or town. All of these practices help reduce greenhouse gases.

In terms of transportation, as far back as I can remember, we always had a lot of choices in how we could get around. But I must say, that the auto was not the primary means. Our family did not get a car (a tiny Renault) until 1960. And we had the first one in the neighborhood! Most families are still one-car families even today. Because of the closely-knit layout of the villages, most people could walk or bike wherever they had to go. I could walk the 3.5 kilometers to school, which I frequently did, or I could take the train or the bus. If you walk along the lake today from my parents’ house in Schuttdorf to Zell am See, the pedestrian path is closest to the lake. Outside it and beyond a low hedge is the bike path. Beyond a high hedge is the small gauge rail line, then the main rail line, and finally the road — which has the worst view of the lake. This seems like the right order to me.

If you do go to a city like Salzburg by car, you are best to park the car once and get around by foot or bus or subway. Like many European cities, its older center is relatively small with narrow streets built during the Middle Ages, which are hard to negotiate, even with today’s Smart Cars. Some inner cities are available to only pedestrians, and even bikers have to park their bikes.

You’re always extremely conscious about how much gas you use. Gasoline costs over $4 per gallon in Austria and $5 per gallon in Germany. There is a motor toll sticker for all vehicles using the Austrian highway system, and several energy and emission-related taxes have been implemented. The motor vehicle tax increases dramatically with engine power. As a result there is an incentive to buy efficient cars and drive as little as possible. My mother takes the car once a week and does everything. It’s a whole other way of thinking.

Last summer I found, in talking with an Austrian on the bus from Salzburg to Zell am See that there is a conversation in Germany and Austria now (it’s on talk and call-in shows) — about every single human being having a certain amount of energy available to them — a personal energy budget, perhaps similar to the “carbon footprint” talked about in the U.S. People are beginning to take seriously the questions: ‘What car I’m going to buy to best meet my energy budget? Am I depleting my energy budget by doing what I’m doing now?’ It’s about thinking, ‘OK — I’m close to using up my energy budget today, now could I go by foot, or combine trips, or do I really have to go there?’

So it’s really about learning to be aware of turning on a light or using the car — creating an awareness of when we are using energy.

Stances on climate change and air pollution have become a litmus test for candidates to the German Parliament — dating back several years to when auto emissions were linked to the decline of the Black Forest. Even when some people said that tougher standards and higher taxes were going to ruin the economy, new leaders with the
political will stepped forward to take action. As a result, there has been an increase in preserving nature, building cars with cleaner emissions, and new forms of transport and transit use. These are all happening and have economic benefits, such as new jobs in these sectors, while reducing greenhouse gases.

In Austria, we have our own “flatlanders” (mostly Germans and Dutch) who have been building vacation homes in the area. This summer we even heard that the Dutch government is subsidizing relocation to Austria of some of its citizens as a hedge against lowland flooding caused by global warming.

I think Vermont is trying to encourage alternatives to always using the automobile. The recent commuter bus between Montpelier and Burlington encourages me. I hope the Amtrak Vermonter train continues to expand and that a train to Boston is pursued. But I would like to see more bike paths in Vermont like the Montpelier walking/bike path and the one in Stowe. It would be great if these could be expanded to link other towns. Is it possible to think in terms of some towns linked in this way for commuting and general travel?

As an elementary school art teacher in Calais and East Montpelier, I feel that the best way to change a person’s habits or behavior is with education. People have to understand: “I’m not the only one on this planet.” Nobody likes to be told to do one or the other thing without being able to truly support the idea behind it. So, the questions remain: How do we have to organize our lives, how do we have to live, so that we are not depleting our resources? If everyone on the planet wants to have the lifestyle that we have, what measures do we have to take? These are big questions.

At our school, children are learning how the sun and wind produce energy. We have a solar collector on the roof, and lights go on in the school when it is generating electricity. We have a small demonstration of how wind power can work, with pinwheels. Children are really learning about separating and composting waste, that plastic goes one place — food another. These are all wonderful beginnings to the bigger idea of conserving resources.

The United States has a rich history of independence and sense of abundance of land and natural resources. Perhaps there has not been the pressing need to conserve as much as I was used to in Europe. But I think now, especially in Vermont, people are becoming aware of the need to conserve land and energy. Europe has both a high quality of life and has also been conservative in the use of its resources. This may be a lesson we in the United States can learn from.

There are enough conscientious people who could lead Vermont and make it a frontrunner in addressing climate change. Vermonters have a special relationship with the earth, nature, culture, agriculture, and the seasons. They enjoy the beauty of their state — the quality of their lives. It’s a small state. People know each other. Vermont can make small changes that step-by-step can overcome the big challenge of climate change. It can become a model — an example for the rest of the country, if people work together.

Heidemarie Holmes-Heise arrived in Vermont from Austria in 1966 to work in the nascent ski industry. She is now a teacher in Calais and East Montpelier and wife of Steve Holmes, VNRC’s Sustainable Communities Program Director.

VNRC offers a regular membership of $35. Besides helping the leading statewide environmental group preserve Vermont’s valuable resources, your membership includes:

- Invitations to local events and meetings
- VNRC publications: two issues of the Vermont Environmental Report and the Legislative Bulletin annually
- Access to environmental information and resources
- Assistance in writing letters to the editor, talking to legislators, testifying at public hearings

Call us at (802) 223-2328, or visit us on the web at www.vnrc.org
Vermont population in:
- 1960 ................................................. 389,881
- 2000 ................................................. 608,827
- 2006 ................................................. 623,908

Rate of population growth between 1982 and 1992 .................. 10 percent
Rate of growth in number of acres developed over the same period ....... 25 percent

Number of vehicles registered in Vermont in:
- 1986 ................................................. 504,192
- 1995 ................................................. 594,307
- 2005 ................................................. 779,694

Amount of CO\(_2\) emitted, on average, per mile of a:
- 2007 Toyota Prius ............................... 0.425 lbs
- 2007 Subaru Legacy Wagon ................ 0.851 lbs
- 2007 Ford F-150 pickup ...................... 1.304 lbs

Average miles per gallon of a:
- 2007 Toyota Prius ............................... 46
- 2007 Subaru Legacy Wagon ................ 23
- 2007 Ford F-150 pickup ...................... 15

At the cost of $3 a gallon, the cost it takes to fill a:
- 2007 Toyota Prius ............................... $36
- 2007 Subaru Legacy Wagon ................ $48
- 2007 Ford F-150 pickup ...................... $81

Annual total vehicle miles traveled in Vermont:
- 1950 ................................................. 1.188 million
- 1970 ................................................. 2.687 million
- 1990 ................................................. 5.685 million
- 2006 ................................................. 7.689 million

Projected growth in vehicle miles traveled annually between 2002 and 2018: .... ~ 1.3 percent

Vermont’s 2005 per capita vehicle miles traveled annually .................. 12,893
(Third highest after Wyoming (13,111) and Oklahoma (18,050).

Average distance food travels from its origin to a dining table in the United States ........ 1,500 miles

Distance food travels between Pete’s Greens vegetable farm in Craftsbury to dining tables in Montpelier ......................... 36 miles

Number of farmers markets in Vermont:
- 1988 ................................................. 8
- 2007 ................................................. 66

The top two opportunities for greenhouse gas reduction strategies for Vermont:
1. Energy efficiency:
   26.8 million tons of CO\(_2\) by 2028
2. Reducing forest clearing for development:
   22 million tons of CO\(_2\) by 2028

The Climate Change issues on which VNRC works?
- Energy, Forests, Water, Land Use and Transportation

How can you help VNRC advance solutions to challenging environmental issues? Join!
- Cost ................................................. $35 to start
VNRC continues to work hard on the front lines to help conserve our valuable farmland, steer new development away from cornfields and into areas designated for growth, and advance clean energy solutions. VNRC has seen solid victories recently.

**Soils Protected**

At VNRC’s urging, a key legislative committee this summer blocked a state agency from weakening protections for some of Vermont’s best farmland.

In late August, the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules, or LCAR, told the Natural Resources Board, or NRB, to rethink its proposed rule change to Act 250 — Vermont’s important land use and development control law — and work with groups like VNRC to bring a better proposal before the committee.

The pivotal issue before the legislative panel was whether or not the proposed rule, which would have allowed district environmental commissions to waive one of the Act 250 criteria to make it easier to build on primary agricultural soils, was consistent with statute and legislative intent.

Administrative agencies — in this case the Natural Resources Board — promulgate rules that flesh out details of legislation that governs them. Agencies must, by law, develop only rules that reflect what lawmakers intended in their legislation. In this case, LCAR blocked the NRB’s attempt to recast the intent of the law. This move prevented the creation of a potentially dangerous loophole which would have opened up too much of Vermont’s invaluable farmland to intensive development.

“This is a great win for farmland and environmental protection. The committee saw that these rules were clearly flawed and had strayed from what the Legislature wanted,” said Steve Holmes, VNRC’s Sustainable Communities Program Director. “Thankfully, the committee sent the Natural Resources Board back to the drawing board to come up with something better.”

As part of its unanimous vote, LCAR gave the NRB until October 3rd to see if it could work out a satisfactory proposal with the interested parties. Although VNRC offered to work with the NRB to craft a solution, the NRB decided to withdraw the rule. VNRC will continue to monitor this important issue and work to ensure that important protections for Vermont’s agricultural soils remain intact.

**VNRC Questions Growth Center Process**

VNRC has appealed a recent state agency decision creating the state’s first “growth center.”

Under the 2006 growth center law, municipalities can request the state to designate certain areas of the municipality for development. The idea is to channel growth — through various incentives — into compact centers. Williston was the first town to apply.

VNRC is a strong supporter of the growth center law and was instrumental in ushering it through the Legislature. VNRC’s appeal in the Williston case in no way attacks the merits of the law or the Town of Williston’s efforts, but instead challenges the process by which this growth center was created.

VNRC contends the process to determine the Williston growth center boundaries was flawed because it violated the intent of the law. VNRC filed its notice of appeal with the Vermont Supreme Court on December 14.

During this past summer and fall, the town of Williston, the state’s Growth Center Planning Coordination Group, and non-profit groups including VNRC, Smart Growth Vermont and the Preservation Trust of Vermont hammered out an agreement for a growth center in Williston. But that agreement was set aside at the last minute, when a state board suddenly changed course and redrew the boundaries of the growth center, and included new properties that do not meet growth center criteria. VNRC’s appeal followed.

“Because of a last-minute request by a developer to state officials, the way this growth center was created was fatally flawed,” said Steve Holmes, VNRC’s Sustainable Communities Director. “The law is too important to Vermont, and this first application needs to be done right,” he said. “It will set a precedent for other communities.

“The growth center law was never intended to give out tax and other financial incentives to promote Wal-Mart or other big box development that is single-use, scattered and auto-dependent,” Holmes said. “This new version of the growth center does just that.”

The town of Williston, led by its town planner, spent months preparing an application for the growth center in and around Tafts Corners. The town held a public hearing and then a state board — the Growth Center Planning Coordination Group — held three meetings on the issue. That panel then sent a proposed growth center plan to a higher board, known as the Expanded Downtown Board, for final approval.

But then suddenly, the Expanded Downtown Board reversed course and included in the growth center additional properties. The new boundaries include the existing
The warm, dry weather in Vermont this summer and fall along with new water bottling proposals have sharply underscored the urgency of one of VNRC’s biggest priorities — protecting the state’s underground drinking water.

Wal-Mart and Home Depot as well as other undeveloped property in Tafts Corners. VNRC will keep members updated as this appeal develops.

**VNRC’s Wal-Mart Work Continues in Earnest**

VNRC continues to advance a successful campaign to hold Wal-Mart and other “big box” stores accountable to the people and places where they propose to do business in Vermont. Together with project partners, VNRC is working to modify or stop proposals for mega-stores in Vermont that are poorly sited, out of scale and would hurt our traditional downtowns and local businesses.

VNRC continues to be involved in the proposed 160,000-plus square foot Wal-Mart in St. Albans and the expansion of the existing 50,000 square foot Wal-Mart in Bennington to 112,000 square feet. In addition, JL Davis, the St. Albans Wal-Mart developer, has proposed a 150,000 square foot Wal-Mart in Derby. VNRC’s work is focused on these three locations as well as on the issue of large-scale retail development on a statewide scale, as we work to raise awareness about the damaging impacts Wal-Mart and other “big box” proposals can have on communities. VNRC is also working to address community needs by building support for less costly alternatives. Here is a current status report on the three proposals:

In St Albans, VNRC is working on several fronts, including Act 250, local zoning, and the Agency of Natural Resources stormwater permitting process. VNRC and other parties, including a citizens group, are awaiting an Act 250 decision. Either way that decision goes, it is expected to be appealed to Environmental Court. VNRC, on behalf of a citizens group, has also appealed the local zoning permit to the Environmental Court and on stormwater, VNRC has appealed an Agency of Natural Resources operating permit and is also questioning the construction permit.

In Bennington, a citizens group appealed a local zoning permit for the store to Environmental Court. The court has ordered the parties into mediation. The citizens group and VNRC are concerned with traffic, fiscal and economic impact, and site planning deficiencies, including the size and placement of the store. Mediation talks are moving ahead, although at a slow pace. An Act 250 process is expected to follow an independent fiscal and economic impact analysis, which is underway.

In Derby, J.L. Davis, the same developer who wants to build a store in St. Albans, has received a local zoning permit for a 150,000 square foot Wal-Mart in Derby. Along with the Preservation Trust of Vermont, VNRC continues to monitor the process and have begun talks with local residents who are concerned with the project.

**Groundwater Protection**

The warm, dry weather in Vermont this summer and fall along with new water bottling proposals have sharply underscored the urgency of one of VNRC’s biggest priorities — protecting the state’s underground drinking water. In September, drought forced a Northeast Kingdom community to truck in water for municipal drinking water purposes when area wells ran dry. Recent water bottling proposals in East Montpelier and Claremont, New Hampshire, (using water from Vermont) are highlighting the need for a program in place to sustainably manage the use of the resource.

Severe droughts in other parts of the country this fall (one of which prompted the governor of an arid Southwestern state to call on the Great Lakes states to ship them water) also underscores the need for Vermont to take action now to avoid real problems later.

VNRC has been working across the state with citizen groups and in the Legislature to proactively help Vermont avoid potential problems with our groundwater. The goal? To create a state-managed program that allows diverse use of the resource but helps guard against over-consumption, depletion and contamination.

Unlike neighboring Maine and New Hampshire, Vermont continues to lag far behind our neighbors and the nation in efforts to safeguard our groundwater — the primary source of drinking water for two-thirds of Vermonters. This is troubling, considering the state’s underground aquifers provide an invaluable supply of fresh water for important priorities like municipal.
drinking water supplies, agriculture, and industry.

In Vermont, we don’t know much about the quantities and location of our aquifers. That, coupled with the lack of any overarching program to manage the resource, leaves Vermont vulnerable.

In recent years, VNRC made important headway to begin addressing the issue. In 2006, the Legislature created a governor-appointed groundwater task force, upon which VNRC has a seat, and charged it with studying the issue and making recommendations for a protection program. In 2007, the Legislature appropriated over $330,000 to begin mapping the resource — the vital first step in the protection process.

The task force is expected to deliver its recommendations to the Legislature in early 2008. VNRC will continue to press for measures that will safeguard Vermont’s groundwater and affirm that it is managed first and foremost for the public good.

The 2008 legislative session is where the hard work will really take place, and concerned Vermonters have an opportunity to help the state enact a strong program.

VNRC Vigilant on Septic

VNRC fought hard this summer and fall to put the brakes on environmentally damaging septic regulations proposed by the Agency of Natural Resources.

The ANR brought the rules before a legislative panel three times for approval. Each time, VNRC testified that the rules would cause sprawl and pollute streams, lakes and ponds. And each time, the panel, known as the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules, told ANR officials to go back to the drawing board.

Of particular concern to VNRC was a provision in the proposed rules that would have exempted from septic permitting the conversion of seasonal camps — many of which sit along the shores of Vermont’s lakes and ponds — into year-round homes. Turning these camps into permanent homes — a growing trend — could have serious, damaging implications if the septic systems are not up to snuff. That’s because old systems aren’t built to handle the additional waste. That means they could more easily fail, sending septic effluent into lakes, streams, and nearby wells.

In an ironic twist, this camp exemption would have actually increased the risk of phosphorous discharges from camps along Lake Champlain — a direct contradiction to the Douglas administration’s often-trumpeted goal of cleaning up the lake. In fact, a group of local town administrators from Lake Champlain communities harshly denounced the ANR’s shortsighted plan. In a July letter, administrators said they were “appalled that the ANR would consider such an irresponsible proposal.”

While the removal of this exemption was an important victory, VNRC continues to oppose one part of the rules that did go through: a loophole that allows property owners to escape having to identify a replacement septic area on their lot in which they could put another system should the first system fail. This provision in the rules makes it easier for developers to carve up Vermont’s rural forest and farmlands for development. VNRC will work in the Legislature in 2008 to overturn this part of the rules.

Wetland Protection

Working with many interested parties, including the real estate community, VNRC is in the midst of mediation efforts aimed at hammering out a new framework for protecting Vermont’s wetlands, those natural features that purify our water, control floods, and provide key wildlife habitat.

The Water Resources Panel in 2007 launched an investigation into how to best update Vermont’s wetlands protection program, including possibly moving away from the current system that is based on outdated wetland maps. VNRC, the only statewide environmental group involved in the investigation, has strongly advocated for protecting Vermont’s valuable wetlands, whether or not they are on a map. The wetland maps in question were created by aerial photography in late 1980s. During that process, many wetlands — in particular forested wetlands — were not mapped.

When the Legislature convened last year, the Water Resources Panel attempted to advance legislation that would have failed to protect Vermont’s vital wetlands. The legislation thankfully didn’t move at the Statehouse.

The Water Resource’s Panel reconvened parties to the wetland investigation this summer. In a surprising but welcome win for wetland and water protection, the coalition opposed to VNRC agreed to wetland regulation that did not rely on wetland maps and would protect all of Vermont’s wetlands. The mediation began on September 4. Stay tuned for more information and action on this important issue as the process continues.

VNRC Helps Protect Mountain Stream

One of Vermont’s pristine mountain streams in the town of Stratton and Jamaica will enjoy better protection from the risk of pollution thanks to an unusual agreement made
VNRC is working hard to protect a wetland complex in Burlington that is important for birds and other species.

Vermont’s natural resources and environment,” said Jon Groveman, VNRC’s water program director.

**VNRC Works for Key Wildlife Habitat**

VNRC is working hard to protect a wetland complex in Burlington that is important for birds and other species. Seven years ago, VNRC successfully petitioned the Vermont Water Resources Board to upgrade the classification of the Northshore Wetland, which lies just south of where the Winooski River empties into Lake Champlain, near the end of North Avenue. The reclassification gave the wetland the highest level of protection available under the Vermont’s wetland regulations.

In reclassifying the wetland, the Water Resources Board wrote that it was “exceptional and irreplaceable in its contribution to Vermont’s natural heritage due to its values for the functions of ‘hydrophytic,’ (water loving) vegetation habitat, education and research in the natural sciences, and open space and aesthetics.”

Then, last year, the Agency of Natural Resources granted a permit for the construction of a house just 20 feet from the wetland, well inside the 300-foot buffer required to protect the wetland. VNRC and the city of Burlington jointly appealed that permit to the Vermont Environmental Court to protect the integrity of the wetland. The city of Burlington recently denied a local building permit, which could influence the ability of the house to be constructed. Currently the parties are pursuing options to mediate the case.

The Northshore Wetland is an ecologically significant wetland complex. It provides habitat and food for waterfowl, wading birds, and migrating shorebirds and represents one of the best examples of a unique combination of natural communities in the state.

**VNRC Engaged in Forestry, Current Use**

Over the summer and fall, the Legislature studied issues that relate to forestry and Vermont’s forest resources. An interim study committee on forestry collected testimony on issues ranging from biomass energy to worker’s compensation rates for the forest products industry and is also looking into the parcelization of Vermont’s forests. The committee, consisting of six legislators, met to develop legislative recommendations for the House to take up in January. VNRC testified before the committee, outlining for the members, the final recommendations that sprung from more than year of work by the broad-based, VNRC-sponsored, Forest Roundtable. (For more information visit www.vnrc.org and click on Forest Roundtable at the bottom of the page.)

VNRC is also working to protect and enhance Current Use, the property tax equity program that helps landowners keep their property undeveloped by taxing their land at use value for forestry and agriculture rather than development value.

VNRC’s Jamey Fidel, representing land use and conservation interests, served on a task force set up to make legislative recommendations for the Current Use program. The group met during the fall, conducted public hearings, and considered input from an independent report on Current Use performed for the Legislature. The task force is expected to issue a report with recommendations for the Legislature in January.

VNRC is hopeful the Legislature can make improvements to the program which help to reduce the administrative burden of the program while increasing incentives for long-term enrollment of forest and farmland, incentives for greater protection of ecological systems, and a recognition of the value of having foresters work with landowners to develop sound management plans for their property. VNRC will keep members posted as this work progresses.

**VNRC: Vermont’s Environmental Voice on Climate Commission**

Global warming, skyrocketing fuel prices and Vermont’s energy future are on people’s minds these days. That’s why VNRC was glad to represent the environmental community on Governor Douglas’s six-member Commission on Climate Change. For more than a year, VNRC’s Executive Director Elizabeth Courtney worked from her seat at the table to ensure the commission made strong recommendations to support conservation, efficiency, renewable energy
Those Traditional, Durable Landscapes: Supporting Local Self-Reliance
The intervening ridgetops are rounded and open. Across them, more farm fields lay a patchwork pattern of bright green across the rugged, dark-green forest.

Houses and barns can be seen, scattered across the Craftsbury hills. At the edge of one hilltop field there’s a red barn with an old white silo and a newer dark blue silo, and in the next field over, another red barn, and a weathered gray barn — the barns considerably bigger than the nearby houses. The distant buildings look like toy farms, but they are not toys. This is a working landscape.

Clouds plow the sky, casting shadows that creep slowly across the broad fields. It all seems peaceful, proper, and somehow unchanging — an illusion, of course, though a pleasant one. Nothing is unchanging, not even here.

Vermont’s working countryside is undeniably beautiful, a quiet and satisfying place to live. It is also a symbol of wholeness, self-reliance, and of a pastoral economic system that has been largely displaced by the more hurried gasoline and cash-driven economics of today. But it is more than that. It is also an enormous resource, both economic and ecological, and perhaps a textbook for the future, as well.

Obviously, land that can produce food and fiber, grain, timber and heating fuel has an economic value, over and above whatever aesthetic virtues it may possess. Productive land can also help reduce our dependence on fossil fuels to bring those necessities to local markets from afar: apples from Vermont require far less gasoline and jet fuel to transport to say Burlington, than apples from New Zealand.

Furthermore, current science suggests that there is a close connection between forests — millions of trees that consume CO2 and emit oxygen — and a healthy atmosphere. A living forest naturally removes carbon from the atmosphere, in effect cleaning the air and mitigating one of the causes of global warming. The process is known to scientists as carbon sequestration.
Can a new look at the Vermont countryside, with its ability to produce food and fuel — that can even help cleanse excessive carbon from the atmosphere — help us fund more moderate, self-reliant, and fundamentally more rewarding ways of living?

This larger picture also emerges when you talk to planners and visionaries who love the Vermont countryside for what it could be, as well as for what it is. Many see, in the traditional landscapes of rural Vermont, the emblem of a more local, more self-sufficient economy that could, if properly nurtured and developed, lead to a more environmentally whole society in years ahead. Or at least help us survive an economic or ecological catastrophe, such as climate change.

The historic economic system that produced the pastoral landscape that all Vermonters love — wild and working forestlands and prosperous farms — is not the economic system that prevails today. That earlier system, based on hard work, family self-sufficiency and community cooperation (and reflected in the Vermont state motto: “Freedom and Unity”) seems light-years away from the 21st century. Land was not an investment then, but the means of getting a living. Farms did not run on petroleum. Their horsepower came from horses.

Now, however much we may sentimentalize it, that system is almost completely gone. Across America it is being displaced by a global economy based on cheap energy, cyber-technology, and the easy transportation of money, goods, and people far beyond local communities.

In Vermont, too, that historic system is slipping away, but important vestiges of it — including the state’s compact settlements surrounded by open and productive countryside — remain today. While the global economy has its benefits of apparent convenience and low prices, it is also exacting a high price on that landscape — and Vermont’s way of life.

In Vermont, development is gobbling up land at a rate that is faster than our population is growing.
Between 1982 and 1992, Vermont’s population grew by about 10 percent but the amount of developed land grew by 25 percent over the same period, according to a Smart Growth Vermont report. And nearly 40 percent of the land developed between 1982 and 1992 was formerly cropland and pastures, according to the same report.

A University of Vermont study showed that Chittenden County has seen a 4.4 percent loss of forestland in the past 15 years and statewide, Vermont forests shrank by a half percent annually from 1992 to 2002. Over time, that’s a significant loss of forestland.

So, what happens to a system that begins to buck and strain with petroleum selling at $85 a barrel when that same barrel of oil goes to $100 a barrel or higher? Is it pure Romanticism to ponder retooling some older ways of thinking and living? Can a new look at the Vermont countryside, with its ability to produce food and fuel — that can even help cleanse excessive carbon from the atmosphere — help us find more moderate, self-reliant, and fundamentally rewarding ways of living? It is a question worth asking, and more than a few Vermonters are beginning, in various ways, to ask it.

Ideas, as well as corn and alfalfa, are sprouting in the broad green fields of Vermont. Some of the ideas are as old as agriculture; others are new, and still others combine new and old, all in the hope of conserving Vermont’s incomparable working landscape and learning from its time-tested wisdom. “Smart growth,” “green” construction, the “localvore” movement and other new ways of thinking and acting locally aim at somehow countering the current global economy’s hunger...
for open land. They aim to conserve land, not just because it is beautiful, but because it will be a vital resource in creating alternatives to — even countering — the current wave of petroleum-fueled over-use and over-consumption.

VNRC, which has had an interest in protecting and strengthening the Vermont landscape for a generation, is working to ensure that new development is concentrated in our town centers, that our forests remain viable for their ecosystems as well as their forest products, and that Vermont’s farmland is not lost forever.

From Act 250 to Vermont’s planning laws, from protecting and improving current use to fighting Wal-Mart and promoting growth center legislation, the Vermont Natural Resources Council has helped to keep Vermont’s working landscape working for Vermonters for decades.

“More and more Vermonters are becoming aware of the inherent utility, efficiency and durability of the Vermont landscape,” said VNRC Executive Director Elizabeth Courtney. “It worked 100 years ago, it’s working today, and it will work in the future to help us be self-reliant.”

The landscape is at work in three Vermont places with traditional landscapes that I recently visited: Tinmouth, the Mad River Valley, and Craftsbury. Though each has its own character, and differs in its approach to the issues of land use and conservation, the citizens of each locality are alike in their deep affection for their town and their neighbors. They also recognize the invaluable economic, environmental and community values their lands offer.

**Tinmouth**

From Wallingford, Route 140W climbs steadily uphill, over a forested mountain top, and eventually drops into a high, farmed valley. It’s only about five miles through open farm and forestland to the T-intersection and the cluster of buildings that mark the little village of Tinmouth. By the time you get there, it feels pleasantly remote, as though you’ve somehow dropped into a peaceful, rural section of Vermont’s past.

The office of Town Clerk Gail Fallar shares space with the Tinmouth Historical Society in a pale yellow, two-story Victorian building that used to house Tinmouth’s general store. Gail’s officially there only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but she shows up at other times as well. Right next door is the Tinmouth Volunteer Fire Department, and across the street is the town grade school and the Community Center.

Fallar’s office is a cavernous space filled with books, papers, town records, and photos of town events. At the door, there’s a box of summer squash and zucchini with a “free” sign. As supper hour approaches, a couple of kids scamper over, grab a squash or two, and shout “thank you!” through the open door before scampering off.

Surrounding the little village is a classic Vermont landscape: working farms and forests climb the hills. More pickup trucks than SUVs cruise the town’s roads, and there are frequent views of Dorset Mountain and Tinmouth Mountain.
It’s a pretty town, but no Shangri-La. The farm fields are open, scenic, and productive, to be sure. However, most of Tinmouth’s year-round residents of working age have jobs in Rutland or Manchester. Once economically independent, Tinmouth is now largely a bedroom community for those larger cities “on the grid” — and off the mountain. It’s a lot like other hill towns around Vermont. Many residents, if not most, make their living elsewhere.

Neither is Tinmouth a haven for the wealthy. Median income of its approximately 600 residents is $32,600, slightly less than the median Vermont income of $39,000. Of the 50 or so kids in the school, one-fourth receive a free or reduced-price lunch. Again, this is a lot like the rest of Vermont.

What is most notable about this small Rutland County town is the very large amount of conserved land it contains — and, interestingly enough, the strength of its community life. The two facts are closely related.

If you add up the land that’s been protected by the Tinmouth Land Trust and other conservation easements, plus the state land set aside in a conservation district to safeguard Tinmouth Channel (a Class 1 wetland that flows through the town), you come up with a total of more than 40 percent of the town that is protected from development. Add in the acreage enlisted in the state’s current use tax program, and the percentage jumps to 66 percent. Just as noteworthy as those remarkable figures is the fact that most Tinmouth residents, natives and newcomers alike, strongly support keeping the land open and productive.

Fallar, the town clerk, says that people like Tinmouth the way it is now, and don’t want it to change too fast or too much. Most others in town seem to agree.

The Tinmouth Land Trust, founded in 1988, holds easements for much of the town’s conserved farm and forestland. It was founded to protect a 170-acre farm that had a striking view. The farm, saved from development by the campaign, is in operation today.

“Once the land was conserved, people could see that land trusts were not a Communist plot — that relinquishing some of your rights still allowed you to use the land,” says Robert Lloyd, one of the founders of the land trust.

Other land trust agreements were forged, and townspeople liked both the fact that their town stayed beautiful — and relatively little changed socially. It was still a small town, with a few hundred people who knew each other well.

And they help each other out. When Alfred Ballou’s tractor overturned and injured him a few summers ago, his neighbors in town knew his hay had to get put in the barn, or Ballou would face a huge loss and a hard winter. So they turned out, cut and baled his hay, and put 3,000 bales of it in his barn. “There’s kind of a tradition here,” Bob Lloyd said, “of people taking care of one another.”

Tinmouth Town Clerk
Gail Fallar.
The Mad River Valley

In every town I visited, there was a clear connection between the land and the life of the people who live there. These communities, like others throughout the state, protect land for broader reasons than simple aesthetics. They want more than a beautiful place to live. They want farms to stay farming, forests to be used. They want people to continue to be able to make a living from the land. In short, they have conserved land in order to maintain and enhance their chosen way of life. Their community life.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Mad River Valley towns of Duxbury, Moretown, Fayston, Waitsfield, and Warren. The vision of the working landscape as a basis for a more sustainable future is held strongly in those towns: not by everyone, but by many.

“Our hope is that the Mad River Valley could become an incubator and a pace-setter for creating a viable 21st century Vermont — a hybrid of old and new,” said Rob Williams, a history teacher at Champlain College in Burlington.

The Valley (as it is known locally) has a strong regional orientation. It was the first place in Vermont in which a group of towns worked cooperatively and together for the conservation and orderly development of a landscape they all loved.

They took their first steps to plan together in the 1990s. Today, a decade later, more than 7,000 acres of Valley farm and forestland have been permanently protected, the result of a collaborative process involving a wide array of conservation organizations.

“There are reasons people live here,” declared Robert Ferris, executive director of the Yestermorrow Design/Build School. “I was drawn here because of the people.”

Ferris noted the close connection between people and land in The Valley. “There’s a social value to maintaining a traditional working landscape,” he said, adding that the Mad River Valley area tends to attract people with both a “certain kind of vision,” and a practical bent. “People tend to spend their time making cider or (maple) sugar,” he said. “That’s a much more meaningful kind of activity than going to a shopping mall or watching a ‘reality’ TV show.”

Driving through The Valley as fall began, I saw handmade signs along many of the town’s back roads, as well as on Route 100, which threads the Valley, north-to-south. “Eat local squash,” the signs said. “Eat local greens.”

The Mad River Valley is one of the epicenters of Vermont’s nascent “localvore” movement, a campaign to encourage people to eat more locally grown foods. The idea is that depending more on food produced nearby and less on food shipped in from afar helps the local farm economy, promotes local self-reliance, and reduces a community’s dependence on petroleum. That’s because it takes petroleum in the form of fertilizers to grow the distant food, and still more petroleum in the form
of gasoline to transport it to Vermont.
And so localvore organizers issued a challenge to their neighbors: for one week in the fall, could they eat only food that came from within 100 miles of their homes? More than 200 Valley residents said they could.

Over the past year, a lot of organizing has gone on. Kate Stevenson and others made up starter kits with flour and beans, oil and vinegar, all produced within the target area. They organized workshops on canning food, sauerkraut, jelly-making, and other traditional methods of preserving food. Area restaurants added entrees made with local ingredients and schools in The Valley served local foods at lunch and had classes to explain the movement to their students.

“Think of our little community as a system, and it is easy to see that buying more of our food from local farmers and producers will help us keep The Valley scenic and rural,” localvore organizer Robin McDermott wrote in the Valley Reporter. “And keeping The Valley scenic and rural will enable us to feed our own community.”

The movement has already had an effect. Farmers in the area noted an increased demand for their products, Stevenson said. Farmers’ markets were busier. And the localvore participants got an unintended side benefit: they got better acquainted with their neighbors who happen to be farmers.

When disaster struck, they, too, helped out. Last February’s freak Valentine’s Day snowstorm dumped several feet of snow on Vermont and collapsed the Turner Farm’s barn. The salvaging and rebuilding of that barn was a saga that involved many people in all the Valley towns.

The purchase of the Kingsbury Farm in Warren is another Valley-wide project that involves significant partnerships. The farm, which straddles Route 100 by the Iron Bridge in Warren comprises a scenic 22 acres of land located right on the Mad River. A local coalition has signed an agreement to purchase the farm, which was ripe for development, for $495,000. Partners include the Warren Conservation Commission, the Mad River Valley Planning District, the Vermont Land Trust, Yestermorrow, the Mad River Valley Localvores and others. They see saving Kingsbury Farm as an important step to maintaining open land — and opening up future possibilities in The Valley. The Vermont Land Trust recently stepped up and bought the farm to allow the coalition more time to secure funding.

“If we can work collectively together, then we’ll all gain,” Ferris said. “There are an awful lot of very bright people here who are concerned about maintaining the integrity of this valley.”
Craftsbury

Lynn Flory’s pottery studio sits on the edge of Craftsbury’s open fields, about a mile north of Craftsbury Common. She is surrounded by farms, which provide much of Craftsbury’s striking rural beauty. Craftsbury has to be one of the prettiest towns in Vermont, and according to those who live there, it has a lively, good-hearted community life.

Flory grew up in Stowe and moved away to seek her fortune. She came back to Vermont, she says, “because I got tired of living where everything looked like Taft Corners.” The reference is to a piece of lost Vermont. Taft Corners, home of big-box development in Chittenden County and Vermont’s poster child for bad development, used to be open farm fields also.

Flory didn’t want to move back to Stowe. It had become too glitzy, she felt, too money-conscious, too much like the places she’d come from. She couldn’t afford to buy property there, anyway.

She found a place she could afford on a hilltop in Craftsbury. It had open, undeveloped land and friendly, genuine people. In short, it seemed like Vermont. She bought the place and began making pottery.

“It’s just very peaceful,” she says. “It gives me a peaceful place to work.”

Businesswoman and skier Linda Ramsdell, owner of The Galaxy Bookshop in Hardwick, is another Vermonter who moved away and came back. The place was imprinted on her, she said. She couldn’t stay away.

Librarian Lisa Sammet, who grew up in Massachusetts, chose Craftsbury when she decided to move to Vermont. “I had seen the best agricultural soil in New England paved over,” she says. She moved in and found a community that cared about her — and cared for her when she was recovering from surgery.

Like Flory and Ramsdell, Sammet moved to Craftsbury because it was beautiful, and because she liked the friendly, open people she found there. There are many Craftsbury natives who have remained there for the same reasons.

Perhaps one of the intangible functions of a beautiful landscape is to attract creative people, dedicated to keeping land open and productive. One would like to think so.

But Craftsbury may be more fragile than its beautiful landscapes suggest. There are only a handful of working farms left in town. Some are protected by land trust arrangements, but others are not, and Craftsbury voters have repeatedly turned down firm zoning plans.

“Nobody around here realizes how fast this place could change,” notes Stark Biddle, who lives in an old house on the Common.

The big open fields visible from Creek Road are still striking in their beauty. Off to the west, the Lowell Mountains raise their forested shoulders and seem to stand watch over the valley.

To the north, there’s a gray farmhouse with yellow shutters. Very picturesque. But as you drive past it, you notice there are no curtains on the windows, and at the end of the driveway stands a sign that reads: “For Sale.”

Back in her office, VNRC’s Elizabeth Courtney reflected on the possibilities for the future and ticked off the various ways that VNRC is nurturing, safeguarding and encouraging the important qualities we all recognize in Vermont.

“As the lone environmental group represented on the governor’s climate change commission we pushed vigorously for a final report calling for, among other things, a reduction in the development of our farms and forests,” Courtney said. “VNRC continues to fight for incentives to funnel growth into downtowns and other compact areas, which protects our rural lands. We are working to improve the current use program so more of Vermont’s important farm and forestland can be enrolled, and we are helping communities engage in planning at the local level, to do everything from protecting groundwater to saving energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.”

Courtney then summarized her hope for the future.

“If any people can chart their own course by drawing on their history to anticipate the future and prepare for it, Vermonters can,” she said. “We have at our fingertips access to landscapes rich in productivity, inspiration, and community. These are the elements that make life thrive. How we nurture and grow these qualities is, now, in our hands.”
generation, and thoughtful land use and transportation policies.

A broad-based group of diverse interests served as members of an advisory ‘plenary group’ to the commission. Their knowledge helped to inform the recommendations in the long-awaited report, issued October 26.

The outcome was a set of strong and well-researched recommendations, which include boosting efficiency, protecting Vermont’s “green bank” of farms and forests and investing in public transportation.

The 38 recommendations the commission put forward are intended to tackle the problem with the substantive, measurable actions necessary for success. Topping the list of the commission’s priorities is the creation of an all-fuels efficiency utility. VNRC pressed hard for this important measure during the last legislative session, but a disappointing gubernatorial veto stopped the idea dead in its tracks.

VNRC will continue to push for the implementation of all of the commission’s recommendations. Vermonters who care about saving energy, saving money and creating independent, renewable supplies of energy should stay tuned... and join us in our work to ensure the state, the governor and Vermonters take the 38 recommendations seriously.

Local Energy, Climate Solutions Move with VNRC Help

VNRC’s work with partners in the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network to start and strengthen town energy and climate action committees continues to gain momentum.

Nearly ever week, VNRC receives a call from a Vermonter interested in starting a local energy committee. More than 30 towns in the state now boast volunteer, citizen-led committees and seeds for new committees are continually being planted. Each of these groups is working to develop strategies to save energy and increase opportunities for clean, green, renewable generation.

As part of VNRC’s efforts in VECAN to serve as a resource ‘hub’ for committees, we are working hard to connect, coordinate and offer communities technical and organizing support. VNRC and our partners in VECAN offer communities the opportunity to learn from each other, share successes, and replicate and collaborate, so committees can more effectively advance strong community-based energy initiatives.

To better inform and guide the work of local committees and VECAN’s evolution, VNRC and partners convened the second Town Energy Committee Roundtable in Montpelier on December 6. This face-to-face gathering of town energy committee representatives working from Burlington to Brattleboro and in between to advance energy and climate change strategies offered a great opportunity for people to share ideas, network, consider collaborative opportunities and learn more about resources available to committees.

Stay tuned for the launch of the VECAN web site, anticipated to “go live” in January. The web site will serve as a clearinghouse of information, including resources and strategies on efficiency, conservation, renewables, transportation, land use, “relocalization” efforts, education and advocacy. Up-to-date information about what other Vermont committees are doing through an interactive map of Town Energy Committees will also be available on the site.

For more information about VECAN, the web site, town energy committee efforts or to find out about starting a committee in your community, contact Johanna Miller at 802-223-2328 ext. 112 or email jmiller@vnrc.org.

‘Climate Witness’ Project Offers Powerful Storytelling Opportunities

VNRC recently teamed up with two up-and-coming Burlington-based media firms, Tamarack Productions and Legitify, on a project called “Vermont Climate Witness.” This web-based initiative will offer Vermonters a way to share their observations of and responses to climate change.

Many Vermonters are realizing the reality of climate change in the most powerful way possible: In their daily lives. Over coffee in a local diner, around conference room tables and on the street, Vermonters are talking about the shifting weather patterns they are witnessing — from first frosts in November to rain on New Years Day and sap running in January.

Vermont Climate Witness will offer Vermonters a venue to add on-the-ground context to the evolving climate picture to help track, understand and adapt to the realities a warmer world might bring. The web site will have user-created video clips, audio recordings, photographs, and personal, written climate and weather observations.

“We are very excited to partner with VNRC on Vermont Climate Witness, a project that will bring together our expertise in using media for education and social change,” said Tamarack Productions President Bill Finnegan.

“VNRC’s commitment to finding and supporting solutions to the climate crisis, and the real desire of Vermonters to share their stories on this important environmental, social and political issue,” he said.

The site will be launched early in 2008.
VNRC’s Forest Program Director Honored

It’s easier to tell you’re doing good work when peers and leaders in your field appreciate your efforts. The recognition of VNRC’s forest program director, Jamey Fidel, by Vermont Coverts is one exciting example of that kind of affirmation. The organization recently presented Jamey the only annual award it bestows upon a non-Coverts member. Vermont Coverts noted Jamey’s “commitment to building a broad-based consensus around strategies that balance the many values and uses of Vermont’s magnificent forest lands.” In particular, Vermont Coverts recognized Jamey’s commitment to organizing and directing the Roundtable on Parcelization and Forest Fragmentation, and his efforts to work with municipalities to craft town plans and zoning regulations that address fragmentation and parcelization. As a statewide network of forestland owners, Coverts’ recognition is a great testament to Jamey’s efforts to thoughtfully steward the forests that define the Green Mountain State. As a network of landowners, Vermont Coverts is intimately connected to the day-to-day pressure, problems, and issues related to forest management. That’s why this award, which publicly acknowledges the importance of broadening the context and constituency around long-term sustainable management of Vermont’s valuable forestlands, is an exciting affirmation for VNRC’s efforts. Congrats Jamey!

VNRC Hires New Office Manager

VNRC welcomes James Sharp as its new Office Manager/Administrative Assistant. James has been an active letter-writer, demonstrator, and campaign supporter for environmental sustainability and democracy issues for many years. In addition to consulting with several non-profits as a website designer, he worked at the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse as webmaster and communications director, and as National Wildlife Federation’s Campus Ecology coordinator for the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region.

“I’m glad to be part of this great team,” he said. “I welcome the opportunity

James Sharp

VNRC Helps Outdoor Gear Exchange Host Eco-Fest

This past fall, VNRC participated in the 2nd annual Vermont Eco-Fest hosted by the Outdoor Gear Exchange. The Outdoor Gear Exchange is a Burlington-based company that offers new and used consignment gear, and also has a strong environmental ethic. The staff at the Outdoor Gear Exchange work hard to raise awareness about local conservation efforts, alternative energy resources and ways people can contribute to protecting and enhancing the environment. The annual Eco-Fest event aims to not only educate, but also to be fun and inspirational with food, carnival games, live music and outdoor organizations alongside environmental groups.

VNRC was one of three organizations chosen by the Outdoor Gear Exchange staff to sponsor the event. “VNRC does great work,” said Marc Sherman, president of the Outdoor Gear Exchange. “VNRC’s groundwater preservation efforts and our work to preserve Burlington’s Northshore wetland are particularly important and we are grateful for all that VNRC does for Vermont.”

Rousing speakers at the event included Sen. Bernie Sanders and Ben Rose of the Green Mountain Club.

VNRC would like to thank the Outdoor Gear Exchange staff for hosting Eco-Fest, and for their ongoing efforts to energize, inspire and motivate others to protect Vermont’s environment.
VNRC Welcomes New Board Members

VNRC has three new board members that bring a wealth of talent and experience to the table. The new members replace a cadre of long-serving and dedicated outgoing members. Stark Biddle, Wayne Fawbush, and Chuck Fergus, who, after years of generous service to VNRC, have moved on to other pursuits.

VNRC’s new members bring deep experience in the areas of renewable energy, sustainability, forestry, waste management issues, and land use, as well as public service and public policy.

**Kinny Perot** of Warren has served as president of Friends of the Mad River since its founding in 1991. Friends of the Mad River is a local non-profit organization that works to protect and improve the ecological, recreational and community values of the Mad River and its watershed through research, education and cooperative partnerships with the Mad River Valley residents, businesses and governments. She is also currently a member of the Yestermorrow Design/Build School board of directors.

Kinny has strong government experience, too. She represented the towns of Granville, Fayston, Warren and Waitsfield in the Legislature from 2000 to 2004, has served on the Warren selectboard and as Warren representative to the Mad River Valley Planning District. She has also been active on the Warren School Board, the Warren PTA, the Warren Library Commission and The Vermont Festival of the Arts board.

She and her husband, Richard Czapinski, are working “to do less with less,” fostering energy conservation and sustainability and experimenting with permaculture in Warren village.

**Don Sargeant** grew up in Johnson. He graduated from the University of Vermont with a BS in Civil Engineering, and then worked for the US Forest Service in California and Kentucky. He served in the US Army and in 1964 returned to Vermont, working for the Vermont Highway Department and the Vermont Department of Water Resources. Don joined IBM in 1969 and from 1980 until his retirement in 1999 he was Manager of Environmental Programs for the IBM Essex Junction site. He oversaw the engineering and operation of all chemical and environmental systems, and state and federal regulatory compliance and permits. During his tenure, the IBM site several times received the annual Vermont Governor’s Award for Environmental Excellence, as well as IBM’s corporate environmental awards. Don, a registered professional engineer, also served on the Vermont Environmental Board and the Vermont Waste Facility Panel for over 20 years. He currently serves on the board of the Colchester Land Trust. Don and his wife Lucille have two daughters and seven grandchildren in Kansas and Texas.

**Greg Strong** of Burlington has 12 years of experience designing, developing, assessing, and marketing renewable energy, and energy efficiency technologies and services. Greg currently serves as president of Spring Hill Solutions, LLC, a clean energy and carbon reduction consulting firm in Burlington. Through his work at Spring Hill, Greg provides a host of services, including system design and integration, project management, research, strategy development, business development, and commercialization in the clean energy, carbon management, and intellectual property strategy fields. Greg holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Arizona and is a published writer of both fiction and non-fiction. He is an instructor for the National Outdoor Leadership School, the Adirondack Mountain Club’s Winter Mountaineering School, and the Appalachian Mountain Club’s Mountain Leadership School.

Said Greg: “I look forward to offering my experience and background to VNRC, Vermont’s steadfast advocate for the things we hold dear in Vermont: a healthy environment, vibrant communities, and a sustainable future.”

For more information about the events listed in the News and Notes section, please visit our website at www.vnrc.org, or call Johanna Miller, VNRC Outreach Director, 802-223-2328 ex 112.
Under hazy sun, a strong and balmy southerly breeze swept across the open Chittenden County landscape. Yellow leaves skittered across a dirt road. And a bearded Jim McCullough, standing in a field on his family homestead in Williston, gazed out over a wetland, toward Camel’s Hump.

His boots were planted on some 500 acres of prime real estate, possibly one of the most developable chunks of land in the state. Long road frontage. Good soils. A mix of fields and forests. Convenient to shopping at Tafts Corners. And views. Plenty of views.

While standing in that field, and looking across his property, it was clear Jim was also taking in something else. Something he refers to as his family’s “land use experiment in conservation.”

McCullough, a Democrat from a long line of Republicans, has served in the Vermont House since 2003. He sits on the Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources Committee and is well-known in Montpelier for his pro-environment record. His commitment to this land is no surprise, which also makes it not surprising that he is a long-time VNRC member. Leaders like him make VNRC’s work possible. They also make it inspiring. That’s because he walks the walk.

Jim McCullough — deliberate, soft-spoken, independent-thinking and quick with a squinty smile — remembers his childhood when this property was a farm — the barns, the cows, even the draft horses (though most of the work was being done with tractors by then, he says). Years later, in the late 1970s, when he inherited the place, he and his wife Lucy and three children decided that this land would remain working land
as long as they had anything to say about it.

In 1978, Jim and Lucy founded the Catamount Family Center as what he calls a “land use experiment in conservation.” At that time, the pressure to develop land in Williston was intensifying. The family could have turned that land into serious cash but they resisted.

“Selling it for development certainly was the financial ‘best use,’ but for us, it was not really the best use,” McCullough says. “Conservation was. There were plenty of opportunities in Chittenden County for development and we wanted to create a place that we could offer the public for recreation.” Some place, he says, where people could reconnect with the land and reconnect with their roots.

“The human ego, in its superiority, has tried to divorce itself from all the other critters,” says McCullough. “We as people have been pulled up by our roots and an experience in nature helps us get rooted again.”

McCullough. “To me, that’s simple, logical and reasonable planning. Some would say we are just rationalizing, but without this move that makes the whole property work, there is total uncertainty.”

In the future, in order to keep the landscape working and open, it will be about partnerships, McCullough says. He also believes that in order for land in general to remain open there will have to be “business plans” for large parcels, whether they are wooded or farmland. McCullough expresses skepticism about government subsidies generally, and state land protection plans, he says, should rest largely on community partnerships.

Specifics aside, McCullough knows he will have to remain open to diverse partnerships and responsive to reality. As one whose business relies largely on weather, the issue of climate change has now moved squarely into his consciousness. McCullough strongly suspects that climate change is upon us and, in fact, is coming more quickly than experts predict. Over the last two decades, climate change has forced him to change his business.

Both snow quality and snow quantity have diminished. Now, when it does snow, it’s often a wet, heavy snow, landing on unfrozen ground. This has weakened the cross-country skiing business, forcing delays, transfers and cancellations of events. Catamount Center’s once-vibrant ice-skating business ended two years ago from lack of consistently cold weather.

Change is afoot, McCullough believes. He is keenly aware that adaptability will be essential. He is also aware of what it might cost. His eyes and mind drifted from the family’s kitchen table out the window and onto the Catamount land and their 30-year experiment, he remarked: “abundant and consistent snow is Vermont’s climate keystone; no snow, no skiing, no foliage season . . . no maple sugar.”
A recent ruling by a state court that two backcountry trails in the Town of Halifax could not be reclassified to public roads will have important implications for the rural southern Vermont community and other towns working to control sprawl. The decision will help make rural lands along trails, which include significant wildlife habitat, working forests and recreational opportunities, less vulnerable to development.

VNRC intervened in the case and worked closely with a group of Halifax residents to halt the selectboard’s attempt to reclassify the trails, a move which would have violated the goals of the town plan and put popular skiing, horseback riding, hunting, hiking, and snowmobiling trails at risk from development.

“These public trails are treasures,” said Halifax resident Paul Taylor. “They offer recreational opportunity, solitude, and are key to Halifax’s rural character. Reclassifying them as roads would have robbed our town of unique assets, not to mention clearly violating our town plan.”

The ruling also provides guidance on an important land use issue in Vermont. In the decision, Judge John P. Wesley of Windham County Superior Court agreed with VNRC that towns do not have the power to allow trails to serve as road frontage for development in Vermont. State law requires frontage along a public road to develop a home.

The selectboard in Halifax had tried to get around this requirement by reclassifying several trails in direct conflict with town plan language and several town votes, which urged the protection of recreational trails in the town. VNRC helped a group of town residents appeal the selectboard’s reclassification, and on August 31st, Judge Wesley ruled that the public good required the preservation of the trails.

Jamey Fidel, forest program director and legal counsel for VNRC, credited the residents of Halifax for their steadfast commitment to conserving valuable rural areas in the town.

“This is an important case in the sense that there is a legal standard that towns must follow when upgrading trails to roads to allow for more development,” Fidel said. “The reclassification must be in the ‘public good, convenience, and necessity of the inhabitants in the town.’ This means looking at the environmental impacts of reclassifying roads, and whether it is in the town’s best interest,” said Fidel.

“We expect this ruling may become even more important as towns consider what to do when they discover ancient roads,” Fidel added.

The ruling also sends a message to towns that they must consider the sentiment of the public, and the provisions of the town plan and local zoning when reclassifying roads in ways that could result in more subdivision and development. The ruling underscores the importance of local planning because the case hinged in large part on what townspeople expressed through the planning process.

“Sometimes it seems that things are stacked against the average landowner who simply wants a town plan to be respected,” said Halifax resident Maggie Bartenhagen. “In this case, the town plan clearly urged that these trails and the land around them be considered for their natural resource values. Thanks to VNRC, the court, and the commissioners who helped the judge, the integrity of our town plan and these trails will remain intact,” she said.
On November 3, VNRC co-convened the second ‘Step It Up’ climate action rally on the steps of the Statehouse. Nearly 200 Vermonters braved a cold and biting wind to call for leadership on climate change. While hundreds of events took place simultaneously across the nation shining the light on Congress, the Montpelier event highlighted the need for state action. Despite the fact that Vermont has a federal delegation leading the charge on legislation to curb carbon emissions and generate clean, green energy supplies, the state’s commitment has fallen far short.

Vermont’s solutions to address the climate crisis must match the severity of the problem we face. VNRC is proud to be a part of many important, essential climate action efforts, including working in the Legislature to advance measures to increase efficiency, conservation and renewable energy generation.

Inside, check out our analysis of the Governor’s Commission on Climate Change from our seat at the table, our efforts as a partner in the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network to support and spur the creation of town energy committees across Vermont, and our partnership with the “Vermont Climate Witness,” an interactive web site that will allow Vermonters to share their first-hand experiences with a warming world.