

Toward a Shared Vision

Twentieth Anniversary of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
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I'd like to start with a story from a sabbatical trip that I took a few years ago. As you know, I come from the land conservation field. In 2004, I spent 10 weeks traveling around the country visiting land trusts to learn what they were doing and what kinds of issues they were grappling with. One stop was in Gunnison, Colorado, where a group of ranchers had started their own land trust. I found this interesting because as a group western ranchers are very property-rights oriented.

As it happened, I arrived in town on the very evening that the land trust was holding its annual celebration for landowners and members. Although the organization was only 10 years old at the time, it had accomplished an amazing amount of land protection, thanks in part of a Colorado law that provides tax credits to landowners who donate their development rights, and then allows them to sell the credits to taxpayers who can use them. I was looking at a map of conserved land near Gunnison, and remarked to one of the founders, who was himself a rancher: "You must be very proud of all your organization has accomplished in such a short time." I'll never forget his response because it was almost angry: "No," he said, "I'm not happy. We started the land trust not just to save ranchland, but to save ranching." He went on to explain how a flood of new money coming in from Denver and L.A. was driving up the cost of land and housing; how new landowners who didn't understand the economics of ranching were changing the land use patterns upon which ranching depended; and how some people from away seemed to care very little about how the community functioned, so long as Gunnison remained a beautiful place to visit. He feared that his children and grandchildren would be unable to afford to live in Gunnison, that they wouldn't have economic opportunities there, and that working ranches would be replaced by high-end homes, fences by gates, and cows by thorough-bred horses. What he was saying, of course, is that it is not just the land, but the culture of Gunnison—that mixture of economic, environmental and social relationships—that makes the place special to him. No matter how much land his organization manages to protect, Gunnison's

culture and heritage will still be at risk. The situation is really no different than here in Vermont. His words were a reminder that if we want to keep what is special about Vermont to us, we have to go beyond the land and our individual organizational missions.

So today, because it is 20 years since the creation of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, I would like to spend a little time reflecting on how we got here and congratulating some of the old timers. But mostly, I would like to speak to the next group of leaders, the ones who have already assumed the helm or soon will do so. You are the ones who must fulfill the vision, which we only partially perceived 20 years ago. What we have done is construct a foundation. The beauty of the structure that is built upon that foundation—its strength, its durability, its inclusion of all the elements of the community—that will be your challenge and your opportunity.

There are probably as many stories about the origins of VHCB as there were midwives who attended its birth. For me, the seed was first planted when I met Rick Carbin, who founded the Vermont Land Trust in 1977. Rick was directing the Ottauquechee Regional Planning Commission at the time. He not only wanted to start a land conservation organization for the Woodstock region, but a housing organization and an economic development organization as well. The housing group was in fact established, and they built several housing projects in Woodstock. The economic development component never came into being, but the connection between land, housing, and jobs was not forgotten. Rick was simply ahead of his time.

The ideas that I heard Rick first express in the mid-1970s finally began to mature in 1986, when a group of land conservationists and affordable housing advocates came together to lobby for a state fund that would address both issues. Let's take a moment to recognize those founders: some are still in their traces, but others have moved on. In addition to Rick, the conservation community included Paul Bruhn, Bob Klein, Monty Fischer and Eric Palola, and Bob Rose of Waitsfield, who passed away a few years ago. The key people in the housing field were Gus Seelig, Jim Libby, Kirby Dunn, Brenda Torpy and Tim McKenzie. From state government were the late Mollie Beattie, Karen Meyer, Bob Sherman, Paul Stone, and Governor Madeleine Kunin. Lobbyist Steve Kimbell did extraordinary work for the coalition, and Representative Paul Portier and Senator Scudder Parker were among those led the charge in the Legislature. Once the Board had been established, many of these individuals, plus the first at-large Board members Rob Woolmington, Charlie Kireker, John Nutting, Beth Humstone and Stuart Thurber, had a hand in putting the legislation into practice. We owe these people so much.

It was a public-private partnership at its best—a “conspiracy of good will” as Gus has so often put it.

Combining housing and conservation in a single fund was truly an odd and yet compelling idea at the time. Odd because on one level, open space precludes housing and housing eliminates open space. Compelling because if you look at what it takes to create a livable, healthy, sustainable community, you need not only safe and affordable housing, but land to grow food and fiber, preserve wildlife, and provide clean water, recreational opportunities and the other goods and services which open space can provide. There is no question that putting housing and conservation together, instead of creating two separate funds, was an effective political strategy. It would have been pretty difficult for the Legislature to ignore a bill that addressed two very high-visibility issues of the day and was supported by both the Vermont Farm Bureau and the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council as well as many other organizations. Over the past 20 years, as the political winds have shifted back and forth and state tax revenues have ebbed and flowed, the existence of a united coalition supporting both housing and conservation helped ensure that funding remained available to address both needs.

Beyond the political advantages, however, I have long felt that the real benefit of putting housing and conservation together is that it requires each of our organizations to think about the needs of the entire community, even as we pursue our individual missions and programs. This is where the challenge of this conference lies. The title “Toward a Shared Vision” implies that we have not yet reached a shared vision. It also implies that the next generation of leaders will have to complete the work that we started.

In 1987, the land trust community across the country was by no means ready to think in broader “community” terms. I recall when Rick Carbin and Chuck Mathai made a presentation about the newly created VHCB at a national land trust conference held in the late 1980s. Chuck Mathai was the founder of the Institute for Community Economics and assisted the Burlington Community Land Trust during its formative years. As the attendees were leaving the seminar, I over-heard one person remark: “Well, that was interesting, but my job is land conservation. The rest of that stuff is somebody else’s job.” He was right in one sense: we all have our jobs and our areas of expertise and responsibility. However, that does not prevent us from thinking about the broader community’s needs and goals. It also does not keep us from considering how our work may impact, positively or negatively, on the mission and programs of other community organizations. To truly reach a shared vision, we must reach out to other organizations and

interests. We must not only engage them in our work, but we must become engaged in theirs. I am pleased to report that when I attended the same national land trust conference a month ago, I found that land trusts are talking much more about land conservation in the context of the overall needs of their communities.

In the early days of VHCB, we talked a lot about “dual goal” projects, where land conservation and affordable housing would be combined on a single tract of land. We did complete a few good dual goal projects in Hancock, Norwich, and some other communities, but largely this effort was a failure. The problem was that we were trying to force-fit housing into land conservation projects, in locations where housing was not truly appropriate. In later years, we have been far more successful in creating other types of “dual goal” projects: historic preservation combined with affordable housing, affordable housing combined with commercial space and human services, farmland conservation combined with starting new rural enterprises, a farm where city kids can experience rural life, and a summer camp for children living in affordable housing. All of these projects are helping to build the fabric of community life, because they are directed at more than one end.

It has been interesting to watch how Vermont’s community land trusts have gradually evolved into community development organizations. They are taking on mixed affordable and market rate housing projects, creating incubator space for new businesses, restoring or replacing burnt-out buildings in downtowns, creating neighborhood pocket-parks, supporting the creative economy, and in Groton, even re-building the village center. In many ways, community land trusts are now in the business of community revitalization, taking on new challenges and forging new alliances that go far beyond just providing safe and decent shelter for low- and moderate-income Vermonters.

At the same time, land trusts have moved beyond just land protection. They are supporting diversification in Vermont agriculture, creating town forests and recreation areas, promoting the manufacture of wood products from trees harvested on conserved land, engaging in place-based education, and in a few cases providing land for affordable housing. They no longer define “success” just by the number of acres conserved, but also by the impact of their work on the health of the human community.

There are encouraging signs that the community ideal that underlies the housing and conservation program is beginning to take on new dimensions and involve a still wider coalition of interests. Consider, for example, the intensive negotiations that have taken place this past year

between the affordable housing community and environmental advocacy organizations. The environmental advocates have known for a long time that if we want to limit sprawl and promote more efficient patterns of growth, we must reduce the regulatory barriers that slow housing and economic development in our downtowns and village centers. At the same time, wholesale relaxation of environmental regulations could accelerate sprawl, which few Vermonters want. After years of talking past each other, the two sides have finally begun to hammer out a legislative proposal that addresses the legitimate concerns of both.

Another reason for optimism, in this age of increasing childhood obesity and eroding connections to rural life, can be found in the collaboration between the Intervale Center, Foodworks, and Shelburne Farms in developing a Farm to School program. Because of this program, children are learning where food comes from and are participating in its production and preparation, school cafeterias are beginning to use local foods, and maybe – just maybe – we’re beginning to restore the nutritional balance for our kids. Farmers markets, the localvore movement, farm-energy projects, new proposals to incubator farm programs like the one in the Intervale, all are creating new businesses, new opportunities, more efficient uses of resources, new gathering places, and new connections within the community. In the next 20 years, many of these programs may take flight in the same way that community land trusts and land trusts began to take flight twenty years ago.

But there are also discouraging signs. After 20 years, the land conservation community has made little progress in overcoming the suspicions of traditional forest industry interests, who worry that land trusts will lock up the land against productive use. The fact is that we both want to maintain the forest resource base and we both recognize the importance of the forest products industry to Vermont’s rural economy and heritage. We need to find ways to work together. It is also disheartening that after three years of wrangling over Vermont’s housing policy, the Administration and the nonprofit community seem no closer to agreeing on the approach for getting more housing built on the ground. Instead of pulling on the same oar, we are wasting energy and time by rowing in different directions. The result is less housing being built.

As the ranchers learned in Gunnison, Colorado, Vermonters will not preserve the qualities that make their communities special simply by preserving open space or building affordable housing. We must in fact engage all of the interests that make up our communities. This will not be easy. But we have one advantage in Vermont that Colorado does not. Because our state is small, because our political institutions and leaders are accessible, because we can get

to know each other, because we still have a strong sense of community, a small group of people with a good idea can still make a difference if they are willing to take the time to reach out and involve others. We must look beyond the mission of our individual organizations and beyond cooperation of just housing and conservation interests. We must create new partnerships, broaden our alliances, and seek out new opportunities to work toward shared goals.

If you think that this is too complicated or that your organization will build fewer affordable homes or protect less land as a result, let me leave you with this thought. The land trust community in Vermont has protected roughly 10 percent of the state. I would hazard a guess that had we not linked up with affordable housing twenty-one years ago, that total would probably be only 2-3% of Vermont today. I would also guess that there would be far fewer than 8500 units of affordable housing in existence in Vermont today. By incorporating other interests into our work, we not only furthered the interests of our own organizations, but we broadened our public support, and we made more lasting and meaningful contributions to our communities.

The challenge for you leaders of today and tomorrow is not just to deepen and make more tangible the relationship between housing and conservation, but to bring into your work the other needs and goals of our communities. It's a big vision, but if it can be done anywhere, it can be done in Vermont. Good luck. I plan on coming back in twenty years for VHCB's 40th anniversary to see how well we did.