

A scenic view of a mountain range with hikers on a rocky peak in the foreground. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The mountains in the distance are layered and hazy. In the foreground, several hikers are standing on a rocky outcrop, looking out over the valley. One hiker is wearing a blue jacket and a backpack, another is in an orange jacket, and a dog is sitting on the rocks.

February 7th, 2024
2024

VTGC Testimony on H.673

House Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry Committee

Nick Bennette, Executive Director, the Vermont Mountain Bike Association
Co-Chair, Vermont Trails & Greenways Council

Tommy O'Connor, Executive Director, the Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association
Board Member, Vermont Trails & Greenways Council

Background

Outdoor recreation is woven into the fabric of Vermont

- 8,000+ miles of public access trails, 70%+ hosted by private landowners
- Public-access recreation is a designated purpose for conservation
- Strong collaboration between public land mgrs & nonprofit stewardship orgs (VTGC)
- A vibrant and highly diversified outdoor recreation business sector
- Dozens of outdoor recreation-oriented communities
- Accounts for 4.6% of State GDP (↑ 0.5%)



About the VTGC

The consolidated, expert voice and support hub for recreational trails in Vermont.

As of 2021, our organizational members:

- Represent 50,000+ individual members
- Log 100,000+ hours of volunteer time annually
- Manage and maintain 7,750+ miles of trails
- Support 50,000+ jobs statewide through the broader impact of our work
- Steward trails on private land, which hosts over 70% of public access trails in Vermont
- Partner closely with state and federal agencies to manage trails on public land

<https://vermonttgc.org/>



Stewardship

Maintaining and growing trail infrastructure through private landowner relationships and public land manager partnerships

- Balance equitable access with responsible use of Vermont's amazing landscape
- Apply Best Management Practices (BMPs) on trail design, construction, use, and maintenance
- Develop maintenance, access, and stewardship plans
- Professionally-led with support of VTGC coordinator and Volunteer-supported work
- Establish and cultivate lasting relationships with landowners who host trails
- Funded primarily through memberships, grants, and philanthropic support



Challenges

Threats to the future prosperity of outdoor recreation in Vermont

- Limited understanding of the outdoor recreation economy
- Deferred maintenance
- Underfunded stewardship
- Insufficient organizational capacity
- Majority reliance on private landowners without any recognition or support
- Ill-suited regulation & oversight system
- Dramatic increase in demand
- Climate change

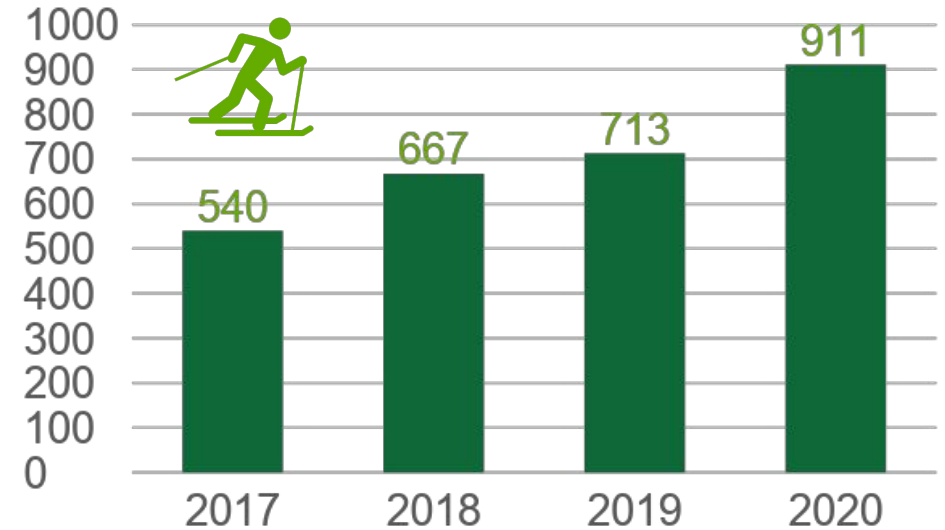


Growth

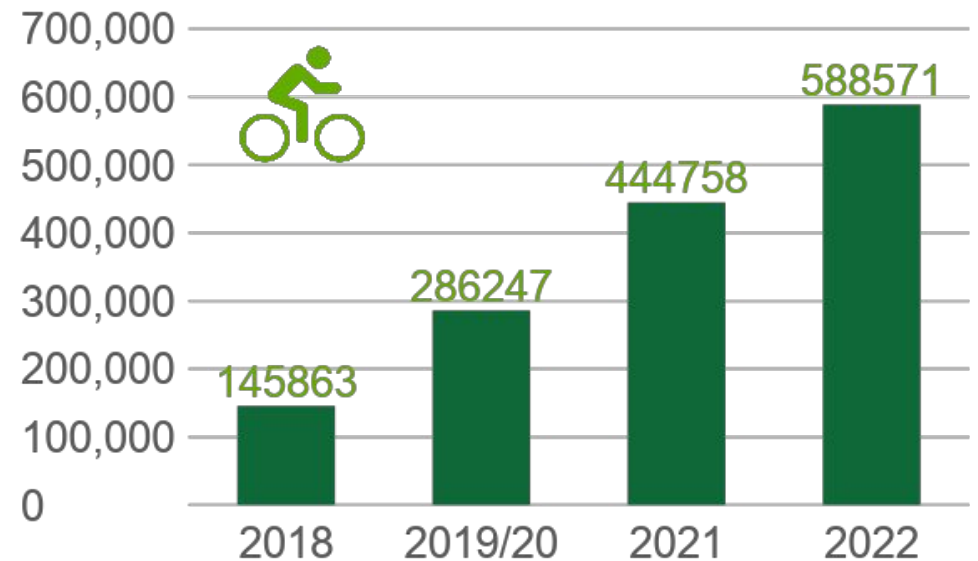
Vermonters and visitors rely on recreational trails, now more than ever

- Dramatic increase in demand for outdoor recreation over the last decade; accelerated through the pandemic
- Over half (54%) of Americans recreated outdoors in 2021, participation that has increased every year since 2014
- Trail usage across usage types, motorized/non-motorized and seasons has increased 100-200% over the last 5 years
- Over 70% of Vermont's recreational trails are hosted by private landowners, stewarded by non-profit organizations with limited public support

Trail Users, 'No-Name' Backcountry Area



TrailForks Trail Check-ins, State-wide



The Benefits

Outdoor Recreation drives health, environmental, and economic impact

- Supports healthy & resilient communities
- Fosters ecological awareness & conservation
- Fuels sustainable economic development:
 - Hundreds of outdoor businesses
 - Attraction and retention of new residents
 - Supporting infrastructure and amenities
 - A driving force for so many of the 13+ million annual visitor trips
 - **Responsible for 4.6% of Vermont's GDP, behind only Hawaii**

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Source: Headwaters Economics

Financial Burden

Stewardship bears a heavy cost and limited public funding

- VTGC conducted a post July Flood Damage report that estimated close to \$5 Million in damage to trail networks across Vermont
- Trail networks also see deferred maintenance costs for several organizations reach \$1 Million annually
- Trail organizations are seeing prices on materials, labor, and support rising exponentially



Recap

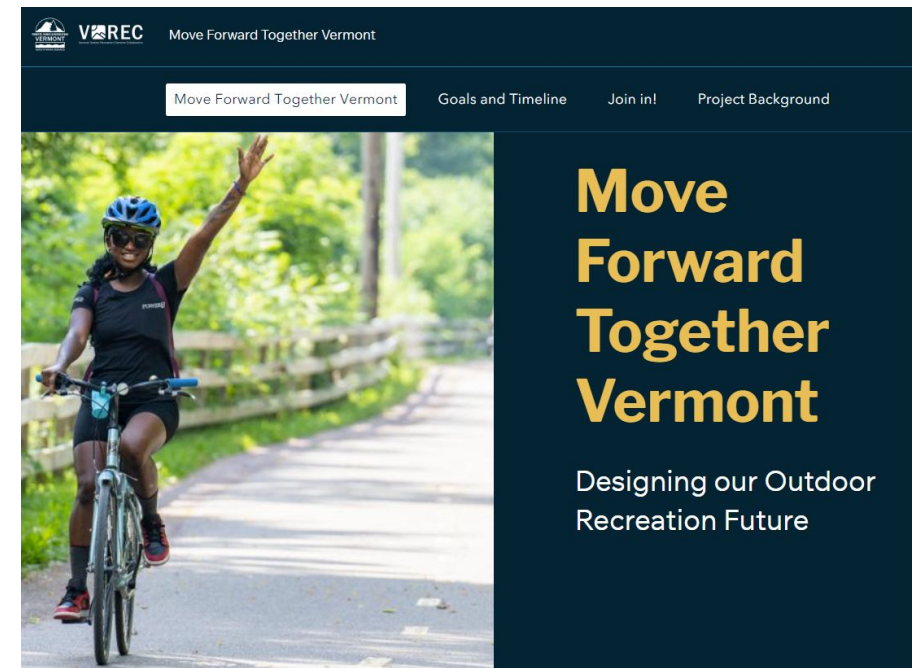
Highlights from last session (& '23)

- H.467 - combined three short-form bills
 - H.131 - Green Mountain Rec. Fund
 - H.85 - Trail Accessibility
 - H.310 - VOREC Funding
- H.126 / Act 59 - 30 x 30
 - Conserved lands Inventory (July '24)
 - Plan (December '25)
- Move Forward Together Vermont
 - SCORP
 - VOREC Action Plan



Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative

Help Decide Vermont's Pathways to Conservation!



H.673

Rationale and Contents

- Why the new bill?
 - Feedback from last session: quantify the investment need
 - Climate resiliency
 - Integration with MFTVT
 - Investment in VTS Modernization
- Contents
 - A comprehensive outdoor recreation economic assessment
 - VTGC staff capacity
 - Best Management Practice (BMP) aggregation & consolidation

1 H.673
2 Introduced by Representatives Rice of Dorset, Sims of Craftsbury, Anthony of
3 Barre City, Boyden of Cambridge, Christie of Hartford, Cole of
4 Hartford, Harrison of Chittenden, Headrick of Burlington,
5 Jerome of Brandon, LaBounty of Lyndon, Lalley of Shelburne,
6 Lipsky of Stowe, Logan of Burlington, Morris of Springfield,
7 Nugent of South Burlington, Priestley of Bradford, Roberts of
8 Halifax, Surprenant of Barnard, Templeman of Brownington,
9 Torre of Moretown, and Williams of Granby
10 Referred to Committee on
11 Date:
12 Subject: Conservation and development; recreational trails
13 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to direct the
14 Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative to conduct an outdoor
15 recreation economic impact study. It would also create a position at the
16 Vermont Trails and Greenways Council. It would also appropriate funds to the
17 Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation to oversee the development of
18 best management practices for recreational trails in cooperation with the
19 Vermont Trails and Greenways Council.

H.673

I. Economic Impact Study

- Overall statewide and county-level impacts
- Distribution of impacts across recreational activities and land ownership
- Current carrying costs of outdoor recreation asset stewardship
- Outdoor Recreation ROI in VT
- Top three opportunities for growth
- Recommendations for future investments to maintain and grow VT's OR economy; including climate resilience investments

VALUE PROPOSITION

- We must better understand our OR economy if we are to sustain and grow it
- Now is the right time to identify smart investments, including climate resilience
- It is essential that we put a price tag on carrying costs of trails, before it's too late
- With so much riding on private landowners, this study would establish the economic rationale for landowner recognition
- This work would provide a critical resource for future requests to support outdoor stewardship and outdoor businesses

H.673

II. VTGC Capacity

- Responsibilities;
 - Administer membership to the VTGC;
 - Manage VTGC meetings, activities, operations, and budget;
 - Routinely assess the needs of the Vermont trail stewardship community;
 - Develop, manage, and deploy technical assistance resources for VTGC members
 - Execute the VTGC's advisory role to the Agency of Natural Resources
- \$100,000 one-time appropriation (FY 2025)
- Currently supported by a part-time Program Manager through philanthropic seed funding and a VOREC Capacity-Building grant

VALUE PROPOSITION

- The VTGC represents the >70% of public access trails on private lands, in addition to being a public land manager partner
- The VTGC has an unfunded statutory responsibility to advise ANR through FPR
- The Council has demonstrated both the need and value for this position
- VTGC capacity will help ensure the trail community is actively engaged and adequately supported at a pivotal moment for outdoor recreation - and Vermont

H.673

III. Best Management Practices

- FPR would contract, in partnership with the VTGC a contractor to;
 - Aggregate current BMPs in use across VTGC (VTS) Member Organizations
 - Distill these into a set of common BMPs for natural surface trails in VT
 - Articulate where distinctions exist for trails on public vs. private lands
- VTGC would support FPR in working to see these BMPs integrated in the VTS
- \$50,000 one-time appropriation

VALUE PROPOSITION

- Our organizations already follow use-specific, often highly specialized and complex Best Management Practices
- This effort would distill these into a general, accessible, and applicable set for any trail stewardship organization (or landowner)
- A simplified set of universal BMPs would allow us to provide greater weight and a stronger identity to the Vermont Trail System - essentially defining a standard of excellence
- Such a private/public partnership to create a technical trail resources was recently proven in the Backcountry Ski Handbook

Questions?

And... See you at Outdoor Recreation Day next Friday!



February 16, 2024
Vermont Statehouse

VT OUTDOOR RECREATION DAY

Meet with legislators
Press conference
Testimony on the value of outdoor
recreation to our state's economy
and peoples' wellbeing



H.673 SPONSORS

- **Rice of Dorset**
- **Sims of Craftsbury**
- Anthony of Barre City
- Boyden of Cambridge
- Christie of Hartford
- Cole of Hartford
- Harrison of Chittenden
- Headrick of Burlington
- Jerome of Brandon
- LaBounty of Lyndon
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- Nugent of South Burlington
- Priestley of Bradford
- Roberts of Halifax
- Surprenant of Barnard
- Templeman of Brownington
- Torre of Moretown
- Williams of Granby

A photograph of two off-road vehicles on a dirt road at sunset. The vehicle on the left is a dark-colored utility vehicle with a person standing behind it, and the vehicle on the right is a Polaris utility vehicle. The sky is a mix of orange and grey, and the background shows rolling hills.

THANK YOU!

The VTGC Board of Directors; board@vermonttgc.org

VTGC Members

Comprised of over 50 trail-related organizations and individuals

- 18 Statewide Trail Stewardship organizations
- 10 Regional Trail Stewardship organizations
- 6 Local/Community Groups
- 7 Townships & Municipalities
- 7 State/Federal Agencies (ex-officio)
- 5 Individual and Commercial members

<https://vermonttgc.org/members>

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VTGC Board

- Nick Bennette, Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA), Co-Chair
- Cindy Locke, Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST), Co-Chair
- Mariah Keagy, Sinuosity Flowing Trails, Co-Vice Chair
- Greg Western, Cross Vermont Trail, Co-Vice Chair
- Abby Long, Kingdom Trails Association, Treasurer
- Carolyn Lawrence, Stowe Trails Partnership, Secretary
- Matt Williams, Catamount Trail Association
- Caitrin Maloney, Velomont Trail Collective
- Rachel Batz, Town of Dorset
- Rosy Metcalfe, Independent Community Representative
- Tommy O'Connor, Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association (VASA),



Advisory Role

The Council has a statutory role to advise ANR on trail matters

- The Vermont Trail System (VTS), which designates the official public-access trails in Vermont
- The Recreation Trail Program (RTP), which provides Federal Highway Administration funds to the States to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses
- The Vermont Outdoor Economic Collaborative (VOREC), with two Steering Committee seats
- Other trail-related policy and legislation

Vermont Statute: Title 10, Chapter 20

§ 441 Statement of Purpose

(a) In order to provide access to the use and enjoyment of the outdoor areas of Vermont, to conserve and use the natural resources of this State for healthful and recreational purposes, and to provide transportation from one place to another, it is declared to be the policy of this State to provide the means for maintaining and improving a network of trails to be known as the "Vermont trails system"

§ 443 Vermont trails system

The Vermont trails system shall consist of those individual trails recognized by the Agency of Natural Resources with the advice of the Greenways Council. The Agency, with the advice of the Council, shall establish criteria for recognition of single use and shared use trails. (Added 1993, No. 211 (Adj. Sess.), § 28.)

§ 443 Advisory council designated

(a) The Vermont Trails and Greenways Council, Inc., an organization of trail using and trail providing groups, is designated as an advisory council to the Agency of Natural Resources and shall advise on all matters related to this chapter, including the allocation of State and federal funds appropriated for the purposes of this chapter.

