



To: The Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry  
From: Sharon Plumb, Program Manager, Vermont Trails and Greenways Council  
Re: H.673, Support for an act relating to Vermont's outdoor recreation economy  
Date: February 7, 2024

### **Testimony for H. 673**

On behalf of the over 50 member organizations that comprise the Vermont Trails and Greenways Council (VTGC), we would like to express our support for H.673.

You've had a lot of information brought to you today by FPR staff, as well as the people who run the trails organizations that are funded by donations, membership and trail fees, as well as private and public grants, some of which come from FPR. I want to share with you why they need my position.

But first, I want you to imagine a favorite trail you go to. Maybe it's in a town forest or it's a remote part of the Long Trail, or you love to get your adrenaline pumping on a mountain bike trail in the Northeast Kingdom. Imagine it in its 'best' condition: the kiosk is beautiful and fresh, the parking lot is clean, signage is well-maintained and the trail itself is kept up, feels safe, and you can leave your busy world at the statehouse behind. Are you all there? Now imagine you come to the parking lot and trash has been left behind, the kiosk is damaged, there's no signage and you head out but the trail is clearly worn out, damaged by recent rains. Are you as able to relax on this kind of trail? What image does it give community members and tourists?

Trails don't just happen. Good trails - excellent trails - trails we can be proud of to promote in our travel brochures and that give our communities a way to connect with nature - they take time. They take money. They take skilled professionals. They take FPR and VTGC.

The Vermont Trails and Greenways Council was founded in 1989. In 1993, it was named by statute as the advisory body to the Agency of Natural Resources, specifically the Vermont Trail System and FPR's Recreation Trails Program (RTP). At that time, the trails community consisted of a much smaller number of players: the Green Mountain Club, the Catamount Trail Association, the Vermont Association of Snowmobile Traveler's, state trail managers and a growing number of nonprofits and town-based trail managers. Since then, membership has grown and now includes dozens of volunteers and professionals who build and maintain 8,000+ miles of public trail. *Given adequate time and resources, we will be able to actively support hundreds of additional trail managers who work for municipalities, volunteer their time for conservation commissions and are employed as professional trail builders.*

In its 30+ year history, all of the work that the Council has done has been completed by a volunteer board: people who are full-time executive directors and trail managers for other organizations. They saw the value in coming together as liaison to the state, a role that is even more vital today. Much has changed since VTGC was formed. Its founders advocated for more trails and that day has arrived. They likely would not have imagined the growing popularity of mountain bikes, fat bikes, ATV's, or e-bikes, all of which have their own advocacy groups and trail needs. While they might have imagined the outdoor recreation mecca Vermont could have become, they would likely be surprised by the numbers of trails that now exist in the state, how much they are used by Vermonters and visitors alike, and how much trails contribute directly to community vitality and the state's GDP.

**The trails we Vermonters rely on for mental and physical well-being and community-based economic vitality need to be built and maintained to a high standard.** While many resources do exist to support that goal, trail managers don't always know where to find them, how to use them, or have the skills or capacity to use them.

*This year, FPR and VTGC will sign a Cooperative Agreement, a binding agreement that clearly outlines the relationship between FPR and VTGC and specific details about how each entity will continue to provide the trails community what they need to build and maintain high-quality trails. Just as FPR has paid staff to fulfill these obligations, VTGC needs a salaried person to keep our end of the agreement. Our volunteer board can not do this work.*

The best way to understand what VTGC is doing and *if adequately resourced* can more effectively do to meet these opportunities and challenges are through some real-life examples:

- 1) July 2023's major flood event came just a few months after I was hired. Because VTGC had staff, board members could focus on their own organization's needs. I was available to create a system for gathering information on trail damage throughout the flood-affected regions of the state. In addition to a survey, I called every municipality and trails organization that might be impacted. This personalized call helped bring much-needed data to FPR so they could provide real-time information to Commissioner Fitzko and Secretary Moore. It also helped convey a message to trail managers that the state is invested in outdoor recreation assets and is going to act on their behalf. *As a result, the FPR [VOREC 2023](#) round of grants included a flood relief track.*
- 2) East Montpelier Trails has developed a 'necklace' of 11+ miles of scenic trails that loops through the farms and forests of the town and this year will connect with the Cross-Vermont Trail. Developed and managed entirely by volunteers over the past 30 years, it has done well to access town funds, local donations, and some state funding. However, though it needs a new bridge, would benefit from a professional map design and print job, would like to host more special events to attract volunteers, and would make excellent use of a VYCC crew for a week, the volunteer board does not have the capacity to apply for Recreation Trails Program (RTP) funding. **There are dozens and dozens of nonprofits and municipalities that are in the same position as EMT. The end result: funding that is available to them if they applied doesn't get to them.** *Nonprofits like EMT, as well as conservation commissions, recreation trail committees and low-staffed municipalities need the capacity to write the grants that are available through FPR. While VTGC wouldn't have the capacity to write the grants for them, we can help*

*them by providing grant-writing workshops and develop or enhance technical assistance opportunities so the grants are well-written and more likely to succeed. Our new website will also have a host of resources to help EMT operate more efficiently, such as tools, trainings, and networking opportunities that share best practices on how to effectively run a non-profit volunteer-based organization.*

- 3) One of our board members, Rachel Betz, is the town of Dorset's sole employee whose job is to maintain the town trails. Like many areas in Vermont, the Dorset region is breathtakingly beautiful, hosting many miles of trails enjoyed by Vermonters and tourists alike. Rachel has funding to hire a trail crew, but it is not easy; the positions are not well-paid, and housing in the area is hard to come by. While Rachel can wield a chainsaw, build beautiful trails and work with town managers and landowners, she does not have the capacity to seek additional funding, or collaborate at the scale that could be needed to seek more funding to support her work. *VTGC is tapped into national efforts to build a skilled workforce, and knows what needs to be done to help make trail building a more professionalized and attractive career. We could help Rachel by building statewide momentum around the issue, helping her connect with Vermont University's Trail Building Certification program, and help her collaborate with a skilled grant writer so she could go after existing funding.*
- 4) The Green Mountain Club maintains the Long Trail and hundreds of miles of side trails. Many of these trails were built more than a century or more ago with outdated techniques and require constant upkeep. While GMC does remarkable work, their need for funding to pay for trail work far exceeds what they can access through FPR, federal grants, and private foundations. Yet at the national scale, they cannot compete against bigger states and longer trails for funding from big corporations such as CocaCola or Carnegie. *VTGC could collaborate with GMC and other Vermont Trail System organizations to go after big funding. Someone needs to coordinate that work.'*
- 5) In 2023 legislators introduced a bill that states that 10% of all new trails need to be built to be accessible. While trails organizations statewide are excited about the concept, they need resources to do that. They need to know what guidelines to follow to design and build new or amend existing trails. People facing physical disabilities to be part of the planning and design process. Professional trail builders need to acquire the skills and equipment to build these kinds of trails. Without a statewide plan, well-meaning trail managers and public representatives who want to make this happen end up defeated as they search for funding, best practices and skilled workers. *Instead, VTGC could create one localized "Accessibility Hub" for people to obtain best practices, share success stories, offer trainings, etc.*

FPR needs VTGC to take the incredible work their staff is doing and help bring it to life on as many miles of trail as possible. The state's Move Forward Together initiative is comprehensive, gathering the advice and ideas of professional trail managers and the public on how best to augment, care for and amplify the positive impacts of our outdoor recreation assets. VTGC needs staff to help bring that work to life through the hands, minds, and hearts of *all* of the trails organizations in Vermont. **We are the organization to do that work.**

My position has only been in place for 7 months and in that time, I have seen the scope of opportunities that exist to support trail managers. Here are a few highlights of work that I've accomplished that could not have been accomplished by the VTGC board.

- ❖ Worked with VTGC co-chair Nick Bennette and the FPR staff to draft a Cooperative Agreement with FPR;
- ❖ Led the effort to gather information on trails damage due to 2023 flooding events;
- ❖ Developed a monthly enews that goes to more than 100 stakeholders monthly, and more as needed for special events and legislative updates;
- ❖ Overhauled the website; thanks to Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) funding, hired a design studio to build a new website and design a new logo, which will make it much easier for us to share resources with trail organizations;
- ❖ Conducted a stakeholder survey and held 1:1 listening sessions with trail managers and partners throughout the state so that we may better understand opportunities and gaps;
- ❖ Helped with flood recovery communication: Coordinated the gathering of information from trails organizations and helped to disseminate resources;
- ❖ Served on the Recreation Trails Program (RTP) working group to provide recommendations for improvements to make it a smoother process for applicants;
- ❖ Served as a 'scorer' for the VOREC flood recovery track applicants;
- ❖ Supported the development and success of the 2023 fall Trails Symposium;
- ❖ Collaborated with Nick to create board meeting agendas and the upcoming retreat;
- ❖ Identified a need in the trails community to have information and resources to build more accessible and adaptable trails. I brought together partners (Upper Valley Trails Alliance, Vermont Mountain Bike Association, Northern Forest Canoe Trail, CommGIS: the back end of [Trail Finder](#), and Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports) to write a \$600,000 VOREC grant to develop a statewide Accessibility Hub;

While the seed money we have for this position has helped us get started, we've only put the first few steps together. Trails organizations are scrapped for time and have far more miles of trail to manage than they have people or time to do the work. We need to help them make excellent use of resources that already exist through FPR and partner organizations, and create opportunities where gaps exist. VTGC is the organization to work with FPR and trails organizations of all sizes to co-create a future of resilient trails.