

March 12, 2015

Kate Pace, Route 7 Social LLC, Manchester VT, (802) 379-3617

To the Member of the House Appropriations Committee as you address WLEF funding for Fiscal Year 2016--

I understand that Governor Shumlin's proposed budget targets a significant decrease in WL funding and that your committee is considering removing the Working Lands Enterprise Fund altogether as a means to address the growing budget gap.

I am moved to submit written testimony here in full and open support of the WLEF, asking that it continue to be funded in all three grant giving areas: Enterprise Investment, Service Provider and Capital Infrastructure. As with the farm to table movement, the agriculture and forest product sectors bolstered by the WLEF grant support are at the very heart of Vermont's character and economy. WLEF has fostered business development and job creation to a measurable result in just two short years. Imagine what could be accomplished in two more!

My business is marketing. I am an independent consultant working from a solo shop in Southern Vermont. I collaborate with Vermont-based talent in digital media, graphic design and advertising. When the Guild of Vermont Furniture Makers was awarded their WLEF grant in 2013, they hired me to coordinate and establish a social media and content marketing program. At the same time, the Guild was able to contract with a start-up web developer out of BTV to revamp their site's look, and infrastructure. So two gigs, two Vermont companies, two different towns.

We rolled through year one with a great response. We blogged weekly, we grew a social network. We cultivated email contacts. We created and strengthened peer and advocate relationships. We measured our results. The year's work proved promising enough that when the grant cycle was up, the Guild wanted to keep going.

Today, we're looking at two years of collaborative work with continuing results. We've grown an aggregate social community of 1,300+ connected fans and we communicate with thousands more across the site and platforms on a weekly basis. Several makers report increased sales, more traffic and new clients as a result of the digital marketing plan. Route7Social has had an opportunity to do work with individual members who've been inspired by the marketing results. We've also had an opportunity to introducing makers to local colleagues who have provided solutions to their small business needs.

So when the furniture makers got a WLEF uplift to grow their visibility and push their message and product farther afield, many of them reported direct, measurable benefit. And by extension, so did I. More business means more locally sourced materials, means more staff, means more services needed. I urge you to consider our particular experience, one of many similar stories, as emblematic of the big picture Working Lands impact.

Since I began working with the GVFM, I've said that the Working Lands investment in Vermont has had a pretty decent "trickle down" effect. i.e. "Putting Vermonters to work" both inside and outside the focus sector. From southern Vermont, I ask you in Montpelier -- with the utmost sincerity and hopefulness for a vibrant, authentic and competitive future -- to continue to fund the WLEF. It's Vermont supporting Vermonters, and the seeds from which great things come.