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Testimony from Lyle P. Jepson, Dean of Entrepreneurial Programs at Castleton University and Director of Rutland Economic Development Corporation.

Today I will ask you to prioritize economic growth and population growth in your decisions about education policy.

Castleton University believes that higher education is an economic driver. That belief is exemplified in Castleton’s growth into the Rutland region. The purchase and repurposing of Spartan Arena, the upcoming construction of the Spartan Dome, the introduction of three art galleries in the City’s downtown, the location of the Castleton Polling Institute, creation of the Center for Entrepreneurial Programs, the daily work being undertaken to connect business and industry with University interns, and most recently, and the opening of student housing in downtown Rutland, directly enhance our region’s ability to attract and retain a workforce that is vitally needed for our continued economic recovery.

Because of Castleton’s leadership and, specifically, President David Wolk’s vision, Rutland Economic Development Corporation requested that Castleton University lead the County’s economic development efforts. Castleton University and Rutland Economic Development Corporation now share one roof and blur the lines between education and training and economic development.

Vermont is at a critical economic tipping point. We have learned that employers have unfilled jobs. Access to skilled workers is an urgent need. Our workforce is aging. Families are having fewer children.

Our education policy is in the process of catching up to these changes. Agencies and departments – including education and economic development – need:

1. a common understanding of Vermont’s most urgent problems, and
2. common language to describe and measure outcomes.

We need to make sure that the puzzle pieces fit and that the policy decisions that are made reflect the need to increase Vermont’s population. We need to link economic growth with population growth.

For discussion purposes, I have attached three documents:

- population projections for Rutland County,
- a Regional Marketing Initiative Overview, and
- the Joint REDC / Rutland Region Chamber of Commerce Policy Report.

The Joint Policy Report connects Governor Scott’s “Comprehensive Blueprint for Economic Growth” and the work that REDC and the RRCC will be supporting. Our primary focus is on population and economic growth through regulatory reform and workforce development. Within “Workforce,” the importance of K-12 education, specifically technical education, is highlighted.

Castleton University, Rutland Economic Development Corporation and the Rutland Region Chamber of Commerce will work closely with high school and college/university partners to connect education and employers with work based learning and internship opportunities.

We want you to:

1. Support continued implementation of Act 46 school district restructuring and consolidation; we have too much supply and not enough demand.
2. Require the Agency of Education to oversee consistent application of Act 77: Flexible Pathways *within* technical center service regions – and ideally, throughout the state;
3. Require a common school calendar, common graduation requirements and equal access by all students to school choice within technical center service regions;
4. Allow access to technical education beginning in 9th grade;
5. Support statewide recruitment campaigns to bring back and retain young Vermonters or professionals with some link to Vermont (the state has begun such an effort but it is underfunded);
6. Increase financial support for higher education as outlined by the Vermont State College system request; and
7. Invite the Vermont Futures Project to present their data on workforce trends and needs. They have collected data that indicates the need for almost 11,000 new employees each year, every year, for the next 15 years in order to fill the workforce gap that has been created by an aging workforce and declining population.

Governor Scott will be judging decisions based upon:

- Affordability,
- Economic growth, and
- Protecting the most vulnerable.

By now you have heard from hard-working, committed professionals from across the state about:

- Career Pathways for Vermont's students in areas of high skill, high demand, and high paying jobs,
- Career Readiness,
- The importance of 3rd party validation of credentials that are valued by business and industry,
- The professional development needs of school leaders,
- Work-based learning,
- Dual enrollment,
- Act 166,
- Act 77,
- Proficiency-based graduation requirements,
- Standards-based assessment procedures,
- The need for a Talent Pipeline Management system that supports business and industry, and more...

All of these initiatives are important, and the bottom line is that everyone wants very similar outcomes: a talented workforce that is benefiting from a strong economy and a workforce that is drawn to Vermont's cultural and adventure-based activities – a place they choose to live, work and play. In many ways, we are on the right track.

But Rutland County, in particular, is hard-hit by the declining population. This demographic change effects everything from property values to what schools can afford to offer their students.

In conclusion, I hope you have heard this message:

1. Continue the initiatives that are underway – stay the course with Act 46 and Act 77,
2. Eliminate any barriers facing students who wish to participate in technical education,
3. Approve the request for an increase in funding for the Vermont State College system, and
4. Ensure that all state agencies work together towards common goals. Today, by executive order, Governor Scott has aligned the Department of Labor and Agency of Commerce and Community Development. We applaud any and all efforts that will enhance efficiencies, communication and outcomes. We can not have isolated silos of responsibility and expect positive outcomes.

In Rutland, our goal is to collaborate in innovative and bold ways. We believe that economic growth and population growth are inextricably linked to each other, and to Vermont's success. If our population grows, and the result of that is economic growth, we will no longer be burdened by re-slicing the state's budgetary pie. We will have a bigger pie to slice.

I urge you to consider whether your future decisions will support population growth. It is such growth that will spur economic development, bolster property values, increase state revenues, and allow us to provide the comprehensive educational programming that all of our children need and deserve.