



VERMONT HOUSING and CONSERVATION COALITION

Testimony of Tracy Zschau
to the Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations
Public hearing
August 27, 2020

Good evening Senator Kitchel, Representative Toll and members of the Senate and House Appropriations Committees. My name is Tracy Zschau, and I am Vice President for Conservation at Vermont Land Trust.

I am here today as a co-chair of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition, a collection of 50 businesses and non-profit organizations that partner with VHCB to continue investments in our rural communities.

On behalf of the entire coalition, I want to start off by saying thank you for the sustained investments in the VHCB.

And thank you for your hard work in recent months. The fiscal CRF bills you passed in June were important. They included real resources for homelessness prevention and the working lands sector. Our local service groups are busy now turning those funds into economic activity and improvements for Vermonters.

We believe in and value VHCB. VHCB conservation programs support Vermont's rural communities. The conservation of farms and forests supports the viability of working-land enterprises and the communities that depend upon them. They also host critical natural assets that provide opportunities and solutions to some of the vexing challenges we face: climate change, flooding and water quality. These last 6 months have shone a light on our need for food security and the importance of local farms and food, as well as the solace and safety our local trails, parks and swimming holes provide. They were good investments before COVID 19, they have proven critical during COVID 19 and they will be vital to our economic and community recovery going forward.

As it relates to the FY21 budget, we ask that you make one minor revision to the VHCB allocation: an additional \$75,000 for REDI, the Rural Economic Development Initiative. The Governor did not fund this program. This program helps small rural communities (under 5,000 population) with grant writing to pull in

philanthropic, federal and state grants. Over the last 3 years since the program began, it has brought in more than \$4 million to these communities. We very much want to continue the effort. In my work in Newport City, I have personally seen the impact REDI has had in terms of adding capacity and funding for outdoor recreation investments.

And speaking of leveraging outside dollars, State investment through VHCB leverages significant federal and private funding. In conservation, this includes the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, in addition to foundations and private donations. **On average, nearly \$5 comes into Vermont for every \$1 of VHCB investment.**

There is a strong pipeline of community-driven conservation projects ready to go. The list of projects in development represents \$17M in funding needs over the next 18th months. These are investment opportunities that boost recreation and local food production, save special places and help clean water across the State.

Thank you again for your time and your commitment to our rural communities.