



VERMONT HOUSING and CONSERVATION COALITION

Testimony of Philip B. Huffman to the House Appropriations Committee February 21, 2019

Good morning, Chair Toll and members of the Committee. Thank you for your time, your commitment to our great state, and the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Phil Huffman, and I am Director of Government Relations and Policy for The Nature Conservancy in Vermont. I am here today as one of the four co-chairs of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition, a collection of nearly 60 organizations working to advance critical conservation and affordable housing projects across the state. Together we represent tens of thousands of Vermonters who are passionate about these issues that are so central to the well-being of our communities and landscape, now and in the future.

Thank you for your past support for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. We ask now for you to fully fund VHCB at the amount required by long-standing statute – 50% of Property Transfer Tax receipts. For fiscal 2020, this is about \$21.8 million.

The State's investments through VHCB over the past 32 years reflect the combination of social, economic and environmental commitments that makes Vermont so unique, appealing, and resilient. These public investments also create remarkable leverage of other public and private funds; result in significant short and long-term economic impact and good jobs for Vermonters; and enrich the quality of life in our communities.

Over its 32 years, VHCB investments have conserved 268,000 acres for public recreation and natural areas and 725 farms encompassing more than 167,000 additional acres; restored 69 historic buildings for community use; and created affordable housing for more than 33,000 Vermonters. VHCB projects are in every corner of our state – in our settlements and across our priceless landscape – creating workforce housing, increasing home ownership among lower income residents, providing flood resilience, water quality protection, public access for recreation, historic preservation, local food, habitat for native plants and wildlife, carbon storage, and other benefits. They are also essential to the state's economic vitality and our irreplaceable brand.

VHCB has invested a total of \$345 million in state funds in this remarkable array of projects, which have touched down in more than 200 communities. In turn, these investments have leveraged an additional \$1.7 billion from federal programs, foundations, private capital and charitable donations – about \$4 from other sources for every \$1 of state investment. This

remarkable leverage is unusual for state programs and is just part of the significant return on investment that Vermonters get for every dollar allocated to VHCB.

A recent analysis conducted by the Trust for Public Land's Conservation Economics team for several conservation organizations under the umbrella of the Vermont Forest Partnership demonstrates significant additional return that Vermonters receive from VHCB and other state investments in conservation. The TPL team found that for every \$1 of state investment in conservation over the past 30 years, Vermonters have received \$9 worth of natural goods and services such as air and water quality protection, carbon storage, flood resilience, and food production. And that 9:1 ROI doesn't include any of the huge additional economic benefit that conserved lands provide to the state's farming, forestry, outdoor recreation and tourism industries, which together generate several billion dollars per year.

It is also important to note that unlike many other state programs, VHCB expenditures on conservation projects are one-time investments that provide enduring benefits. Once a town forest, natural area, wetland, swimming hole, or farm is conserved, it provides the natural goods and services and other economic benefits described above in perpetuity.

While the return on past VHCB investments has been remarkable, there is much more urgent work to be done in both the conservation and housing sectors. There are many important natural areas, forestlands, farms, community open spaces, historic structures, and housing projects that are in the pipeline and at risk if not funded. VHCB currently estimates a total need of more than \$58 million in pending projects over the next 18 months. This amounts to more than three times VHCB's current year funding. These projects are often one-time opportunities that are years in the making, and if adequate funding is not available many of them will be lost.

It has been 18 years since VHCB received full funding in accordance with statutory requirements. And based on the Governor's proposed budget, between FY11-FY20 nearly \$28 million will have been diverted to other purposes. This represents countless lost opportunities to make a lasting positive impact on the lives, landscapes, and communities of Vermonters across the state.

We recognize you face very difficult decisions in allocating scarce funding among many worthy programs. But the outsized benefits of investments through VHCB are clear. We urge you to provide full funding for VHCB at the amount required by long-standing statute – 50% of Property Transfer Tax receipts, or \$21.8 million for fiscal 2020.

Thank you again for your time, your commitment, and your consideration. Don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Respectfully submitted,
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