



February 11, 2020

## AARP VT Testimony – Creation of Better Places Program

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on bill H.782 section 15. AARP VT supports the provision to create the Better Places Program in bill H.782. We have long supported placemaking efforts that enhance the livability, walkability and vitality of our downtown and village centers. Placemaking can help grow local economies, support healthy, active lifestyles for people of all ages and ability, and strengthen a community's already-existing assets.

Placemaking projects are focused on activating public spaces by strengthening the connection between people and the places they share. It often begins with temporary changes with the goal of leading to permanent, long-term impact that builds social capital. The most successful placemaking efforts put people at the forefront of creating change in their community. When residents help identify and solve the challenges that affect their daily lives — whether it is a half-vacant Main Street or roads that make walking or bicycling unsafe — communities and local leaders are more likely to achieve and sustain success.

The Better Places Program is a partnership that utilizes an innovative 'crowdgranting' funding model to support community development efforts in Vermont's downtowns, villages, and neighborhoods. This new program will leverage local efforts and investments to improve the livability of our communities, making our places more walkable, vibrant, and socially connected. This new program will establish a scalable, 50/50 matching community grant program that strategically coordinates the efforts of several funders supporting place-based economic development projects like walking and biking trails, public art, parks, and farmers markets.

Rural communities across our state are faced with important issues, a demographic that is aging and is increasingly isolated, a desire to support local businesses and add local jobs, a commitment to creating a positive future for our children --- all while utilizing limited financial, human, and infrastructural resources. As rural economies, environments, and demographics continue to change and evolve, developing locally driven solutions to meet these needs is critical to the long-term vitality of our communities. AARP Vermont in partnership with the state and other non-profits have come together over the last several years to leverage the power of community placemaking to help grow local economies, support aging in place, and strengthen a communities' already-existing historical, natural, and cultural assets.

For over a decade AARP Vermont has been fully committed to helping make Vermont towns, cities and neighborhoods more livable. A livable community is a place where people of all ages can thrive—with access to appropriate and affordable housing and transportation options, with

close proximity to services such as health care, and with desirable features, including shopping, gathering places and outdoor spaces. Such a community enhances personal independence, allows residents to age in place, and engages people of all ages in civic, economic and social life.

Overwhelmingly, older Vermonters want to age in place. Livable communities are great places for people of all ages; studies show more people of all ages desire such communities. They include safe, walkable streets; age-friendly housing and transportation options; access to needed services; and opportunities for residents of all ages to participate in community life. Cultivating public spaces in which to gather, socialize and engage with others is an integral part of a livable community.

AARP Vermont along with our partners at the State and other non-profit organizations have recognized a need and a desire among communities across the state to transform their public spaces through low-cost, high impact interventions. We hope to inspire those who have a vision for their community to take action by providing ideas, support and resources for positive change. The Better Places Program will further our resources to amplify community development efforts, improving the livability for people of all ages.