



## 2021 LEGISLATIVE SESSION RDCs of VT Priorities

The Regional Development Corporations have been at the forefront of supporting businesses to navigate these unprecedented times. One lesson has been that businesses will innovate, adapt, and survive, and the degree to which we support their efforts, by providing the tools they need, will largely determine how our economy recovers in the coming years. The RDC's have identified specific areas where we feel the State and their partners can effectively provide support that will accelerate growth and drive innovation.

### 1. Funding Priorities for a Recovering Economy:

**Business Technical Assistance Program:** As part of the effort funded by the CARES act, the RDC's of Vermont created a network to provide technical assistance utilizing a combination of private and public resources. The need far outweighed the demand, and much work is left to be done. A delivery system already exists and the model has proven to be highly effective. We respectfully request that the legislature consider an appropriation to support the **Vermont Business Interchange** (See attached) to continue to assist businesses adapt and succeed in the new economy.

**Workforce Development:** The availability of a robust and skilled workforce to fill existing and future employment vacancies remains a challenge and an ongoing impediment to economic resiliency and growth in Vermont. Core workforce development programs across the state to upskill, cross-train, and re-train Vermonters need to be resourced and expanded to meet this challenge. The RDC's seek expansion of this partnership through continued support of the Vermont State College system, the career and technical centers, and state programs that support these efforts.

**Broadband access** has proven to be a critical need at all levels for Vermonters. As so many of us became remote workers, our homes became our schools, and work/family connections shifted to online platforms, we all came to recognize our reliance on having access to a robust broadband network. Ensuring that communities are served with broadband should be a priority on par with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural electrification efforts in Vermont.

**Housing** continues to be a critical need for Vermont's workforce. Affordable housing for our teachers, manufacturing and healthcare workers, along with those needing subsidized housing, continues to lag behind demand.

**Safe, reliable childcare** has to be a priority for policy makers. The ability of business to maintain a workforce was a challenge prior to Covid. Since the onset of the pandemic options for childcare have continued to decline. The obstacle to employment for many working families is dependent on having access to quality and affordable childcare. This is also a key investment in the future generation of Vermonters.

**2. ACCD Priorities:** The RDC's of Vermont strongly support the legislative initiatives of the Agency of Commerce & Community Development: Additional business assistance, project-based TIF, New Worker Relocation, housing and marketing.

**3. Act 250 Improvements:** The RDC's of Vermont support **Act 250** changes that include a waiver for designated development areas that have undergone significant prior review. Vermont needs to create an environment that supports development in designated areas to accelerate our economic recovery.

## Vermont Business Interchange

The year 2020 not only presented severe challenges for the business community in Vermont but also highlighted systemic issues that prevent future business growth even under normal circumstances. These challenges applied to both small and mid-sized companies. The need for marketing, strategic planning and financial literacy were among the areas where businesses indicated the greatest continued need.

The RDC's propose the following solution. **The Vermont Business Interchange** is an initiative modeled after the very successful ReVTA grant program, which was administered by the RDCs of Vt. and funded by the Cares Act. From this program, the RDC's now have a robust inventory of technical assistance providers who have demonstrated the ability and expertise to assist small and mid-sized businesses with critical tools to grow and adapt their businesses to the everchanging business climate. The Vermont Business Interchange will produce benefits for both the client companies as well as the vendors providing the assistance. It will also expand the capabilities of RDC's to serve an even larger portion of our business community.

The Vermont Business Interchange will require additional sustained funding, administered by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development through the annual grants to the RDCs. The funds will serve two functions: first, to partially fund in-house RDC staff to effectively execute the program and act as Business Navigators; and secondly, to provide technical assistance grants that are paid directly to the technical assistance providers on behalf of applicant businesses. Much like the Vermont Training Program, applicant businesses will be required to provide a 50% match to cover the cost of the technical assistance. We recommend grants averaging \$3,000. Status reports will be given to the Vermont Department of Economic Development twice yearly.

The Vermont Business Interchange would provide a clear message from the state that regardless of size, all businesses are welcomed and supported by Vermont. It is an investment in our future and wellbeing. It will strengthen our business community and provide them with the assistance they need to not only grow, but remain resilient.

# Restart Vermont Technical Assistance (ReVTA)

## How it Works



When COVID-19 hit, businesses and organizations were scrambling to adapt to a new virtual and contactless world. In response to the changing economy, the **Regional Development Corporations of Vermont (RDCs)** worked quickly to launch the ReVTA program: designed to deliver critically important technical assistance to hundreds of businesses and organizations to adapt business practices, retrofit space and access new technologies. RDCs leveraged over \$1.5 million in CARES act funds to connect **local businesses and non-profits with technical assistance providers**. The results have been overwhelmingly positive and the network of businesses and vendors will create lasting economic opportunity as our economy recovers from COVID-19.



**12** navigators from ReVTA helped businesses assess need and identify vendor partners



**512** businesses joined the program and received help from navigators

**402** businesses have hired vendors through ReVTA. Of them:



**184** are women-owned



**137** are owned by people over age 55



**19** are owned by those not U.S.-born



**12** are owned by people with disabilities



**12** are veteran-owned



**10** are owned by people of color



These businesses employ a total of more than **3,539** people.



**361** businesses signed on to provide technical assistance through ReVTA. Of **229** who have formed partnerships through the program:



**91** are women-owned



**68** are owned by people over age 55



**6** are owned by those not U.S.-born



**3** are owned by people with disabilities



**6** are veteran-owned



**4** are owned by people of color

## Sample Partnerships and Testimonials

### Storymatic + eBizVisibility

Brian Mooney, a teacher and writer, has found an amazing way of connecting his two passions into a lot of fun. Storymatic games tap into your imagination and get your creative juices flowing. Mooney runs his shop out of the Cotton Mill in Brattleboro. Before the ReVTA program hooked him up with eBizVisibility, Storymatic had seen a drop in sales of 15 percent. With search engine optimization and other technical marketing help, Mooney was able to change his website to help more story-minded people find his products. Storymatic is seeing sales 45 percent above the same timeframe last year.



### Windjammer Hospitality + Seven Days

The Tygate Motel Corporation, which runs the Windjammer Restaurant in South Burlington, had to pivot from inside dining to outside dining, then back to inside and curbside-only dining. With funds from the ReVTA program, the restaurant hired Seven Days as an agency to create short videos, ads and email marketing templates to help put forth a cohesive, professional message to the community. This allowed restaurant staff to focus on operating their business during a very uncertain time.



### Lyndon Area Chamber of Commerce + Northeast Kingdom Online

The COVID pandemic and ongoing recovery has simultaneously reduced the Lyndon Area Chamber of Commerce's revenue streams, while making their role in the community more important than ever. The Chamber, forced to cancel all events and miss out on revenue, feared they would likely see lower-than-projected membership renewal, too. At the same time, businesses and community members were looking to the Chamber for guidance on the shifting regulations and available recovery support. Northeast Kingdom Online was able to help the Chamber upgrade their website so businesses could leverage the Chamber's reach to drive traffic safely back to them.



### Barre Opera House + Eternity Marketing

The theater and music industry in Vermont has been hit particularly hard by COVID-19. Barre Opera House lost a significant percent of their memberships, donations, ticket sales and sponsors as in-person events came to a complete halt. The venue hoped to be better positioned when in-person events become feasible again. They also needed and to promote remote options and classes. Eternity Marketing helped the non-profit with planning, strategy and initial ad design for a Google Ad campaign that could create future sales to make up for the losses due to COVID.



"We will be in a better position in 2021 than pre-pandemic... the TA program helped me do things I simply could not do on my own... a very successful program and a good use of State funds. I encourage its return, because I think it can help a lot of people."

**Brian Mooney, President, Storymatic**



"Working as a vendor with the ReVTA program was an amazing experience and outcome for Eternity. The navigators were friendly and helpful every step of the way. Many of the projects have also now turned into recurring revenue streams."

**Mike Lannen, Eternity Marketing**