



VERMONT HOUSING and CONSERVATION COALITION

**Statement from Phil Huffman, VT Housing & Conservation Co-Chair,
to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees
February 8, 2021**

Thank you, Chair Hooper, Chair Kitchel, and members of the committees for the opportunity to testify before you earlier today, and for everything you are doing for Vermont in this difficult time.

I'm the Director of Government Relations and Policy for The Nature Conservancy in Vermont, and I offer this statement in my role as one of the co-chairs of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition (VHCC).

For any of you who may not know, VHCC is a collection of more than 50 nonprofits and businesses large and small that work on implementing a wide array of conservation and affordable housing projects statewide. Our members have a long history of working collaboratively with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to deliver lasting results that benefit Vermonters in all sorts of ways.

Our Coalition respectfully asks today for your support of the Governor's Budget Recommend of \$34.8M for VHCB in FY22. This amount is appropriate and needed to more fully enable VHCB and its partners to help address the unprecedented challenges Vermonters are facing from COVID, and to capitalize on the opportunity we have to accelerate Vermont's economic recovery from the pandemic through expanded investments in both conservation and housing.

We also urge you to provide flexibility for VHCB to direct funds as needed to respond to individual community needs – *whether they are for housing or for conservation.* The Governor's budget language directs \$20M in one-time funds from the \$34.8M total to go to housing only. But the needed investments are varied across the state, and we value the ability of VHCB's staff leadership and Board to assess and support the most critical needs in our communities.

My fellow VHCC co-chair Molly Dugan from Cathedral Square testified before you this evening from the housing side, so I will focus the rest of my statement on the conservation side of VHCB's unique dual mission.

As they have over the past 30+ years pre-COVID, conservation investments through VHCB have had a major positive impact on helping Vermonters across the state weather the storm of the pandemic and support our rural communities and economy in this time of crisis. Just a few examples include:

- Providing ready access for a wide range of outdoor activities year-round, which has proven to be more essential than ever for our physical and mental well-being as evidenced by the dramatic increase in the numbers of people using our trails, swimming holes, parks, and other conserved public spaces;
- Providing farms and community gardens for growing healthy, local food for Vermonters in need;
- Attracting new residents with our world-class landscape and ready access to nature and the outdoors;
- Using CRF funding to provide business coaching through VHCB's Farm & Forest Viability Program to more than 500 enterprises statewide, helping them get through the pandemic and position for future success.

As I expect you're aware, pressures on the real estate market and land base have never been greater with the influx of "COVID refugees" drawn to Vermont as a relatively safe haven with many appealing qualities. As a result, revenues from the Property Transfer Tax are at an all-time high. Together these factors are a big part of what creates the need and opportunity to fund VHCB at the Governor's recommend for FY22.

There is currently an 18-month pipeline of housing and conservation projects totaling \$60M – far more even than the Governor's recommend – that are ready to go. This includes an estimated \$27M of conservation projects and \$32M of housing projects. What's needed is the funding to unlock the lasting benefits for our economy, communities, wellbeing, and landscape that they can provide.

It is also important to note that State investments in VHCB provide a big bang for the buck by leveraging funding from other sources that far exceeds what the State puts in. In last two fiscal years, the State's investment of \$31M in VHCB leveraged \$162M from federal, local, private, and other sources – more than \$5 for every \$1 from the State.

And there are significant new opportunities for leverage and need for sufficient state match on the conservation side in light of the overwhelming bipartisan approval by Congress last summer of full funding for the national Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This will roughly double the federal funding available through LWCF for state and local conservation projects and requires 1:1 non-federal match, so it is essential to increase funding for VHCB to avoid leaving valuable federal funds on the table.

With all this in mind, we once again **respectfully ask for your support of the Governor's Budget Recommend of \$34.8M for VHCB in FY22, and urge you to provide flexibility for VHCB to direct funds as needed to respond to individual community needs – *whether they are for housing or for conservation.***

Thank you for your time and consideration of our requests. Please feel free to contact me at phuffman@tnc.org with any questions.