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H.159

Introduced by Representatives Coffey of Guilford, Burke of Brattleboro,  
James of Manchester, Jerome of Brandon, Killacky of South  
Burlington, Kimbell of Woodstock, Lefebvre of Newark, and  
White of Bethel

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Commerce and trade; economic development

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create a Better  
Places Program to support projects that create, activate, or revitalize  
communities and public spaces.

An act relating to creating the Better Places Program

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. FINDINGS; INTENT AND PURPOSE

(a) The General Assembly finds:

(1) The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated our economy through  
business closures and job losses, and physical distancing requirements have  
exacerbated social isolation and impacted Vermonters' quality of life and sense  
of community.

1           (2) Public spaces are essential for supporting economic activity and  
2           health and well-being throughout the pandemic and for building engaged,  
3           equitable, and resilient communities in the future.

4           (3) Vermont’s downtowns and villages increasingly depend on inviting  
5           public spaces that are robustly programmed to restore our distinct sense of  
6           place, strengthen community pride and identity, and attract businesses, jobs,  
7           and talent.

8           (4) Placemaking projects intentionally leverage the power of the arts and  
9           cultural assets to strengthen the economic and social fabric of communities and  
10          allow for growth and transformation that builds upon local and regional  
11          character, culture, and quality of place.

12          (5) Research shows that community-driven placemaking projects  
13          increase economic and civic vitality, and create spaces where commerce  
14          thrives, social connections flourish, civic participation increases, and residents  
15          are empowered to take ownership of their future to build healthier and  
16          equitable local economies.

17          (b) It is the intent of the General Assembly to:

18               (1) enhance the livability and unique sense of place in Vermont’s  
19               downtowns and villages by providing funding, training, and resources to  
20               support investments in public spaces and local placemaking projects that build  
21               prosperous, equitable, healthy, and resilient communities;

1           (2) promote healthy, safe, equitable, and vibrant downtowns, villages,  
2           and neighborhoods for people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and incomes  
3           by increasing public space and placemaking investments in local communities;

4           (3) strategically coordinate and simplify the funding process from  
5           multiple community development funders, streamline the grantmaking and  
6           distribution process, democratize community access to grant funds, and  
7           provide communities a nimble, flexible source to quickly fund and launch  
8           community-driven placemaking projects to make positive and enduring change  
9           locally; and

10           (4) help local leaders identify, develop, and implement placemaking  
11           projects by creating the Better Places Program to advance local recovery  
12           efforts, rebuild local economies, boost local capacity, and reconnect  
13           Vermonters to one another – critical elements that help communities recover  
14           quickly and build prosperous and resilient communities in the future.

15           Sec. 2. 24 V.S.A. § 2799 is added to read:

16           § 2799. BETTER PLACES PROGRAM; CROWD GRANTING

17           (a)(1) There is created a Better Places Program within the Department of  
18           Housing and Community Development, and a Better Places Fund, which the  
19           Department shall manage pursuant to 32 V.S.A. chapter 7, subchapter 5.

1           (2) The purpose of the Program is to utilize crowdfunding to spark  
2           community revitalization through collaborative grantmaking for projects that  
3           create, activate, or revitalize public spaces.

4           (3) The Department may administer the Program in coordination with  
5           and support from other State agencies and nonprofit and philanthropic partners.

6           (b) The Fund is composed of the following:

7                   (1) State or federal funds appropriated by the General Assembly;

8                   (2) gifts, grants, or other contributions to the Fund;

9                   (3) proceeds from the issuance of general obligation bonds; and

10                  (4) any interest earned by the Fund.

11           (c) As used in this section, “public space” means an area or place that is  
12           open and accessible to all people, generally with no charge for admission, and  
13           includes village greens, squares, parks, community centers, town halls,  
14           libraries, and other publicly accessible buildings and connecting spaces such as  
15           sidewalks, streets, alleys, and trails.

16           (d)(1) The Department of Housing and Community Development shall  
17           establish an application process, eligibility criteria, and criteria for prioritizing  
18           assistance for awarding grants through the Program.

19           (2) The Department may award a grant to a municipality or nonprofit  
20           organization for a project that is located in or serves a designated downtown,

1 village center, new town center, or neighborhood development area that will  
2 create a new public space or revitalize or activate an existing public space.

3 (3) The Department may develop matching grant eligibility  
4 requirements, such as requiring that to be eligible for a grant, a project shall  
5 use matching funds raised through a crowdfunding approach that includes  
6 multiple donors and other appropriate requirements to ensure a broad base of  
7 community and financial support for the project.

8 (e) The Department of Housing and Community Development, with the  
9 assistance of a fiscal agent, shall distribute funds under this section in a manner  
10 that provides funding for projects of various sizes in as many geographical  
11 areas of the State as possible.

12 (f) The Department of Housing and Community Development may use up  
13 to 15 percent of any appropriation to the Fund from the General Fund to assist  
14 with crowdfunding, administration, and technological needs of the Program.

15 (g) Beginning on January 15, 2022 and annually thereafter, the Department  
16 of Housing and Community Development shall submit to the Senate  
17 Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs and the  
18 House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development an annual report  
19 regarding the activities and progress of the Program. The report shall:

20 (1) summarize the Program activities in the preceding year and report on  
21 the number of awarded grants and the total grant funds allocated;

- 1           (2) report on partner resources and contributions to the Program; and  
2           (3) report on any measurable economic activity, which may include  
3           number of jobs created, number of visitors, the approximate number of square  
4           feet to be activated or redeveloped, and the number of volunteers engaged in  
5           the project.

6           Sec. 3. EFFECTIVE DATE

- 7           This act shall take effect on July 1, 2021.