



To: The House Environment & Energy Committee

From: Nick Bennette, Co-Chair, Vermont Trails and Greenways Council

Re: H.126, Support for An act relating to community resilience and biodiversity protection

Date: February 16, 2023

On behalf of the over 50 member organizations that comprise the Vermont Trails & Greenways Council (VTGC), we would like to express our support for H.126. The VTGC's member organizations include those that build and maintain trails in Vermont, including trail stewardship non-profits, community groups, local businesses, municipalities, and public land management agencies. Our membership has a deep appreciation for the importance of conservation in preserving the Vermont landscape and in affording public access to the outdoors. Land conservation not only serves an essential purpose in preserving ecological health, but can also ensure lasting open and free access to outdoor recreational opportunities - access that, in turn, helps establish public appreciation for conserved lands.

The VTGC appreciates the conservation goals and approach outlined in H. 126, namely the overarching desire to ensure Vermont retains an ecologically functional and biodiverse landscape. We believe the setting of specific conservation goals for State lands and waters by 2030 and 2050 is essential to advance progress on the state's climate action commitments. These goals can help mitigate the climate change impacts our trail stewardship organizations are already dealing with firsthand. We also would underscore the importance of flexibility in meeting those goals, noting that the vast majority of Vermont's forests remain privately held and over 70% of public access recreation in Vermont occurs on private land.

The VTGC also values the public planning process envisioned by H.126, and looks forward to participating with a large and diverse set of stakeholders to help guide the development of strategies to achieve the goals above. These strategies would both weigh the various values that conservation brings, as well as the appropriate use and combination of conservation approaches. We are eager to bring the outdoor recreation stewardship perspective to this effort, as public-access recreation has long been a tool for land conservation and is officially recognized in Vermont statute as one of the official purposes under which land may be

conserved ([10 V.S.A. § 821](#)). While we fully acknowledge that trail-based recreation may not be appropriate in areas of extreme ecological sensitivity, our member organizations are deeply committed to sustainably connecting people and the natural environment and the approaches necessary to do so without significantly affecting the landscape itself.

Lastly, the VTGC strongly supports the commitment to follow the science-based approach laid out by Vermont Conservation Design. By prioritizing land and waters with the greatest conservation value, we can ensure that the objectives of the bill - healthy and biodiverse landscapes - are truly being met. This approach, too, will help identify areas of extreme ecological sensitivity where public access should not be encouraged, allowing the full spectrum of conservation tools - including recreational trails - to be as accessible as possible outside of these zones. The identification and prioritization of the highest-value lands and waters will also underscore the need for solutions other than permanent conservation, ones that embrace the participation of willing landowners. As the VTGC member organizations steward the thousands of miles of public-access trail already on private land in Vermont, we are eager to both provide a landowners' perspective and help engage them to participate in future conservation efforts.

In closing, the VTGC appreciates the Committee's consideration of this bill aimed at securing the future of Vermont's natural landscape, the value and beauty of which are integral to our State's economy, health, and identity. Our organizational members know firsthand that people find greater value in lands they can access and enjoy. Incorporating public access recreation into the design, planning, and execution of the eventual conservation strategies will ensure that we not only preserve ecologically functional and connected landscapes, but do so in a way that provides lasting benefits to public health, communities, and Vermont's outdoor-recreation economy.

Respectfully submitted,

Nick Bennette, Co-Chair

On behalf of the Vermont Trails & Greenways Council Board of Directors

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