

**House Committee on Environment & Energy**  
**Testimony on the Rural Recovery Coordination Council**  
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Good afternoon,

My name is Brian Lowe, the executive director of the VT Council on Rural Development, or VCRD. Chair Sheldon, Vice Chair Sibilica, and Ranking Member Bongartz, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today.

I'm aware I am the final witness after some important and detailed testimony. I'll keep my remarks short and focused.

VCRD is a State Rural Development Council, charged in the Federal Farm Bill with serving as a neutral, non-partisan facilitator and convener.

Our mission is to support Vermont citizens and residents to build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, marshalling resources, and collective action.

While we have several different programs focused on strengthening local capacity, much of our work is in communities where we are invited and focused on identifying local priority projects and connecting people to resources to make those projects happen. This gives us lots of exposure to different kinds of challenges and opportunities communities face when trying to advance a project.

As outlined in the proposed amendment, a Rural Recovery Coordination Council would convene a broad group of Legislative leaders, Administration officials, and non-profit & academic representatives to focus on structural changes that could support coordination across all levels of government in service to rural economic development, resilience, and environmental goals.

Depending on the Committee's timeline and interest, there may also be an opportunity to add a Select board representative or two to give more local,

rural voice to the Council. VLCT has the ability to support that process of a Select board representative if that is a useful addition.

Moving this amendment forward further strengthens the important work the Legislature and Administration did earlier this session by creating the Municipal Technical Assistance Program – which is the \$3 million allocation in the Budget Adjustment Act designed to assist communities access State and Federal funding.

The Council outlined in this amendment would work to identify ways to hear and support rural voices, municipal capacity, regional collaboration, the integration of state, regional, and local plans, policies, and investments, and establish an office of Rural Economic Development for some period of time.

This kind of coordination will be useful not only in building on the \$3 million set aside to increase local capacity. The Coordination Council's work would happen at a time when there are different Federal funding programs available that could support new infrastructure investments that could lead to new housing creation.

The work proposed for this Council also reflects some of the needs we are hearing in communities as well, about the desire for additional capacity to support projects in small communities from community engagement to identify local priorities through all the way to grant administration, project management, and close out. Many times, the infrastructure projects communities identify are also projects that can support future housing creation (this includes new wastewater systems, downtown investments, renovation of existing buildings, or new housing).

Bringing a broad range of voices together on the Council as contemplated in the amendment would help chart a useful path forward for structural change that could elevate those capacity needs even further within state government.

Lastly, I should note that VCRD is envisioned as having a role organizing and facilitating these meetings.

There is an amendment to the amendment that clarifies VCRD's role is specifically to facilitate these discussions. As facilitators, we don't have a particular outcome in mind – our role instead would be to draw out the

wisdom of the Council representatives, make sure a range of voices are heard, and come to a clear and timely path forward.

And, while we appreciate the funding allocation in the proposed amendment, I want to note that I believe we could do the work envisioned for modestly less than the current allocation (closer to \$30k than the allocated \$40k).

**Thank you again for your time and your leadership.**