



VERMONT TRAILS & GREENWAYS COUNCIL

Testimony of Sharon Plumb, Program Manager, Vermont Trails & Greenways Council House Committee on Commerce and Community Development, February 17, 2026

Thank you, Chair Marcotte, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to speak today. I am here to ask the Committee to prioritize the FY27 Governor's Recommended \$500,000 in funding for the VOREC Community Grant Program in your Budget Memo and to urge you to make this base funding. I will be providing information on a specific VOREC-funded program, the Trail Accessibility Hub, as just one example of a unique and impactful program that has brought Vermont international recognition

Before I dive into the details, I want to ask you a few questions. Do you or people you know enjoy Vermont's trails? Do you know someone with limited mobility who would like to spend more time on trails but can't? Even if you haven't thought about it before, the answer is likely "yes." Trails aren't just paths through the woods—they are places where people experience community, belonging, and peace, and where they develop a sense of stewardship for our landscapes. Trails bring community members together, contribute to our local economy, inspire lifelong engagement with the outdoors, and in many cases, they guide people toward careers in conservation and recreation.

For many Vermonters, access to trails is limited by terrain, mobility challenges, or lack of accessible infrastructure. People who use wheelchairs, adaptive bikes, mobility devices for children, or walkers and canes have far fewer options—hundreds of miles of trails that take time to drive to, rather than thousands of miles within a short drive. Often, the trails are short, and information about them may be lacking.

This committee has extremely tough choices to make. I know that. It's hard to think about funding that supports outdoor recreation when there is a shortage of housing, schools face reduced budgets, and health care costs are unaffordable. But let me help you draw the connection between the VOREC Community Grant Program, trails, accessibility, and our state's economy. Vermont has a backlog of stewardship projects and a shortage of trails that serve all Vermonters and visitors. FPR has done a phenomenal job managing federal grants that support trails and public recreation - the Recreation Trails Program (RTP), Land and Water

Conservation Fund (LWCF). These funding sources, however, are subject to current political whims and are limited in scope and budget.

The VOREC Community Grant Program (CGP) is uniquely Vermont and must be funded.

The program's focus on community-based projects that leverage outdoor recreation is holistic. Each dollar spent has a multiplier effect: bringing communities together (whether that be geographic communities or people working for different sectors towards shared goals, or between organizations) to create a common goal and improve a community asset for peoples' wellness, economic growth, and stewardship.

About the Trail Accessibility Hub (TAH)

Thanks to a 2023 \$644,400 VOREC CGP grant, the Vermont Trail Accessibility Hub came together to advance trail-based recreation for people of all abilities. Led by VTGC, we are a statewide collaboration focused on helping trail managers design, assess, and maintain trails that are accessible to people of all abilities. Our partners include the Upper Valley Trails Alliance (UVTA), Community Geographics, Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT), and the Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA). Each partner provides expertise, training, and guidance so that trail managers have the tools and support to create trails that serve everyone.

In the last 18 months, Thanks to VOREC funding, Hub partners completed:

- 67 trail assessments, each valued at \$2,000. These assessments gave trail managers a professional plan to improve or build an accessible aquatic access, adaptive mountain bike, or accessible pedestrian path. Trail managers now have what they need to seek funding, such as through the RTP program or private foundation support, to build accessible trails in their community.
- 60+ TrailFinder updates, providing objective, clear information for users statewide. These were based on field visits.
- 20+ workshops, webinars, and conference presentations requested by trail managers across Vermont. We also had international reach through Conferences.
- Developed an info-rich Resource Hub, now receiving thousands of views per month. This is the go-to source for trail managers to find information on how to build accessible trails, where to find support, and case studies of success stories throughout the state.
- Hosted a summit in January 2025, bringing together disability advocates and the outdoor recreation community to envision inclusive trails for everyone—people of all ages, people with disabilities, parents with strollers, and elders using canes.

Now that funding is coming to a close, partners are developing a work plan based on a Sustainability Model, that includes plans for how to carry this work forward

Stories of Impact

I want to share with you just a few stories of impact.

At Colchester Pond, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT) and Vermont Adaptive assessed water access sites. Recommendations included improving parking, restrooms, trails, and docks, ensuring equitable access for anglers, bird watchers, paddlers, and people with disabilities.

At South Hero Recreation Park, Upper Valley Trail Alliance conducted an assessment. The South Hero Land Trust manages the property and was able to secure funding to upgrade a 0.5-mile pedestrian trail to become fully accessible by December 2026. Community volunteers—including the family of an Eagle Scout who originally built the boardwalk for his brother—rebuilt the boardwalk in 2025. Trail assessments and ongoing improvements ensure students, families, and visitors of all abilities can enjoy the park safely.

Jenna O'Donnell of South Hero Land Trust put it perfectly:

"The enthusiasm and support we've received from TAH has helped keep accessibility as a priority for our organization."

Economic Impact

Trail accessibility isn't just a 'feel good' cause. It has positive financial impacts.

For example, Vermont has over 530,000 adults, and 25% have a disability. Outdoor recreation contributed \$2.1 billion to Vermont's economy in 2023—4.8% of GDP. If we assume people with disabilities engage in outdoor recreation at the same rate as able-bodied folks, that's \$500M in impact. But the reality is that the barriers the TAH is working to address make it harder for those with disabilities to engage in recreation - and lower these barriers will result in 10s, if not 100s, of millions of dollars in economic benefit. Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports alone contributes over \$10.3 million annually to the state economy, supports 72 jobs, and generates \$1.8 million in tax revenue.

Funding the VOREC Community Grant Program has ripple effects across the state: it supports programs like the Trail Accessibility Hub, pays staff to do critical planning, provides high-quality assessments for trail managers, enables trail managers to secure RTP funding and hire professional builders, leverages grants, and helps communities design trails that are truly inclusive. A \$500,000 allocation now will continue to fuel these economic and social benefits statewide.

Conclusion

Investing in accessible outdoor recreation isn't just the right thing to do—it strengthens Vermont's economy, supports local jobs, and ensures that every Vermonter, regardless of age or ability, has a place to enjoy our trails, waterways, and parks.

VOREC has not had a grant round since 2023. While we can celebrate the dozens of projects VOREC has funded since its inception in 2017, this is only the beginning. At Outdoor Recreation Day (ORD), recipients gathered with VOREC leadership to share stories of success. Our collective enthusiasm for what these public dollars have meant to the programs and partnerships VOREC supports was palpable and just a taste of what's possible with future funding. There are programs and projects that can come to life - and have financial impacts - if VOREC CGP has consistent, stable funding. Outdoor Recreation generates more than \$2.1 Billion a year for Vermont. That funding goes into the very needs this committee wrestles to

fund. This year's \$500,000 allocation for VOREC CGP is a fraction of what is needed for destination development, developing and stewarding outdoor recreation assets such as parking lots and trails, marketing, and more. The return on this small allocation will have a multiplier effect that far exceeds the initial investment.

Thank you, Chair Marcotte, and members of the Committee, for your consideration and support of the VOREC Community Grant Program.