

**To:** House Environment Committee

**From:** Michelle Monroe, Executive Director, Vermont Association of Conservation Districts

Denise Smith, Executive Director, Vermont Council on Rural Development

**Re:** Potential for Vermont Council on Rural Development/Conservation districts to conduct outreach on land use and conservation in Vermont

The Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD) and the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) propose to **use our well established and defined community engagement processes to engage the public around Act 181 / Act 250 reforms.**

VACD and VCRD hold the expertise *and* the legal authority to develop and implement neutral and thoughtful public engagement processes that uphold and honor the conservation priorities of Vermonters in balance with the needs of our rural communities and working lands.

## Why Conservation Districts & the VT Council on Rural Development?

### *Natural Resources Conservation Districts:*

- ❖ Vermont's 14 Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCs) are **regional local government units** that operate under the authority of their elected Boards of Supervisors and the Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC). We are governmental subdivisions, established in 1939 under Vermont's [Soil Conservation Act](#), that serve and represent constituents in every city and town across the state of Vermont.
- ❖ [10 V.S.A. § 723](#) already tasks Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Districts (NRCs) to *“develop comprehensive plans for the...protection and conservation of natural resources within the district, which plans shall specify in such detail as may be possible, the acts, procedures, performances, and avoidances that are necessary or desirable, and to publish such plans and information and bring them to the attention of occupiers of lands within the district”*
  - **Vermont's 14 NRCs still operate within their statutory duties.**
- ❖ Conservation Districts are the only entity identified in [7 U.S.C. § 610.25](#) to use the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service locally-led framework to host Local Working Groups and develop Conservation Action Plans (as defined in [Title 440 Part 500](#) of NRCS Program Manuals) based on the natural resources priorities of constituents.

### *Vermont Council on Rural Development:*

- ❖ Created in 1992, The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) operates as Vermont's State Rural Development Council under the authority of **7 U.S.C. § 2008m**, which establishes the National Rural Development Partnership as a federal–state framework for advancing locally driven, multi-sector rural development.
- ❖ This statute explicitly calls for nonpartisan, broadly representative state councils that *convene public, private, and nonprofit partners to align resources, elevate local priorities, and strengthen rural economies.*
- ❖ VCRD fulfills this federal mandate by serving as a trusted, neutral convener that engages communities across Vermont to identify shared priorities and move them into action.

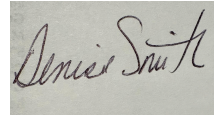
Vermont's NRCDs and VCRD already operate with boots on the ground and have close connections to the communities we serve. We also regularly partner with State Agencies and Departments to help implement programmatic and policy goals around natural resources management at the local level. Tasking NRCDs and VCRD with this work is a natural extension of the work we are statutorily required to do.

As such, **we recommend adding language to S.325 that explicitly charges Vermont's Natural Resources Conservation Districts and the Vermont Council on Rural Development with developing and implementing a process for public input on proposed Act 250 reforms.**

- ❖ *There is no need to reinvent the wheel.* Both NRCDs and VCRD have well established, tried-and-true community engagement processes that can easily be applied to Act 250 reform needs.
- ❖ Any funding to support this work can be directed through the **Vermont Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC)** – the state agency which oversees conservation districts, with VCRD as a named partner.
- ❖ The NRCC line item is **Sec. B.225.2** in the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets' budget.



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