

Written testimony submitted to the Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations regarding the FY 2025-2026 state budget

Jan Mueller, executive director, Hardwick Downtown Partnership

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My name is Jan Mueller. I live and work in Hardwick and serve as the executive director of the Hardwick Downtown Partnership. I have been deeply involved in many different aspects of community and economic development issues shaping the Hardwick area for several years. I would like to share my experience leading our downtown program and how our work with the support of state programs and policies have impacted the greater Hardwick community.

Though one of the smallest downtown programs, Hardwick is an important hub for a 10-town region and beyond. Despite recent flooding challenges, Hardwick is on a steadily upward trajectory—thanks in no small part to well-targeted public investments.

The Hardwick Downtown Partnership began in 2021 to provide leadership to support the economic, social, cultural, and recreational vitality of downtown Hardwick. Initially formed as a municipal commission, it is now a separate nonprofit organization that works closely with the Town of Hardwick.

In that time, despite two consecutive summers of extreme flooding, businesses in downtown Hardwick have reported year-over-year growth, with recent anecdotes of 15-20 percent increases in sales from 2023 to 2024. In the case of Front Seat, a local coffee shop, bakery, and cafe, the trend has been a notable exception to broader trends in that industry. They recently expanded to double their space and added employees to bring their staff size to double-digits. These same businesses have been remarkably supportive partners and have credited their increased business to the cumulative effect of our work to promote Hardwick and leverage the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.

Several downtown Hardwick businesses and property owners have been spurred by existing tax credit programs to make improvements and investments to their buildings. Overall, just in the past year, we've completed private and public projects totalling more than \$18 million in new investment. This included the Yellow Barn-Food Hub project, featuring a new retail outlet for Cabot Creamery and facilities for farm product processing, storage, and transport.

The stability and sustainability of our local economy is strongly tied to the vibrant cultural life and social dynamics of our community. That social capital has been built by the efforts of many individuals and organizations, but one notable example is The Civic Standard, a relatively new and hard-to-describe hub of community-building activity. They make remarkable things happen largely on volunteer time and sliding-scale donations, but public support such as the Better Places grant program have been pivotal in their success.

While there are many reasons to be optimistic about our future, there are also many concerns, and continued, careful public investment will be key to solidifying the local and regional economy.

We appreciate and strongly encourage the Vermont legislature to continue to invest in our downtowns and local communities by supporting these policy and budget measures:

- \$5 million for the Downtown and Village Center tax credit program.

We appreciate Governor Scott's recognition of the importance of this program by extending the tax credit cap to \$5 million. We urge you to support the Governor's recommendation.

- \$500,000 for the Better Places program.

The Better Places program was not included in the Governor's proposed budget, however, we encourage you to consider including this big community *bang-for-the-buck* program in the final budget. The program provides matching grants from \$5,000 to \$40,000 for placemaking projects to enhance our downtowns and village centers—supporting public spaces, community events, and tourism, which are all critical to our downtowns.

- Public Safety

Unfortunately, as you know, public safety matters have become integral to the health and vitality of our downtowns. Increased funding for public safety will return multiple social and economic dividends to our communities.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Jan Mueller
Executive Director, Hardwick Downtown Partnership