



1/21/26 Testimony
Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
Kelly Ault, Executive Director, VOBA

I'm Kelly Ault, Executive Director of the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance. Thank you, Chair Clarkson and members of the committee, for inviting me to speak about the economic development needs of Vermont's growing outdoor sector that contributed \$2.1 billion in 2023 to the state GDP, almost 5% of Vermont's economy.

VOBA is a nonprofit organization established in 2018 with a mission to educate Vermonters about outdoor recreation, strengthen Vermont's outdoor industry, and cultivate a skilled workforce in all our urban and rural outdoor communities.

VOBA's 155 members are values-led and revenue-generators as the manufacturers that make our gear and apparel, the retailers that sell it, the outdoor centers, lodges, and trail builders that ensure places to play, and the guides, educators, and creatives that tell our stories to Vermonters and visitors.

The positive social and economic impacts of outdoor recreation in all our communities are only possible because of ongoing investments by both the private and public sector.

Which is why we were pleased to hear Governor Scott yesterday in his budget address identify the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative, or VOREC, as a program that is making a real difference in our outdoor economy. We fully support the \$500,000 proposed in the Governor's Recommend within the Dept of Forest, Parks and Recreation budget for one time General Fund dollars for grants that strengthen communities, grow local economies, and inspire stewardship of natural resources.

This funding is an important step forward and one which we hope leads to base funding in the future. We hope you'll consider including the FPR-VOREC grants for \$500,000 in your Committee's economic development bill.

Since the first VOREC grant round in 2019, we've witnessed a strong return on investment from \$11.2 million in 84 grants to businesses, organizations, and municipalities across all 14 counties. The success in bolstering local economies and expanding participation has increased demand for the program, evident in the latest grant round. In 2024, 51 projects were awarded \$6.3 million out of 127 applications with requests totaling \$21 million.

We can speak to the value of the grant program firsthand as a recipient of \$150,000 to support workforce and business development in Montpelier/Randolph, St Johnsbury/Lyndonville, and Rutland/Killington.

- In 2024, we used VOREC funding to develop a series of professional development trainings and credentials in the technical occupations of trail building and bicycle mechanics.
 - Four multi-day courses involving 24 professionals and 10 employers and a certificate at Vermont State University led to internships, job placements and career advancement.
- VOREC funds also supported the launch of a career pathways portal where job board webpages continue to be the most visited and career spotlight videos the top performing on social media.
- Most importantly, the VOREC grant was a spring board for VOBA to expand our technical training program in 2025 with an Economic Development Authority grant via the Dept of Tourism and Marketing.
 - 15 workshops in trail, bike and ski trained 116 professionals - of which 23% were women, BIPOC and LGBTQ community members - involved 60 businesses as instructors, employers & hirers, and VTSU classrooms.
- This year, our program expands again into a climate-resilient workforce partnership with the Climate Action Office, Dept of Labor, Office of Workforce Strategy and Development, and VOREC.

VOBA's VOREC grant also funded our business technical assistance program to support manufacturers producing gear, apparel and accessories in Vermont.

- 40 entrepreneurs participated in VOBA workshops focused on strategic and financial planning, market research, and trade show participation.
- The support helped businesses expand customers and retail accounts, develop supply chains, cultivate leaders of women- and BIPOC- owned businesses, and create a brand identity featuring sustainability.

You'll hear from Ascutney Outdoors next but I'll share a few more examples of businesses that have benefited from VOREC grants.

- Petra Cliffs Climbing Center and Mountaineering School in Burlington purchased new mobility and adaptive climbing gear for use in programming.
- The renovated Danville train station is home to the Lamoille Valley Bike Tours and a gear shop serving users of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.
- The Blueberry Hill Inn in Goshen is developing a strategic plan for their Outdoor Center, replicating the outdoor hub success in the Mad River Valley.
- Testimonials from a guide service and trail builder sum up important outcomes for the State:
 - *"The VOREC grant for new trails was a factor in us choosing it as a place to live when finally making the move to Vermont. The work done [in Randolph] has been an example to neighboring communities and added to the economic viability of the downtown."*
 - *"The marketing resources that we developed have led to outcomes such as greater event attendance, higher business revenues, and even people moving to Central VT. The infrastructure we are developing is helping to build Montpelier's outdoor recreation economy in a time when we desperately need economic development."*

In summary, we appreciate your consideration of \$500,000 for the FPR-VOREC grant program in your economic development bill. Our VOBA workforce development story demonstrates how an initial award can cause a ripple effect, leveraging ongoing support for businesses, organizations and municipalities ready to invest in their outdoor recreation. With the average VOREC award at \$134,000, we know a \$500,000 investment in Vermont's outdoor economy in FY27 will keep making a real difference to Vermonters.

Now is the best time to support VOREC as it implements the statewide vision and priority actions of Move Forward Together Vermont over the next five years. With a clear framework for the state and an expanded set of partners on the ground, project support can advance objectives in Climate Resiliency and Equity, themes in Stewardship, Wellness, and Economic Development, and sector areas in Innovation, Sustainability and Career Pathways in ways that are strategic and effective.

We look forward to seeing you on Outdoor Recreation Day on Feb 5. Thank you.