

Hello, for the record, my name is Denise Smith, Executive Director at the Vermont Council on Rural Development

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to present the collective work we have been doing to support investment in rural Vermont towns. Now, more than ever, it is critical that we and others can provide comprehensive support to communities who are navigating incredibly complex issues.

VCRD is an independent, non-partisan, statewide nonprofit. We provide facilitation, convening, leadership skill building, technical assistance and on demand support to Vermont's rural communities. We also convene statewide policy discussions on issues impacting rural Vermont and Vermonters. We have a Board that is a partnership of federal, state, local, nonprofit and private partners, a partnership that goes both ways and in the best case informs decisions and approaches at all of those levels. We are your State Rural Development Council.

For the past 30 years, we have provided technical assistance to rural communities: from ideation to action planning to implementation. We work only where invited, and we always work as part of a strong network of state, regional and local technical assistance organizations. We create resource teams customized to the needs of local communities and facilitate the connections to organizations that can provide the right resources at the right time.

We're here as one of the Vermont Evaluation of Rural Technical Assistance steering committee members. We have been deeply involved and grateful for the work of the State and UVM who listened to the needs of Vermont's small towns and villages and provided recommendations on how the State and its partners can address those needs.

The findings resonate with our experience working with rural communities: towns need coordinated, simplified access to not just information but navigation, flexible and patient funding, and support for all the phases of project development. They need us, Vermont's technical assistance provider network, to work well together, to talk to each other, and to have the time, staff and financial resources, and expertise to support them in their locally defined projects.

We're here to ask you to provide \$500,000 in the FY27 budget to make good on what rural towns have told us they need. Our proposal is simple, and allows for implementation of some of the most impactful recommendations in the VERTA report.

This proposal would provide:

1. Backbone and administrative support: to design and implement a TA and funding program that directly benefits our underserved rural towns and villages.
2. Technical Assistance resources: staff and consultant time to provide custom resource teams for each community selected for the program.
3. Direct support to towns: most of the funding will be distributed through a grant application process where towns will work with their resource team to use grant funding to pay for services that will help them make meaningful progress on community-driven economic development goals. Projects could include housing, infrastructure, childcare facilities, climate resilience, and more.

While this sounds ambitious for a one-year proposal, this is based on work we are already doing and familiar with. MTAP was an excellent pilot program that allowed the state, its TA partners and local leaders to make significant progress on climate resilience, housing, childcare, water/wastewater, and other community and economic development projects. MTAP funding just ended for most TA providers in December, and this proposal allows us to build on that foundation, while incorporating recommendations from the VERTA report and the partners who are already at the table.

Rural towns are being asked to do so much, with decreasing federal funding and increasing complexity of the problems they face. Despite that, we know there are dedicated local leaders who are ready and willing to show up for the towns they love, especially when given thoughtful support to make their local dreams come true.

Respectfully submitted by Denise Smith, Executive Director of VCRD.