

Vermont Bike & Brew
1/28/25 Testimony
Senate Economic Development Committee
Jonas Cole, Owner & Founder - Vermont Bike & Brew

My name is Jonas Cole and I am the owner and founder of Vermont Bike & Brew. Thank you to the Senate Economic Development Committee for inviting VOBA and its members to speak today.

Vermont Bike & Brew is a for profit business established in 2020 that provides electric bike rentals, sales, and tours. The business is based in my hometown of Thetford, Vermont, and our self-guided tours cover a swath of central Vermont, with established routes in Windsor, Norwich, South Royalton, and Randolph and plans to expand in the near future. Each tour relies heavily on the partnerships that we have formed with other local businesses including breweries, farm stands, general stores, cafes, and creameries. For each tour, we deliver e-bikes to a partner brewery and meet our guests there. Riders then complete a 3-4 hour ride, following turn-by-turn directions from a map on their phone, which is mounted to their handlebars. The map routes riders to each of the partner businesses and they are incentivized to patronize the businesses with a small discount. This tour model allows us to double down on our investment in our partnerships and the local economy and reflects our “all ships rise with the tide” approach to doing business.

We welcome Green Mountain tourists as well as lifetime Vermonters pursuing new discoveries in their backyard. Our tours are perfect for couples, families, groups of friends, bachelor parties, and weddings. E-bikes are a fantastic tool that allow people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the outdoors together.

It is quite possible that Vermont Bike & Brew would not be here today were it not for the support we have gotten from VOBA and recent investments that have been made in Vermont’s outdoor business economy and sustainable transportation.

The quality of Bike & Brew’s services and products alone could not have sustained us through the setbacks brought on by the flooding Vermont experienced in 2023 and ‘24.

For example, Buzzell Bridge Road in Thetford is one of the most scenic, accessible, and safest roads that our guests ride on and it was destroyed by flooding in the summer of ‘23.

That same summer, we were in our second year of a partnership with Outer Limits Brewing Co. in Proctorsville. Outer Limits is just a few blocks from the Black River, which flooded and

destroyed the brewery. Outer Limits was not able to recover from the destruction and closed permanently in 2024, bringing an end to the southernmost Vermont Bike & Brew tour.

In addition to the closure of Buzzell Bridge Road and the Outer Limits Tour, the weather forecast in the summer of '23 showed rain almost every day. As a result, sign ups for our tours were down, even on days when it ended up being sunny, and significant revenue was lost.

That fall I applied for a grant from the Main Street Economic Recovery Fund and was denied because my property had not suffered any physical damage. VOBA advocated on my behalf, emphasizing my loss of access to public roads, loss of partnerships, and lost revenue and Bike & Brew was eventually awarded a \$2,500 grant that we would not have received without VOBA's help. While the grant did not cover nearly all of the losses, it gave me the courage to push on and instilled in me a deep appreciation for VOBA's work.

One silver-lining from the floods is that Bike & Brew was forced to expand operations to areas that were not as dramatically affected. By doing so we have made ourselves more resilient in the face of climate change and ensured our ability to provide continued service to our guests.

Many of our guests experience an e-bike for the first time at Vermont Bike & Brew and if you've ridden an e-bike yourself, then you know how transformative that exposure can be. It makes you reconsider your commute, how you get to the grocery store, and how you get your kids to day-care. For many, it is the first time they can imagine leaving their car at home and biking around town despite the steep hills. First-time riders often ask, "how much do these things cost?" and "do you sell this bike in my size?". Riding an eBike makes people want one of their own - but a quality e-bike is a significant investment.

Fortunately, utility companies like Green Mountain Power offer their customers a \$200 incentive if they purchase an e-bike locally. This incentive makes a quality e-bike slightly more attainable for a large portion of my customers. However, lower-income customers need additional assistance, which is why programs like the State of Vermont eBike Incentive, which has been backed by this committee, are so important. As a result, more Vermonters can reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by riding an e-bike instead of driving a car.

Now that you are familiar with Vermont Bike & Brew and some of the ways we've been supported, I'd like to conclude with 3 requests:

1 - Continued investment in infrastructure that supports the growth of Vermont's outdoor industry. The proposed Route 5 bike corridor is one example of an investment in recreation and transportation infrastructure that would encourage the growth of businesses in the outdoor sector. This project would provide economic benefits to hospitality, food, and other industries with an

uptick in bike related tourism and lead to greater numbers of bike commuters by providing a safe commuting corridor.

2 - Continued investment in workforce development. Skilled bike mechanics are hard to find and paying for professional development to keep our mechanic's skills honed is a cost that can be hard for small bike shops to manage.

3- Continued investment in technical assistance programs for outdoor businesses. I recently began a financial technical advising program through the Capital Innovation Lab that is being provided to VOBA members for free, thanks to grant funding secured by VOBA. I am using the program to help me understand the financial investments that will be required as I expand Vermont Bike & Brew operations to other parts of the state. More technical assistance programs will allow businesses in the outdoor sector to be creative and nimble in the face of climate adversity, and continue to be strong drivers of a local economy for many years to come.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I welcome any questions you have.