

State of Vermont, Agency of Commerce and Community Development Convention Center and Performing Arts Venue Task Force Interim Report

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I. Executive Summary and Introduction

The Convention Center and Performing Arts Task Force (“the Task Force”) was established by the Vermont Legislature through Act 65 of 2025 to, “study the feasibility of constructing a convention center and performance arts venue in Vermont.” Per statute, the Task Force held its first meeting in July 2025 and has since met regularly to gather stakeholder input, review background studies, and frame the key questions that will guide its final recommendations.

This interim report provides a progress update on the Task Force’s work to date. It is intended to summarize the themes, insights, and areas of inquiry explored thus far. A final report with findings and recommendations will be submitted at the conclusion of the study period, on or before November 15th, 2026 per statute.

II. Task Force Work Overview

Since convening, the Task Force has focused on understanding Vermont’s existing event and performance infrastructure, exploring the market for expanded facilities, and identifying the conditions necessary for a successful, Vermont-scaled project. The group’s discussions have centered on several recurring topic areas:

Differences Between a Convention Center and a Performing Arts Center

In its work so far, the Task Force has identified that both a convention center and a performing arts venue can serve as cultural and economic anchors, but that they operate under very different market dynamics, physical infrastructure requirements, audience behaviors, and location constraints. The Task Force has concluded that the following distinctions are important for the Task Force’s future deliberations:

- ▶ Other states have constructed and operate convention and performance venues through public or public-private partnerships, often structured as economic development tools rather than profit centers.
- ▶ These facilities generate indirect returns through lodging, meals, and rooms-and-meals tax revenue.
- ▶ In Vermont, the absence of county-level governance presents a unique challenge for this type of infrastructure development, management, and

maintenance. Unlike most states where counties or large cities play a central role in funding, oversight, and economic development of major facilities, without direct state involvement, Vermont's municipalities will be left to handle those burdens on their own and there is no city or town in the state that is large enough to do so.

MARKET AND AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS

- ▶ A convention center caters largely to meetings, trade shows, multi day events requiring large and flexible function space, exhibit space, breakout rooms, and significant hotel capacity.
- ▶ A performing arts venue serves a somewhat different audience. Arts/entertainment patron and local/regional residents are willing to drive from a greater distances for a single evening performance. What the Task Force heard from industry experts is that the travel behavior is different (people willingly drive longer distances for a concert or show than they might for a day meeting event). In a sense, performing arts audiences are essentially leisure travelers, while convention center-goers are literally business travelers.
- ▶ Because of these distinct audiences, the locational criteria differ: convention attendees typically prioritize accessibility, direct flights or short drives (within ~30 minutes), and hotel blocks/walkability nearby; performing arts audiences prioritize experience, placemaking, cultural draw, but are less constrained by immediate airport access.
- ▶ For a convention center, connected or proximate full-service hotel(s) and walkable amenities within a short radius are almost essential, as expert event planners relayed to the Task Force that these are often expected. For a performing arts venue, while nearby amenities are still important (parking, transit, walkability), the hotel dependency is often lower because attendees may drive in for single day or evening events and may stay locally or regionally rather than requiring large room blocks.
- ▶ Despite differences, the Task Force emphasizes both facility types share core needs: funding mechanisms, governance structures, leadership and implementation momentum, and the fact that Vermont's lack of county governance layers affects both.

Given the distinctions in audience, infrastructure needs, travel behavior, hotel/amenity dependencies, and economic impact profiles, the Task Force consensus to treat a convention center and a performing arts center as distinct but related projects allows for tailored analysis, location strategy, and deployment of funding/governance models.

Market Demand and Competitive Position

Members and invited experts agreed that while Vermont's current facilities accommodate small- to mid-size meetings and performances, the state lacks a modern, flexible venue capable of hosting larger conventions or year-round cultural events.

- ▶ Vermont's strengths lie in its authenticity, natural beauty, and quality of life, which appeal to regional conferences, retreats, and association meetings.
- ▶ Due to limited flight/air access and hotel capacity, Vermont is positioned currently to be less competitive for large national conventions.
- ▶ The Task Force heard, however, that demand is strongest from regional markets (ie: Boston, New York, and Montreal) where Vermont's character and scale are viewed as differentiators.

Infrastructure and Site Consideration

Accessibility, lodging, and transportation infrastructure were identified as critical factors affecting feasibility.

- ▶ Accessibility: Based on industry experts, limited direct air service and travel time from major markets pose challenges currently for Vermont.
- ▶ Lodging: Hospitality and lodging in Vermont (specifically Burlington and surrounding communities) face high hotel rates and limited room blocks for large conferences.
- ▶ Venue Flexibility: According to the experts invited to present to the Task Force, large conferences require/demand venues equipped with divisible spaces, options for soundproof movable walls, and multipurpose layouts to maximize usability across event types.
- ▶ Downtown Vitality: Industry professionals communicated that restaurants, nightlife, and walkable amenities are essential to event success; workforce and service capacity are also key considerations.

Economic and Community Impact

Stakeholders from Vermont's arts and events sectors highlighted the potential for a convention and performing arts facility to serve as an economic catalyst:

- ▶ Existing regional venues (ie., Catamount Arts and the Flynn Theatre) already generate significant annual tourism-related spending and currently support hundreds of jobs.

- ▶ A larger or more flexible statewide facility could expand this impact, supporting year-round tourism, downtown vitality, and community development.
- ▶ A performing arts component was viewed as essential to maintaining Vermont's identity and providing statewide cultural access.

Governance and Operating Models

Discussions to date suggest that governance and operations will require a hybrid approach reflecting Vermont's scale and fiscal realities.

- ▶ Other states have constructed and operate convention and performance venues through public or public-private partnerships, often structured as economic development tools rather than profit centers.
- ▶ These facilities generate indirect returns through lodging, meals, and rooms-and-meals tax revenue.
- ▶ In Vermont, the absence of county-level governance presents a unique challenge for this type of infrastructure development, management, and maintenance. Unlike most states where counties or large cities play a central role in funding, oversight, and economic development of major facilities, without direct state involvement, Vermont's municipalities will be left to handle those burdens on their own and there is no city or town in the state that is large enough to do so.

III. Consensus

Points of Consensus

At the October 2025 meeting, the Task Force reached the following points of consensus:

- ▶ Future discussions will be separated between convention centers and performing arts centers due to differences in target audiences, location needs, and travel behaviors.
- ▶ Convention Center: Should be explored in the greater Burlington area. Based on expert witnesses and industry leaders, the Task Force decided that because this audience/clientele prioritizes proximity to an airport, access to walkable amenities, and generally prefers to drive no more than 30 minutes. Convention Center events also require a significant level of hotel density within a close geographic area.

- ▶ Performing Arts Center: The Task Force will explore performing arts center locations throughout the State, as audiences are willing to travel longer distances for arts programming.
- ▶ Both facility types share common considerations around funding, governance, leadership, and momentum. Vermont's lack of county-level governance is a factor for both discussions and will require careful planning. The Task Force will explore funding alternatives and mechanisms used in other states and regions to inform potential strategies.

IV. Future Work and Areas of Exploration

While no decisions have been made, members have begun reviewing how comparable states and municipalities have financed such facilities.

Areas for Further Exploration

Areas for further exploration include:

- Use of local option or rooms-and-meals tax revenue;
- Tourism Improvement District / Convention Center District tax Models
- Public-private investment models;
- Philanthropic or institutional partnerships; and
- Potential alignment with federal or state infrastructure or cultural development funding.
- These discussions remain preliminary, and the Task Force expects to devote significant attention to financing mechanisms in the next phase of work.

COORDINATION WITH RELATED EFFORTS

The Task Force currently lacks dedicated funding and access to resources to conduct detailed analyses of the economic benefits and costs associated with both a performing arts center and a convention center. The level of economic analysis needed to make informed decisions about funding and governance models is critical. As the Legislature is aware, a separate effort is underway, led by Hello Burlington, which has contracted with the Hunden Group, a nationally recognized consulting firm with extensive

experience conducting feasibility studies for convention centers across the United States. The Task Force intends to coordinate closely with Hello Burlington and the Hunden Group as their study progresses, leveraging insights from that work to inform Task Force discussions on site selection, economic impact, and potential funding and governance models for Vermont.

NEXT STEPS

Over the coming months, the Task Force will:

- ▶ Evaluate potential site and scale options;
- ▶ Examine funding and governance structures; and
- ▶ Continue outreach to arts, hospitality, and municipal partners statewide.

These activities will inform the final report, which will include detailed findings and recommendations for legislative consideration.

V. Conclusion

The Task Force has made significant progress in gathering information, defining the core questions, and establishing areas of consensus necessary to evaluate the feasibility of a convention center and performing arts facility in Vermont. While many challenges remain, particularly around site location, funding, governance, and cost, members have agreed on the importance of separating discussions between convention centers and performing arts centers to reflect differing audiences, travel behaviors, and location needs.

The Task Force also recognizes that both facility types will require careful consideration of funding alternatives, governance structures, and leadership to ensure momentum. Coordination with external efforts, including the Hello Burlington-led convention center study and the nationally recognized Hunden Group, will provide critical data and analysis to support decision-making. The next phase of work will focus on these complex issues, including economic impact analysis, site evaluation, and funding options, with findings and recommendations presented in the final report to the Legislature.