Moving Toward a
VITAL ECONOMY

FEEDING
Our Region

Helping Schools
RETOOL
On The Cover: Seeing the Forests and the Trees
The Leadership Upper Valley graduation in June took place in the breezy spaces of the Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences in Quechee, VT. This included an exclusive tour of VINS’ new ADA-accessible Forest Canopy Walk, pictured here.

Editor: Rebecca Bailey
Contributors: Sarah Brock, Abby Kaija, Ana Mejia, Becka Warren
Photography: Staff and courtesy except for the following:
- Rob Strong - cover, page 12
- Dan Hertzler - page 1
- Molly Drummond - page 3
- John Heath - page 10
Printing: RC Brayshaw & Company, West Lebanon, NH
Design: Nomad Communications of White River Junction, VT

Connect with Us
Letter from the Interim Executive Director

Change: that has been the one constant factor as we have navigated the pandemic. Here at Vital Communities, we’ve needed to quickly adapt to new realities to continue our mission of helping our region’s people, communities, and environment thrive.

Six months in, we are glad we have been able to use our networks, programs, and expertise to support individuals, organizations, and community cohesion during this time of unprecedented change and challenge.

We’re also looking a little farther down the road to envision ways the Upper Valley can change for the better after the pandemic. How can this region take better care of its residents and its environment? How can we be more self-sufficient in meeting our own needs and thus more resilient in the face of whatever future shocks might come our way? How can we advance the cause of racial equity in this region and within the work we do at Vital Communities? These dynamic questions have been a part of our conversations as we seek and choose a new executive director.

How does one cope with this constant level of change and that feeling of urgency to act? My solution has been to offer grace. Grace is defined as “courteous good will.” We are a community. We are all going through this. It is hard work that leaves us all feeling short at times. Building for the future requires giving space, and listening and learning. What voices have been unheard? What people overlooked? As we travel through this pandemic together, let’s look for the opportunities to share good will, listen, and step up. Vital Communities will continue to respond to community needs, and we look forward to more opportunities to serve the Upper Valley as we grow and learn with a new executive director at the helm.

Beth Roy, Interim Executive Director
beth@vitalcommunities.org
802-291-9100 x105
Update on Director Search

When this newsletter went to press, a committee was close to choosing a new executive director for Vital Communities. Being in the midst of a global pandemic complicated the search process, said committee member Ron Shaiko, Vital Communities Board Chair. Ultimately, however, the search drew candidates who were excited by the possibilities of this moment in history and the role Vital Communities could play, Shaiko said. “It has attracted a certain kind of person—someone who is looking for that challenge, who has contemplated what COVID-19 is doing to our society and is able to articulate how they are responding to this situation and how the organization can as well.” Vital Communities is already poised to help our region be transformed for the better, post-pandemic. The new “Vital Economy” initiative (see p. 3) is a prime example. “When we made this pivot on the economy back in January, it really put us ahead of the game in terms of what our region needs for the longer term,” Shaiko said.

Staff Hellos and Parting Thanks

The past several months have brought numerous new faces to Vital Communities’ Zoom meetings and socially distanced work gatherings. Rebecca Bailey, a longtime Upper Valley resident and communications specialist for the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth, joined us in June as our Communications Manager, bringing a background in local journalism, performing arts, sustainability, and education. Julia Guy joined us in September for a year of service through the SerVermont AmeriCorps VISTA program. A 2019 Skidmore College graduate pursuing a career in sustainability and conservation, she is working with town energy committees and other volunteer teams. Erika Hoffman-Kiess has signed on as a key member of the Vital Economy team, applying her years of experience in international development to projects on the economy and workforce. A former member of our staff, Lauren Griswold returned to direct our Farm to School program while Beth Roy serves as Interim Executive Director, and will also run Upper Valley Everyone Eats.

We also give parting thanks to Henry Allison and Denise Anderson. Henry leaves behind terrific blog posts on pandemic pivots by businesses and a video about Valley Quest (check it out!). Denise fulfilled a three-month position as Pandemic Small Business Navigator, working one-on-one with local businesses to interpret health regulations and obtain financial help.
Through good luck and good practices, New Hampshire and Vermont have been spared the high illness rates that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to other parts of the country and the world. And our abundant natural spaces allow us to psychologically recharge (see “Last Call for the Quest to Refresh,” p. 10).

But our economy has taken a body blow.

Could we have seen this coming? While the scale of the pandemic was unexpected, Vital Communities has been aware of the need to make our local economy more self-sufficient and thus resilient in the face of pressure from climate change and other factors. Last fall, we set in motion Vital Economy. This new initiative connects local businesses of all types—farmers, retailers, restaurateurs, manufacturers, builders and renovators, solar companies, bus companies, and more. It supports innovation and entrepreneurship and offers technical assistance, capital access, and marketing.

Enter the pandemic, and we needed to leap into emergency mode to help individuals and businesses survive the economic crisis. But rather than sideline Vital Economy, the crisis has underscored its importance.

Turn the page to see what Vital Economy has been doing during the pandemic and how it is building toward the future.
Meetings of Minds

Vital Economy brings people together to coordinate efforts and spark innovation. In March, we began hosting two weekly, virtual meetings on the economic disruption facing our region as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first convenes local Chambers of Commerce. The second involves a broader spectrum of voices, including banks, municipal leaders, a few local chambers directors, and economic development professionals at the city, regional, and state levels. According to Vital Economy Coordinator Nancy LaRowe, participants help one another sort through confusing financial relief programs and evolving public health guidelines in order to get clear, useful information out to businesses.

“What I hear over and over is how helpful the calls are,” said Nancy. “They are part support session, part information and resource sharing. They’ve been immensely valuable during the crisis.” The broad-based meeting will continue even post-pandemic, she said. “It’s been empowering. People realize the value of collaboration and communication.”

Pandemic Navigation

The weekly meetings made it clear that small businesses needed help availing themselves of the many federal and state grant opportunities. Vital Communities found funding to hire a short-term pandemic small business navigator. In that three-month position, attorney Denise Anderson worked one-on-one with businesses and hosted weekly virtual information forums. “Denise was really helpful in figuring out financial assistance and all the misinformation about programs like PPP [the Paycheck Protection Program],” said Will Dodson, chef-owner of the Barnard Inn Restaurant. “And it was like therapy. We’re isolated. We’re nine miles from Woodstock, and the restaurant community wasn’t too close-knit to begin with. It was really helpful to talk with people and share experiences.”

A Renewed Business Guide

The new Vital Communities Guide underscores the 360-degree way consumers can keep their dollars local. Open to any locally owned concern, the Guide lets you explore Upper Valley businesses in numerous ways. For instance, you can find where you can use SNAP or 4SquaresVT benefits to buy locally grown food; or you can locate businesses that are cooperatively owned or are “certified B corporations” (which are legally required to balance profits with concerns for their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment). Listings in the Guide come free with a Local First membership.
which also lets businesses take part in networking, promotion, and crowdfunding opportunities, among other benefits. As a tool to support a vital local economy, the Vital Communities Guide is adapting to help farms and businesses connect with customers.

Add your business, community group, school program, farm, or more to the Guide to build up this wonderful local resource at vitalcommunities.org/valleyfoodfarm/onlineguide/create-listing

Community Investment

Another way to keep your money in the local economy is to bank locally, using an institution that is rooted in our community, like Mascoma Bank, Ledyard National Bank, or a local credit union. The money you place in their accounts goes out to your Upper Valley neighbors in the form of business loans and mortgages. Crowdsourced investing is another great option, including through Vital Communities’ TLC program. The program’s first year included support for a Willow Tree Community Compost, a Wilder, VT-based family business that does door-to-door food scrap collection. And it was a valuable tool for the Valley News after revenues plummeted due to the pandemic—an astounding $155,000 was contributed to support the region’s main daily paper!

Dollars and Sense

Even the most math-phobic among us have to love the "local multiplier effect." This is the additional economic benefit a region like the Upper Valley gains from every dollar spent at locally owned businesses. For instance, an Upper Valley farmer will patronize the local feed store, use a local accountant, and employ local people. As dollars recirculate in our local economy, they are increasing economic activity and we’re getting more bang for our buck before it leaves the economy. So keep your money local—and see it grow!

Building a compost facility at Sunrise Farm in Hartford, VT, where Willow Tree Community Compost hauls its collections.
Feeding Our Region

One of the clearest messages of the pandemic has been the importance of our local food supply. Through our networks of people and organizations involved in every aspect of local food, Vital Communities has helped local growers cope with the pandemic and plan for the future.

Reopening Farmers Markets

April was a time of confusion for Upper Valley farmers markets. Local food growers were more important than ever, and farmers markets are an important way to distribute their goods. But farmers markets at first were not allowed to open in Vermont, and then could do so only after complying with challenging health regulations.

Vital Communities helped area farmers and markets get up-to-date information on health regulations and share ideas about how to meet them. Most of the markets were able to open, albeit looking very different from previous years: online ordering, masks, distancing, hand-sanitizing stations, and directional arrows are the rule of the day; live music, children’s activities, and other social aspects are set aside.

Hartland’s market went 100-percent virtual, with people paying online and picking up pre-packed orders by car. “The cooperation was amazing,” said Beth Roy. “Vendors and markets adapted so quickly, and customers have been supportive. They get how important these markets are to our farmers, and how important our farmers are to us.”

Everyone Eats!

One of the most creative pandemic responses has been ShiftMeals, a program created by the Vermont restaurant chain Skinny Pancake to pay its staff to prepare meals for people experiencing food insecurity. This summer, Vermont adopted that model for a statewide program called Everyone Eats, and Vital Communities—working closely with the Upper Valley Haven and LISTEN—is the program’s Upper Valley community hub.
The program pays local restaurants $10 per meal, at least $1 of which goes to local farms and value-added food producers. Upper Valley Everyone Eats (UVEE) expects to deliver at least 2,200 meals per week through December 15, when the funding ends.

After Vermont announced the program in early July, Vital Communities used the weekly meetings of the UV Strong Food Committee and the UV Business Alliance to enlist participants and adapt the program to this region with vital input from the participating community-based organizations and restaurants.

We welcome additional restaurants and food distribution sites to join Upper Valley Everyone Eats! Contact UVEE@vitalcommunities.org.

Keep Eating Local!

In March, a lifetime ago, many of us feared that the international food supply chain would fail to serve us or our communities. Fortunately, we live in a working agricultural landscape, and our farmers are in business to serve their communities. Customers were able to sidestep the international food supply chain and join a CSA, or receive freshly gleaned produce at a food shelf, or triple the amount of spinach they purchased at a farmers market, or buy eggs from neighbors. Meat farmers were shocked by the sudden demand. Gardeners grew extra rows to donate. At the same time, many farms have suffered great losses, and some have shuttered, because pandemic-related closures devastated their business sales.

Our Upper Valley resilience in response to this pandemic—and whatever emergency comes next—is in part due to our vibrant farms. As we head into winter and fields turn brown, local food can slip from mind, and we are worried that customers will return to buying non-local food because it is more convenient, less costly, or plain old comforting. Please do not turn away from the farmer who fed you this season. For those who have the means, continuing to buy local farm products is a worthy and effective way to contribute to community recovery and resilience. Thank you for anything you are able to do to continue to buy local.
Helping Schools Retool

School kids and teachers have weathered mind-boggling change since the pandemic began. Here are some adaptations we hope can lead to lasting, beneficial changes in how we educate and care for our children.

Getting Meals to Kids

Pre-pandemic, research from Feeding America indicated that 5,370 children in Orange, Windsor, Sullivan, and Grafton counties were food-insecure, or unable to reliably afford enough healthy food. School breakfast and lunch programs have come to fill a critical need. When schools were ordered to educate students remotely this spring, they wondered how they would feed not only those kids already receiving free or reduced-price meals but those who would become food-insecure because of parents’ pandemic-caused job loss.

As steward of the Upper Valley Farm to School Network, which connects and supports 45 schools seeking to include more local food in their meals, Vital Communities was able to give schools up-to-date information about health guidelines, funding, and paperwork, and share schools’ solutions to logistical problems. The pandemic shone a light on how important school meals are to children’s health, and it won more support for the concept of universal school meals. Under this arrangement, schools feed all kids for free, ensuring that all kids are eating healthy meals, no one is stigmatized as a “free and reduced” meal recipient, and the per-child cost of the meal program goes down.

Within days of the March shutdown, schools were delivering meals to all kids via the same buses that had been bringing them to school, or offering meals at convenient pick-up locations.

“There were a lot of coolers on the sides of a lot of dirt roads,” said Farm to School Coordinator Beth Roy, whose two school-aged children took part in the meal outreach. “The fact that it was five days a week, and for everybody, that you’re seeing your bus driver—it brought some semblance of normalcy to a very difficult spring.”

(L-R) Judy Schwarz and Culleen Murphy deliver school meals in Hartland, VT.
Education Without Walls

Through programs like Valley Quest and Farm to School, Vital Communities has decades of experience helping educators teach outside, whether in a farm plot or on a nature trail. Now that concept is catching fire as schools look to outdoor learning as one of the safest ways to conduct in-person teaching. As a fiscal sponsor and steering committee member of the Upper Valley Teaching Place Collaborative—a network of educators interested in high-quality, place-based, ecological education in all Upper Valley Schools—Vital Communities is helping schools and teachers find practical and effective ways to increase outdoor learning. “All along we’ve been saying, ‘Get outdoors more,’ and now it looks like it’s the best practice for our health,” said Roy.

Asking Students About Reopening School

As part of an effort to better engage the southern portion of Vital Communities’ 69-town region, Vital Communities has been bringing together leaders of all sorts from towns along the “Route 11 Corridor”—23 municipalities clustered along that state highway and the Sugar and Black rivers, from Wilmot, NH, to Westminster, VT.

Meeting first in February and then reconvening digitally in June, that group quickly decided to form “action groups” on Youth Engagement, Community Pride and Engagement, Marketing Route 11, and Composting.

The Youth Engagement action group’s biweekly meetings have proven to be a great way for these young leaders to compare notes and strategies on coping with the challenges the pandemic has added to the experience of coming of age in rural communities. It’s also giving students a greater voice in one of the dominant institutions of their lives: school. The group decided to use school outreach and social media to survey students in their communities on what students were thinking about reopening schools, and the challenges to mental and emotional health posed by remote learning. As one group member observed, “this pandemic is highlighting inequities, making it harder for kids who were already struggling. The good thing is people are coming together to get stuff done. People are sharing, using their strengths and positivity.”

Interested in joining these Route 11 action group conversations? Let us know at info@vitalcommunities.org.

The Route 11 Youth subcommittee includes this group, Friends of Change in Bellows Falls, VT.
Grassroots Help for Home Weatherization

Weatherization, the practice of improving a building’s energy efficiency to reduce energy consumption during cold and stormy weather, can help you save money and improve your home’s safety and comfort. This is particularly true for manufactured or mobile homes, which tend to use more energy per square foot than stick-built homes. The upfront cost of weatherization can be daunting, especially with financial strains caused by the pandemic. Yet there are many programs available to ease your worries about heating your home in the winter. To ensure the benefits of energy assistance and weatherization programs are accessible to mobile home residents, Vital Communities is working with many local partners. We’re partnering with COVER Home Repair to identify best practices for weatherizing mobile homes and working with town energy committees to connect residents with programs that help pay high heating bills in the short term while aiming to bring down those bills in the long term through weatherization.

Our new AmeriCorps VISTA member Julia Guy is supporting town energy committees in their outreach to mobile home residents in Vermont, where one in five residents statewide spend over 10 percent of their income on energy costs. Her method is to help residents do their own grassroots organizing. “This is all about neighbors helping neighbors,” explains Julia. “We’re helping residents navigate existing energy assistance programs and listening to their ideas for making those programs work better.”

Find out more ways to save on your home’s energy bills by visiting vitalcommunities.org/energy

Last Call for the Quest to Refresh!

One of our best-loved programs, Valley Quest offers a fun, all-ages way to develop appreciation for our shared home, the Upper Valley. By its very nature, Questing is a pandemic-safe activity. Many have taken up our “Quest to Refresh” challenge of completing at least five Quests by November 1 (get a cool patch and be entered in a prize drawing!). Your five quests could include one of the newest additions, a quest-by-boat on the Connecticut River, created by the Hanover Parks and Recreation Department!

What are you waiting for? Visit vitalcommunities.org/valleyquest today!
Transforming Commuting

For many Upper Valley residents, working now means working from home. Though these employees and their workplaces have adjusted on the fly, there is much to refine as telecommuting looks to be here to stay. Whether you’re a worker or supervisor, check out our Telecommute Resources webpage for everything from IT to advice on working from home while caring for children. Not telecommuting? Record your green commute in the Go! Vermont app and earn rewards. Looking for a ride? Transit is available for those who need it, and you can still find a carpool or volunteer driver.

Want to transform how you get around? Go to vitalcommunities.org/transportation

Same Footprint, More Housing

Rental housing is relatively scarce and thus costly in the Upper Valley, with about half of renters spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent. Construction of new apartment buildings or single-family homes is expensive, with resulting rent prices that are more than many can afford. We need additional affordable places to rent for working families, residents who would like to downsize, and people who would like to move to our area.

One solution gaining traction around our nation is to create rental units within single family homes. Renters get places to live that potentially cost less, homeowners get help with their mortgages, and communities get more housing with no investment in new roads and utility infrastructure. All that’s needed is to align local zoning, provide a financial plan, and help renters and homeowners happily and successfully share these homes.

The Affordable Housing Group of Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center’s Community Health Program is pioneering this trend in the Upper Valley, with the help of Vital Communities Workforce Housing Coordinator Mike Kiess. Modeled on the Weatherize and Solarize programs that have helped Upper Valley residents of all incomes improve their homes, the program works with homeowners, contractors, municipal officials, and renters to overcome the hurdles. If a pilot version of the project succeeds, the group plans to expand the project throughout the 13-town Mt. Ascutney service area—and hopes to inspire other parts of the Upper Valley to follow suit.

Learn more about this and related efforts at vitalcommunities.org/workforce-housing.
This May, Vital Communities and the Upper Valley Adaptation Workgroup also graduated the first group of the Climate Change Leadership Academy (2CLA). Designed to educate, inspire, and prepare Upper Valley residents to take meaningful action on climate change in their communities, 2CLA guided the 19 graduates in creating projects to counter climate change. 2CLA will be back next spring with a hybrid online and in-person curriculum. Applications will open up in January.

Visit vitalcommunities.org/2cla to learn more about 2CLA graduates’ projects.

Leaders Needed, Now More Than Ever

In response to the challenges of this spring, we’ve seen people draw on resources they didn’t know they had to help their neighbors, rally around local businesses and farms, protest injustice, and help the most vulnerable among us. These efforts remind us of how many different ways leaders take action in the Upper Valley.

Vital Communities offers two programs that allow you to explore leadership further. Leadership Upper Valley is an opportunity for participants to learn deeply about our region, discover leadership strategies, and—most importantly—be inspired by each other. To that end, each class for the 10-month program combines people from all sorts of workplaces and life experiences.

Here’s what 2020 graduate Robert Kay, Hypertherm’s Director of IT Operations & Service Delivery, said he gained from the program: “Leadership Upper Valley has shown me the scope of our challenges and insight into ways we can become leaders to effect real change. Only when our eyes are open can we see the problem. I will be forever grateful for what I have learned, as it has made me a more compassionate, complete person.”

A 2CLA Project

The next time you visit Woodstock’s beautiful Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, pick up this new booklet by Leah Marshall, a graduate student from Arizona who spent last year as a Natural Resource Intern at the park and member of the first 2CLA class. This 10-stop, self-guided experience is great for a range of ages and adaptable to social distance, allowing the user to walk the park’s paths and trails while learning about climate change’s impact on forest diversity and resilience.
Vital Communities Board Transitions

We’re pleased to welcome two new members to the Vital Communities Board of Directors, and to thank a departing member for her service.

**Amy Lappin** of Plainfield, NH, is Deputy Director of the Lebanon Public Libraries as well as the owner of Poor Thom’s Tavern in Meriden, NH. “The joy I find in my daily work as a librarian is helping people find resources, whether their needs are informational, educational, or recreational. Much of that work also includes building community and making the library welcoming for all. I was privileged to be part of the Climate Change Leadership Academy and know first hand that the work of Vital Communities aligns with both my core professional and personal values. I bring a curiosity and an interest in learning that I hope will serve well in this new endeavor.”

**Benjamin Nelson** is a farmer and co-owner of Claremont Spice and Dry Goods, a small specialty food market that sells spices, herbs, staple foodstuffs, and a selection of local beef and North Country meats. “Vital Communities’ mission of addressing rural poverty and food access aligned with my agricultural interests. Making sustainable wealth through agricultural production while simultaneously providing affordable food access are goals of mine for my business and my community of Claremont. Seeing the work Vital Communities does gives me hope that this goal is achievable. Ask a farmer why they planted a walnut tree. The answer I commonly encounter is, so their great grandkids can eat. That kind of longterm planning is my direction in life. If taken care of, that walnut tree will feed and provide for countless others over its centuries-long life.”

We say a huge “thank you” to **Jenny Levy**, Vice President of People, Community & Environment at Hypertherm, who leaves the board after six years, including service as its chair. As she said in her keynote remarks at Vital Communities’ May 2019 Heroes & Leaders Celebration, people come to leadership through many routes, including those who hear the call articulated by first-century Jewish religious leader Rabbi Hillel: “If not you, then who? If not now, when?” Levy asked, “In what area of your life could you be answering these questions in the affirmative? When will you take up the call to stand in your circle of strength and lead?”

---

**Fall 2020 Calendar**

**Community Resilience through Food Security: Calling Landowners & Farmers to Discuss Available Land**

Join New Hampshire farmers, landowners, and local food enthusiasts in three regions to learn about incentives for putting more land into farm production and building the local food supply.

**When:** October 20 & 27, November 2

**Where:** Online
Get inspired to . . .

- Build our local economy
- Green up your commute
- Support healthful food and outdoor education at schools
- Help people of all income levels save energy
- Connect with the outdoors
- Fortify our local food supply
- Discover your inner leader
- Strengthen regions within the Upper Valley