Equal Access to BROADBAND

Combining MISSION AND MARKET

Small-Scale HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Leadership Alumni MAKE A DIFFERENCE

New Faces on Our BOARD AND STAFF

New Horizons for a CHERISHED FARM
Vital Communities engages Upper Valley people, organizations, and communities to create equitable solutions to our region’s challenges.

To fulfill this mission, we will:

- Identify, include, engage, and connect diverse groups in our community so that our goals and approach are informed by people of all ages, genders, races, cultures, faiths, abilities, educational backgrounds, professions, documentation status, income levels, sexual orientations, and geographic locations throughout the Upper Valley;
- Recognize and challenge systemic racism and all forms of discrimination in our organization and community;
- Incorporate justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in all our efforts.

Vitalcommunities.org
195 North Main Street
White River Junction, VT 05001
Phone: 802-291-9100
Email: firstname@vitalcommunities.org except where noted

Staff
Rebecca Bailey, Communications, x108
Sarah Brock, Energy, Climate, x109
Rachel Darrow, Finance, x115
Tony Grasso, Climate. Local First, x118
Anna Guenther, Energy, Transportation, x117
Doreen Guillette, Administration, x104
Sarah Jackson, Executive Director, x101
sjackson@vitalcommunities.org
Mike Kiess, Housing & Transportation, x113
Nancy LaRowe, Vital Economy, Food & Farm, x106
Jen Risley, Vital Economy
Beth Roy, Food & Farm, Valley Quest, UVTPC, x105
Jill Savage, Database, x103
Rob Schultz, Leadership Upper Valley, Development, x102
Gabrielle Smith, Valley Quest, UVTPC, x114
Becka Warren, Food & Farm, x112

Board of Directors
Barbara Barry, Taftsville, VT
Meghan Butts, Lebanon, NH
Elyse Crossman, Claremont, NH
Laura Ginsburg, Tunbridge, VT
Tim Josephson, Canaan, NH
Robin Kilfeather-Mackey, Cornish, NH
Amy Lappin, Plainfield, NH, Vice Chair
Nancy Merrill, Lebanon, NH
Rick Mills, South Strafford, VT
Benjamin J. Nelson, Claremont, NH, Secretary
Greg Norman, Norwich, VT
Chelsea Paige, West Lebanon, NH
Monique Priestley, Bradford, VT, Chair
Markell Rips, Thetford, VT
David Watts, Norwich, VT
Sally Wilson, Ryegate, VT, Treasurer
Mary Catherine Guay, Tuck Revers Fellow
Alyssa Lo, Tuck Revers Fellow

On The Cover:
Aerial view of the White River Land Collaborative in Tunbridge, Vermont, an innovative new venture to help young farmers afford farmland and housing. Photo by Kyle Gray/Vermont Land Trust.

Editor: Rebecca Bailey
Contributor: Julia Guy
Photography: Staff and courtesy except for the following:

- Cover: Kyle Gray/Vermont Land Trust
- Page 2: Kimberly Gibbs; My Newsletter About Norwich
- Page 3: Julie Guerrein, VLS Forum
- Back cover: Rob Strong

Printing: R.C. Brayshaw & Company, West Lebanon, New Hampshire
Design: Nomad Communications of Norwich, Vermont

Connect with Us
Dear friends,

As engaged citizens in the Upper Valley, we all know that our region is at a turning point. In striving to recover from the pandemic and build a better future, we face challenges that include addressing our shortage of affordable housing, increasing local food production, mitigating and adapting to climate change, growing local business vitality, and tackling longstanding patterns of exclusion and marginalization based on socio-economic status and race.

This newsletter offers updates on some of our efforts in these areas, including land access for young and BIPOC farmers, equal access to broadband, local business crowdfunding, small-scale housing solutions, and new initiatives addressing equity. You’ll also find profiles of two recent graduates of our leadership training programs. (For a fuller picture of our efforts, please see our newly upgraded website at vitalcommunities.org.)

People are central to this work—whether within the organization as staff and board members or in the community as partners and donors. We are excited and honored by the ways in which that community has expanded in recent months: we are welcoming new Board leaders and members, have added new staff to our team, are strengthening community partnerships, and have received financial support from a variety of first-time donors.

Our ability to engage and collaborate in the Upper Valley has been strengthened as a result, and we are optimistic about the future as we align our work with three essential priorities: economic vitality, environmental regeneration, and equity for all people.

These priorities will also be on our mind as we develop the next strategic plan for Vital Communities, which will cover 2022 to 2027. We look forward to engaging the whole spectrum of Upper Valley residents in developing the organization’s goals and strategies for the coming years. We need these fresh voices and perspectives—joining those of our new Board and staff—because the challenges we face are daunting and we must find even more creative, powerful solutions as we forge ahead.

Yes, there is a lot of work to be done, but I take heart in knowing that we are undertaking that work as a community, that we all care deeply about the future of the Upper Valley, and that opportunities abound for our region to thrive.

With thanks for being part of our community,

Sarah Jackson
Executive Director
In the 17 years Kim Gibbs has lived in North Hartland, Vermont, she has become increasingly concerned about Route 5 traffic. "Our village has some wonderful assets—two covered bridges, a green, playing fields, a playground, beach, post office, and schoolhouse—but it’s hard to get to them on foot. As soon as you turn onto Route 5, it’s pretty darn scary."

One of five Artmouth-Hitchcock employees in last year’s Leadership Upper Valley training, she was inspired to take action. "I thought, ‘I’m not going to just sit here and ‘wish upon.’ I’m going to make a movement and see what we can do as a village.’"

She organized a meeting in June for residents to brainstorm village needs, resulting in a proposal to the town Selectboard. While many items remain on the wish list, Kim got permission to erect several "Please Slow Down" signs, and the town donated two picnic tables for the green. "Traffic already seems calmer," she said.

Even more importantly, the movement has introduced village residents to each other. "That guy down the street you’ve never seen—he writes to you and says, ‘This is amazing, thank you.’ We need to see each other, know who we all are. That’s what makes a community."

For more profiles of Leadership Upper Valley alumni, go to vitalcommunities.org/leadership-upper-valley/alumni

“Delivering a Digital Necessity

“It was impossible to homeschool with DSL last year. Everyone got booted out of their class and sometimes the kids had to take turns going to class. I would do anything to keep this service.” So wrote a parent who was helped during the pandemic by ECFiber, which subsidized broadband for low-income families of public school students during the remote learning crisis of 2020. With a goal of designing a permanent subsidy program that effectively helps all broadband providers to support families in the region, ECFiber established the newly formed nonprofit Equa Access to Broadband (EAB) and turned to Vital Communities for help getting operations off the ground.

With Vital Communities’s oversight, EAB piloted a subsidy program with a web-based subsidy registration tool, designed by EAB board member FX Flinn in collaboration with Rural Innovations Strategies, Inc., connecting families in Windsor and Orange counties to subsidies and affordable broadband. Now EAB seeks funding to broaden the program later this year.

“High-speed internet is no longer a luxury but a necessity for modern life, especially for families raising children,” said Havah Armstrong Walther, who ran the program’s pilot phase as a contractor with Vital Communities. "EAB is working hard to make the connection and keep down the cost.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/equal-access-to-broadband and support EAB by contacting board chair Holly Groschner at holly@equalaccesstobroadband.org.
Addressing Bias within Nonprofit

When the country erupted last summer in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, nonprofits in the Upper Valley recognized the need to confront systemic and institutionalized racism as well as the marginalization of other community members. Yet—like Vital Communities—our boards and staff are predominantly white and middle class. How can we fulfill our missions and more fully engage people across socio-economic, cultural, and geographic differences?

Helping us get there is the goal of the Upper Valley Equity Exchange (UVEX), a new Vital Communities initiative funded by Jane and Peter McLaughlin and the Cotyledon Fund. The project creates a community advisory board to inform Vital Communities staff in selecting a cohort of the region’s nonprofits to work with a consultant to learn about systemic and institutional inequity and develop plans to expand their relationships with traditionally marginalized communities in the Upper Valley.

“A June 6, 2020, rally against racism at Vermont Law School

“The team at Vital Communities did what I know they do best: they collaborated with leaders in the Upper Valley and in the field of equity and inclusion to take a good idea and improve it dramatically,” said Pieter Bohen, Executive Director of the Cotyledon Fund. “We are pleased to be part of this effort to support nonprofit organizations in the Upper Valley in transforming their staffing, governance, and outreach to become more equitable and inclusive of traditionally marginalized communities.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/uvex

Making Room for New Neighbors

“Increasingly, business leaders are hearing from people who want to accept a position but are unable to do so because they cannot find housing anywhere close enough to make a commute viable,” said Mascoma Bank President and CEO Clay Adams. Adams is chair of Vital Communities’ Corporate Council, which has made housing a primary focus for the past three years. “This is no way to have a vibrant economy that allows everyone to get ahead.”

While large-scale development is needed, “It’s simply not enough,” regional planner Jason Rasmussen told a Vital Communities Housing Breakfast. “In some cases, we homeowners have to become developers, too.” With changes to zoning and financing, homeowners can convert single-family homes to multi-family ones, add accessory dwelling units or freestanding “tiny homes” to their lots, even share homes through programs like Homeshare being piloted by the Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock, Vermont.

Said Mike Kiess, Vital Communities Housing Program Coordinator, “We can all be a part of making room for new neighbors.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/housing and keystothevalley.com and in the “Small-Scale Solutions” webinar during Housing Week, Oct. 18-23.
Art and Climate Change

If you visit the farm stands and market booths of Upper Valley organic farmers, you might notice a poster series celebrating the climate benefits of organic farming. These eye-catching images are the work of Tunbridge, Vermont, graphic artist Cecily Anderson for a public education campaign by Vital Communities and Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF).

The campaign grew out of a lecture Cecily attended a few years ago on agricultural practices that help the climate by sequestering carbon and building the land’s resilience to drought and heavy rainfall. Seeking to use her art to inform and inspire people, she joined the 2019-20 pilot class of the Climate Change Leadership Academy (co-sponsored by Vital Communities and the Upper Valley Adaptation Workgroup). A conversation with Vital Communities’s Food and Farm team then led to the VOF project.

Cecily and the Food and Farm staff consciously chose a style reminiscent of the Depression Era, showing “people pulling together and sacrificing for the greater good,” she said. “We need people to start connecting farm practices and climate change. Images can help get ideas across by grabbing our attention and giving the words that accompany them the opportunity to enter our minds. An image can affect us in ways that words often don’t.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/climate-change and nofavvt.org/climatehero.

Connecting Virtually

“Resilience, warmth, and benevolence” are the qualities Julia Guy attributes to the Upper Valley after her year at Vital Communities as an AmeriCorps VISTA member. “I was lucky to serve on Vital Communities’s Energy Savings Program alongside dedicated and passionate volunteers from Town Energy Committees around the Upper Valley. I worked with the volunteers to gather and share information about energy savings programs with local residents that could help them save on their energy bills now and in the future. ...In this new, virtual world, it can be easy to feel isolated, but there were many moments when I felt deep kindness and support from the Upper Valley community that I will remember fondly. ...This summer, I created an Energy Burden web page as well as a toolkit for future volunteer groups. I’m grateful for the connections I’ve made over the past year and am glad to leave behind resources that will be used in the Upper Valley for years to come.”

Read Julia’s full reflections at vitalcommunities.org/my-americorps-vista-year and view the page she created vitalcommunities.org/energy/energy-burden
Two autumns ago, Vital Communities began to pilot a Wyoming-based crowdfunding platform for rural economic development funded by the National Science Foundation. Success! The Local Crowd Upper Valley (TLCUV) helped several new businesses launch, including a large-scale compost operation at a Hartford farm. Last year, TLCUV’s efforts were a way for the Upper Valley to stand by local enterprises during the pandemic. Now, thanks to funding from Vermont and New Hampshire stage agencies, TLCUV can continue to support economic development in rural communities with a focus on mission-driven businesses, entrepreneurs, and projects.

TLCUV works because it supports projects that meet community needs, works with the business owners and communities to design their projects and fundraising campaigns, and raises two forms of “capital”—financial and social. “The TLCUV crowdfunding campaign gave me an opportunity to share my story with the community,” said Jen Murphy, owner of Willow Tree Community Compost. “The exposure and networking that came from the campaign were possibly more beneficial for my new business than the funds raised.”

Recent and current TLCUV projects include a winery, an arts map, and e-bikes for delivery! Check them all out at vitalcommunities.org/vital-economy/the-local-crowd-crowdfunding

It’s no secret that “buying local” puts money back into our local economy, including by paying salaries and adding to the tax base. During the pandemic shutdown, Upper Valley residents did a great job of buying local and patronizing our region’s businesses and farms. And businesses, in turn, bent over backwards to offer goods, services, and community support to get us through.

Now, we need to support those local businesses long-term so they are still here when the next “shock” comes along. One way to do that is to look for a “Local First” logo in a business’s window or on its website. This means that enterprise is part of a Vital Communities-hosted network of locally owned businesses—from banks to farms to bookstores—dedicated to a thriving community.

“Ledyard Bank is a member of Local First because it helps get out the message that our community needs locally owned businesses, and those businesses need us,” said Kathy Underwood, President & Chief Executive Officer of the bank, which is a longstanding supporter of Vital Communities’s economic and housing work. “It’s all part of staying resilient and meeting local people’s needs now and in the future.”

Find Local First businesses near you! Go to vitalcommunities.org/guide
Farmland, Housing, and COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

If you travel Vermont Route 110 between Route 14 and the center of Tunbridge, you can’t miss the Holstein Stock Farm. Accessed by a covered bridge crossing the First Branch of the White River, it’s a spread of large, white-clapboard buildings—a large homestead and several barns—on rolling river bottom set before verdant uplands.

Thanks to fast, innovative work by local residents in tandem with numerous nonprofits, the farm is now the home of the White River Land Collaborative, a farmer-led, community-driven project that aims to provide young farmers affordable land and housing, offer support to the region’s farmers and economy, generate green power, and provide community space. The Collaborative is an example of how market forces, tax laws, community interests, and energy technology can all come together to increase the vitality of the local economy and food supply. Vital Communities is happy to be among the organizations that have helped this project become a reality.

The story begins in 2019 with the “Our 4-Town Future” project, in which Vital Communities participated as a regional support organization.

In response to a proposed large-scale development on adjacent land parcels in the towns of Strafford, Sharon, Tunbridge, and Royalton, citizens from those towns realized they needed to create a joint vision for the four-town area. Vital Communities and the Vermont Center on Rural Development helped the citizens hold meetings for people from all four towns to share a meal and brainstorm ideas for how their towns could become more vital economically, culturally, and environmentally.

Out of the meetings came three key priorities, as well as working groups to pursue them:

1. Develop area housing and build a senior housing community;
2. Support economic development in the region; and
3. Conserve natural resources and the working landscape and create a regional agricultural network.

Fast forward to 2020: Shona Sanford-Long, a young, second-generation farmer, was looking for land onto which she could expand her Flying Dog Farm, which raises pasture-based livestock. Flying Dog had outgrown its initial home on Shona’s parents’ farm, Luna Bleu in South Royalton. In November, Shona and her family learned that the Holstein Stock Farm was going up for sale, just a few miles up 110 from Luna Bleu.

Initially heartbroken at the thought of another neighbor leaving farming, Shona knew she couldn’t afford the farm on her own, but didn’t want the long-time organic farm to simply become someone’s “estate,” she told an August 8 gathering at the farm.
That’s when they turned back to the priorities already laid out by the 4-Town process—priorities with proven community support.

Shona and her mother, Suzanne Long, teamed up with Royalton residents Sarah Danly, Farm to Plate Network Manager for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, and Fran Miller, senior staff attorney and adjunct faculty member at the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law School. Naming their project the White River Land Collaborative, they laid plans to provide affordable land and housing for young farmers, and food processing or storage facilities to aid all farmers in the region and boost local food security.

The Collaborative worked out an agreement with the Vermont Land Trust—which already owned the development rights for 60 of the farm’s acres—to buy the farm and lease it to the WLRC with an option to buy it in two to five years. Since 2004, through its Farmland Access Program, VLT has helped more than 100 entrepreneurial farmers find affordable farms of their own.

But the deal wasn’t quite there. Per tax laws, VLT could only pay the appraised value of the land, $650,000. The Collaborative felt strongly that they needed to pay more than that to fairly compensate owners Corey and Ann Chapman for the investment they had made in such infrastructure as a state-of-the-art manure holding pond.

“We did not want to bargain the price down,” Suzanne said in August. “We wanted to let Corey and Ann leave more whole.”

Enter Norwich Solar Technology (NST), which was connected to the project by Vital Communities’s Nancy LaRowe, a member of the Collaborative’s Advisory Board. NST contributed an additional $70,000 to the purchase price for the rights to install a 2.2-megawatt solar installation on 20 acres of the site, pending permits from the town and state. Using best practices developed for integrating solar installations with farmland and forests, the installation would take place on land that the Chapmans had cleared that is too steep for agricultural uses other than pasture. With the right solar installation, the land can still be used for grazing certain animals; in fact, panels offer shade that’s good for the animals, and the animals’ grazing alleviates the need for mowing. The permitting process is expected to take several years. If NST doesn’t receive permits for the full project, they still hope to install 500kW of panels on five acres.

“This is what we do best at Vital Communities: work with a great project that has broad community support and fill in what’s needed,” said Nancy. “This plan addresses so many goals for this region, chief among them providing affordable farmland so local food doesn’t have to be a premium product.”

For now, the Collaborative is renting the farm from the land trust for $1,900 a month—enough to cover the interest and insurance on the property—with hopes of buying the farm from VLT by 2023. Initially, Shona is the only farmer using the land and is renting several pastures, barn space, and part of the farmhouse where she and her husband live. Three employees of Luna Bleu live in other rented rooms in the house.

Jonathan Hayden, co-owner of Winter Street Farm in Claremont, New Hampshire, gives a tour on August 7. Despite their combined 13 years of farming experience, he and partner Abby Clark have to work winter jobs in Antarctica to sustain the farm. Farmland access in New Hampshire is the subject of an ongoing series of events co-sponsored by Vital Communities and Land for Good. Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/food-and-farm/for-farmers.
This winter, as farm work tapers off, the collaborative will identify the opportunities for other farmers to work and be housed on the site, as well as potential food-processing and community spaces. In addition, Advisory Board member Emily Boles, who is Abenaki, will conduct research, gather community and expert input, and develop a forest management plan that will, among other things, focus on the restoration of native plant species that have been lost with the shifting land-use practices and logging of the property.

“This project will serve as a model throughout the state as Vermonter in every community work to preserve their working landscape, support the next generation of farmers, increase local food availability and accessibility, and strengthen community relationships,” said Nick Richardson, Executive Director, Vermont Land Trust. “We are excited to partner with the White River Land Collaborative to make this a reality.”

Said Grace Oedel, Executive Director, Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont: “This project is visionary: it provides fair compensation for outgoing farmers and an equitable lease arrangement for incoming farmers, integrates renewable energy generation, utilizes the land in a regenerative and sustainable way, and finally, offers a way for the community to steward a piece of land that would otherwise be privatized and developed.”

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/white-river-land-collaborative

---

Challenging Systemic Racism

When it comes to land access, Black and Indigenous communities have unique histories. Throughout the United States, discriminatory legal and financial practices pushed them off their ancestral lands and farms and prevented them from acquiring new holdings. Today, 97.7% of Vermont farms are white-owned.

Every Town, a project by the Vermont-based group Radical Imagination, is seeking to right that wrong. In collaboration with the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust, Every Town has begun to receive land donations with the goal of holding at least one parcel of land in every town in Vermont in trust for permanent stewardship and access for BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color). Vital Communities is also an Every Town partner.

The first parcel donated to the network is a seven-acre farm in Sharon, Vermont, which will be stewarded by two young farmers for growing culinary mushrooms and herbs. Vital Communities Food and Farm Program Coordinator Nancy LaRowe worked out a deal whereby Norwich Solar Technologies bought the land and donated it to the project in exchange for permission to install solar arrays on one acre.

“It’s time for Vermont to do better,” said Every Town founder Kenya Lazuli. “There are over one hundred BIPOC currently living in this state who are actively looking for a place to settle, farm, live, and work. White-led organizations and white land owners are hoarding resources and land that could provide stability for members of the population that are most often overlooked.”
New Faces, Parting Thanks

If you go to the Staff, Board, Advisory Committees page of our refreshed website, you’ll see many new faces on both the staff and board. New Project Coordinators Tony Grasso (Vital Economy), Anna Guenther (Transportation and Energy), and Gabrielle Smith (Valley Quest and Upper Valley Teaching Place Collaborative) bring formidable skills and experience in such areas as community building, sustainable farming, communications, and program design.

New Board members Meghan Butts, Laura Ginsburg, Tim Josephson, Robin Kilfeather-Mackey, Greg Norman, Chelsea Paige, and David Watts hail from Canaan, NH, in the east to Tunbridge, Vermont, in the west and work variously in state agriculture, health care, restaurants, land-use planning, and more. Also joining the board are this year’s Tuck Revers Fellows Mary Guay and Alyssa Lo. This new board will be led by a new Chair, Monique Priestley—who, despite her youth, has already served on more than two dozen boards while tending entrepreneurial efforts to revitalize downtown Bradford, Vermont. Other members of the Executive Committee are Board members Amy Lappin, Vice Chair, and Ben Nelson, Secretary, and Sally Wilson, Treasurer.

We offer warm thanks to departing folks. From our staff: Bethany Fleishman, our Transportation Project Manager for nearly eight years; Sandy Gmur, who coordinated Valley Quest; Julia Guy, our AmeriCorps VISTA specialist this past year; and intern Olivia Salamy, a junior at SUNY Syracuse. From our Board: Bill Geraghty, an independent consultant; Sally Kraft, MD, MPH, Vice President of Population Health, Dartmouth-Hitchcock; Ken Wells, Chief Retail Lending Officer at Mascoma Bank; and Ron Shaiko, Associate Director for Curricular & Research Programs at Dartmouth’s Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences. As outgoing Chair, Ron skillfully oversaw Vital Communities’s response to COVID-19 and our Executive Director transition. Thanks also to last year’s Tuck Revers Fellows David Kenney and Stuart Price.

Learn more at vitalcommunities.org/hats-off-to-our-four-departing-board-members
Scenes from the May 2021 White River Junction First Friday, which turned downtown White River into an outdoor venue for film, music, and reconnection. Vital Communities was a partner of this summer-long series. Photos by Rob Strong.