



Comments to Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economy Collaborative

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Thank you for the opportunity to share ideas and feedback regarding the outdoor recreation and economic development in Vermont. I understand that your core objectives are to promote business opportunities, increase participation opportunities, and strengthen the quality, extent, and stewardship of the state's recreational resources.

Background:

The Upper Valley Land Trust is a regional land conservancy working in 45 towns in NH and Vermont in the Connecticut River watershed. Public access to land has always been a part of our mission. Back in 1985, when UVLT was founded, one of the key conservation concerns was loss of access to trails, water, hunting and fishing, those places in every town where people had traditionally picnicked etc. Our organization considers public access each time we evaluate a project. Today we hold conservation interests on over 500 parcels and more than 51,000 acres. More than a third of our conservation projects provide some form of public access. This includes trails, campsites for canoeists on the Connecticut River, dispersed access to privately owned land and conservation areas we own and manage, as well as two cartop boat launches. We currently promote 50 trail networks on our website.

Our comments to the VOREC focus on three key issues: participation, sustainability, and use impacts and conflicts.

Participation:

A public attitude study commissioned by UVLT found that the majority of Upper Valley residents value access to outdoor recreation. 55% of respondents said that access to trails was "very important" to their personal quality of life – more than access to transportation (45%) and places to shop (27%). However, access to trails is not equally available to all portions of the Upper Valley population. Most trails are singletrack and woods roads suitable for trail running and mountain biking by experienced users with moderate and excellent fitness levels. There are relatively few trails suitable for use by the elderly and very young and even fewer trailheads served by public transportation.

Significant investment is needed to address these opportunity gaps and position outdoor recreation assets to benefit the whole community of potential users.

Another aspect of promoting increased participation relates to the implications of the Americans with Disability Act for trail managers and providers of public access. Few trails are built and maintained with this user group in mind; relatively few trail managers and landowners understand the legal rights of disabled people to use power-driven devices to access land that is open for public use.

Sustainability:

To maintain a framework of trails and natural areas capable of sustaining economic development requires site control in the form of trail easements, conservation easements or dedicated ownership. Last year a popular trail that connects the village of Norwich with Gile Mountain Fire Tower (which according to the Upper Valley Trails Alliance sees up to 10,000 visitors annually) was put at risk when a private landowner closed a section that had been built “with a handshake.”

A second aspect of sustainability relates to the quality of user experience and the ongoing need for management and maintenance of recreational assets. The recent Quabbin to Cardigan Trail Study examined trail systems in central NH, finding that most local trail and snowmobile clubs rely on a few dedicated (and aging) volunteer trail maintainers and have had difficulty recruiting new members to do the needed work. This is consistent with our experience in the Upper Valley. Many more people use trails than care for them. More supporters will open a trail than look after it day after day. Generally speaking, trail users do not become donors. With growing appreciation of the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor recreation, we expect use levels to continue increasing without a commensurate increase in support for maintenance, which will, in turn, put the sustainability of our trail systems at risk.

Private landowners are rightly anxious about the complexities of trail management and public access. Usually, they are on the frontlines, the first to hear complaints about on site experiences and offsite impacts. Additionally, their property is at risk when trails are abused or when management is inadequate. They need to have confidence that the entity ultimately responsible for the trail has adequate resources and is prepared to:

- Provide for the enjoyment of trail users
- Plan for and mitigate impacts on natural resources and conservation values
- Anticipate and address impacts on the landowner
- Anticipate and address Impacts on neighbors
- Anticipate and address impacts on municipal budgets (safety and public works)

Thus, growth of the outdoor recreation sector of the Vermont economy will require upfront investments to protect the lands used for recreation as well as development of realistic business models and dedicated funding streams to cover ongoing costs.

Use impacts and conflicts:

To date there has been limited research into the impacts of user volume on wildlife species in the northeast, however some evidence from western studies indicate that pedestrian traffic may have more consequence than conservationists had anticipated. This is of particular concern as land conservation shifts towards prioritizing the protection of corridors that support species adaptation to climate change. UVLT led the drafting of the innovative West Windsor Town Forest conservation easement, which provides for outdoor recreation based economic development and the protection of significant natural resources. Our ongoing work in West Windsor may provide insights for performance-based use and protection strategies.

Other use conflicts we've observed locally include: trailhead parking (size, maintenance, safety), traffic (especially burden on town-maintained dirt roads in mud season), use after dark, noise, group size, multi-use conflicts (including landowner uses), dogs, invasive species, wildlife management (and hunting), biohazards, and emergency planning. Unauthorized "rogue" trail improvements and the construction of new trails is an increasing problem, especially on properties with dispersed public access. Visitors to these properties trim branches, cut trees, and create stream crossings. Geocache sites are installed without permission. These activities can be largely invisible – but they are highly offensive to landowners, pose risks for resource stewardship and are extremely difficult to confront and prevent.

In summary, we believe Vermont's tradition of access on trails and undeveloped lands is a vital part of the State's heritage, important to local economies and the quality of life of all residents. We believe that new strategies are required to expand and enhance recreational access and benefit all Vermont citizens. Public use has evolved beyond the neighbor-to-neighbor reciprocity that once kept our lands open. Users are less likely to know the landowners and volunteers who create the experiences they enjoy; trail managers face an ongoing challenge of building a sense of community and stewardship among users. We welcome the work of the VOREC and applaud your "open house" approach to engaging Vermonters in this important discussion.