



# **Exploring Visions of a Future Vermont: Myths, Stories, and Data**

Chris Company, Kevin Chu, Kendall Fortney, and Emma Spett  
October 30th, 2025



# Agenda

Myths about Vermont's development

Storytelling for a shared vision of the future

Data tools to bring development visions to reality

Build collaborative data support for Vermont

## VERMONTER POLL RESULTS

### Are you supportive of growing Vermont's population size to strengthen its workforce?

Our work contributes to the increasing recognition and support for growing Vermont's working-age population.

| Response | 2022  | 2025  | Change |       |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Yes      | 48.7% | 60.2% |        | 11.5% |
| No       | 38.5% | 20.8% | -17.7% |       |
| Unsure   | 12.8% | 19.0% |        | 6.2%  |

Table: Vermont Futures Project • Source: Vermonter Poll - UVM Center for Rural Studies • Created with Datawrapper

## VERMONTER POLL RESULTS

### Are you supportive of creating new housing to increase the population in...?

Local, regional, and state level support for housing has surged in recent years while uncertainty has declined. Our work contributes to shifting public sentiment on housing at all scales. **Data-informed education makes a difference.**

|                   | Response | 2023  | 2025  | Change |       |
|-------------------|----------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Vermont           | Yes      | 60.0% | 73.4% |        | 13.4% |
|                   | No       | 20.3% | 12.9% | -7.4%  |       |
|                   | Unsure   | 19.7% | 13.7% | -6.0%  |       |
| Your Town         | Yes      | 57.2% | 65.9% |        | 8.7%  |
|                   | No       | 24.6% | 19.2% | -5.4%  |       |
|                   | Unsure   | 18.2% | 14.8% |        | -3.4% |
| Your Neighborhood | Yes      | 46.3% | 50.5% |        | 4.2%  |
|                   | No       | 31.0% | 31.9% |        | 0.9%  |
|                   | Unsure   | 22.7% | 17.6% | -5.1%  |       |

## MYTH

There aren't enough jobs in Vermont for people who are already here, so why are we trying to grow the population?

### Vermont: Ratio of Job Openings to Job Seekers

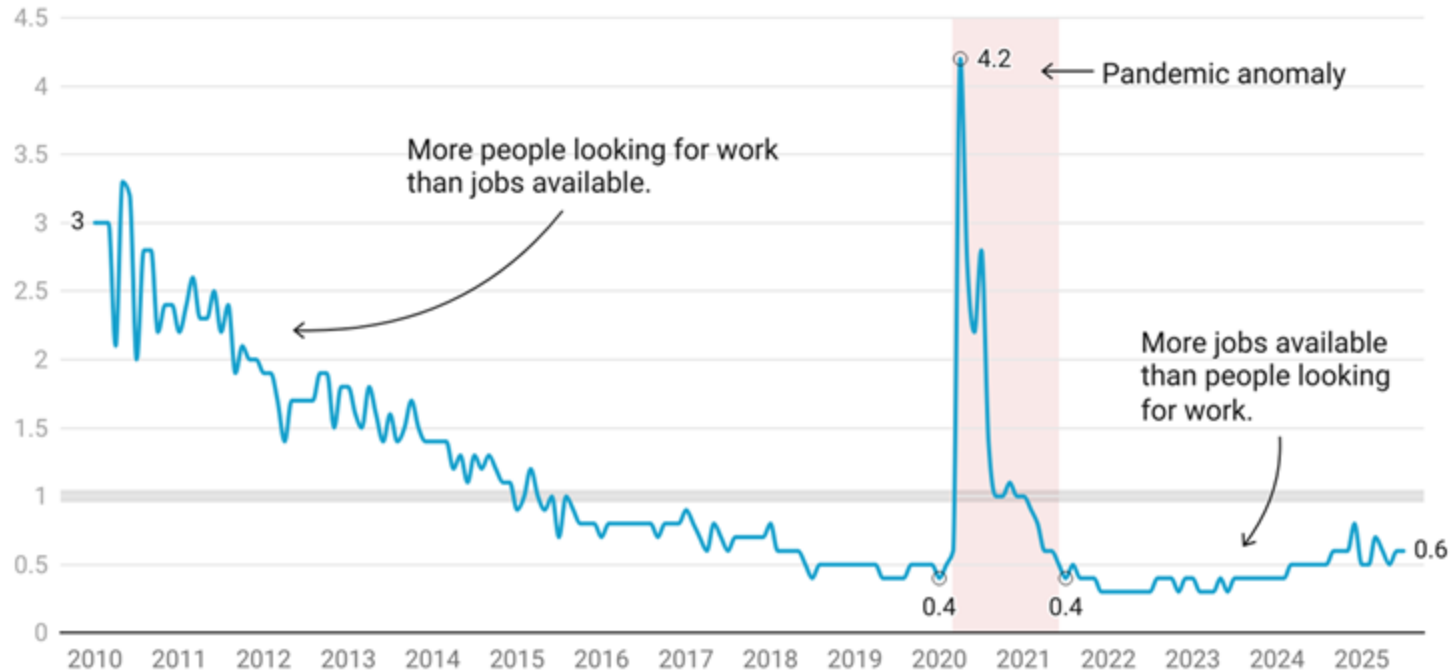


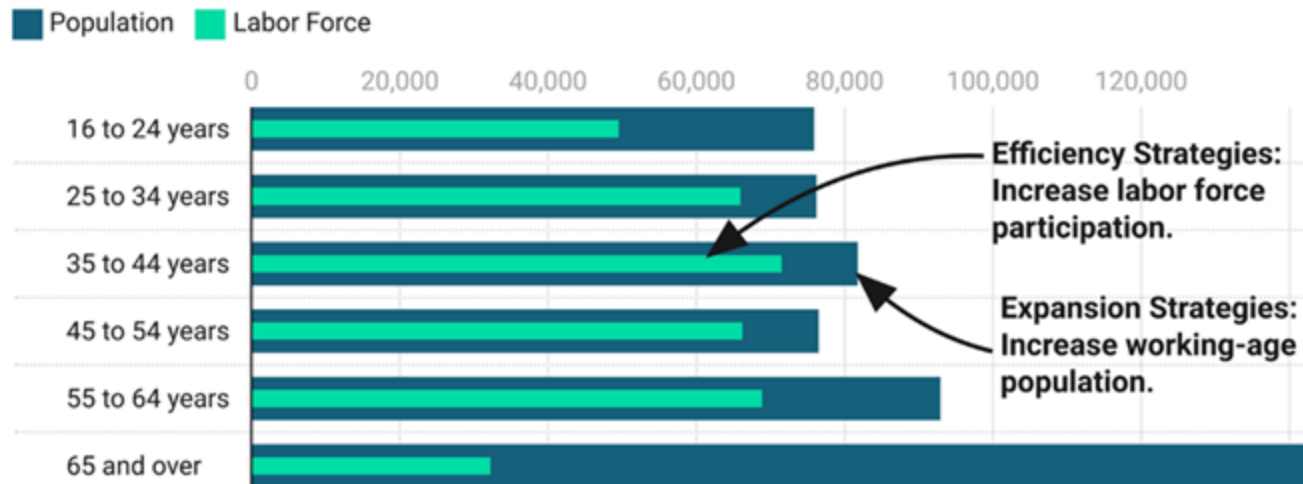
Chart: Vermont Futures Project • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

## MYTH

We don't need to recruit more *flatlanders*. Let's just train and retain more of our homegrown talent.

### 2023 Vermont Labor Force and Population by Age

Most prime working-age Vermonters are in the labor force. Reducing barriers or increasing incentives to work can get some people back into the labor force, but intentional long-term efforts to grow the working-age population are also needed to close the workforce gap.



Prime working-age adults are defined as people between the ages of 25 and 54.

Chart: Vermont Futures Project • Source: US Census Bureau • Created with Datawrapper

## MYTH

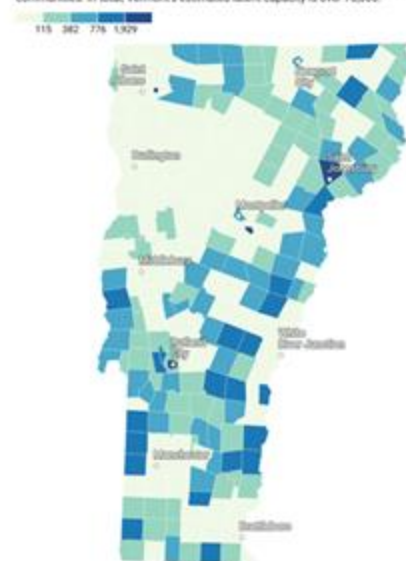
Vermont doesn't have the "carrying capacity" for more people and homes. It will overburden the state and increase costs.

### ESTIMATED LATENT CAPACITY = HISTORICAL POPULATION PEAK – CURRENT POPULATION

| County             | Latent Capacity |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Addison            | 4427            |
| Bennington         | 4688            |
| Caledonia          | 6577            |
| Chittenden         | 34              |
| Essex              | 5556            |
| Franklin           | 4922            |
| Grand Isle         | 157             |
| Lamoille           | 286             |
| Orange             | 6901            |
| Orleans            | 3792            |
| Rutland            | 13033           |
| Washington         | 4656            |
| Windham            | 6963            |
| Windsor            | 9615            |
| <b>Grand Total</b> | <b>71607</b>    |

#### Vermont's Existing Capacity for Growth

Many towns around Vermont have depopulated meaning the current population is lower than the historical peak. Recent growth has clustered in and around Chittenden County. Rural revitalization can be part of Vermont's population growth strategy to fill the latent capacity in our communities. In total, Vermont's estimated latent capacity is over 70,000.

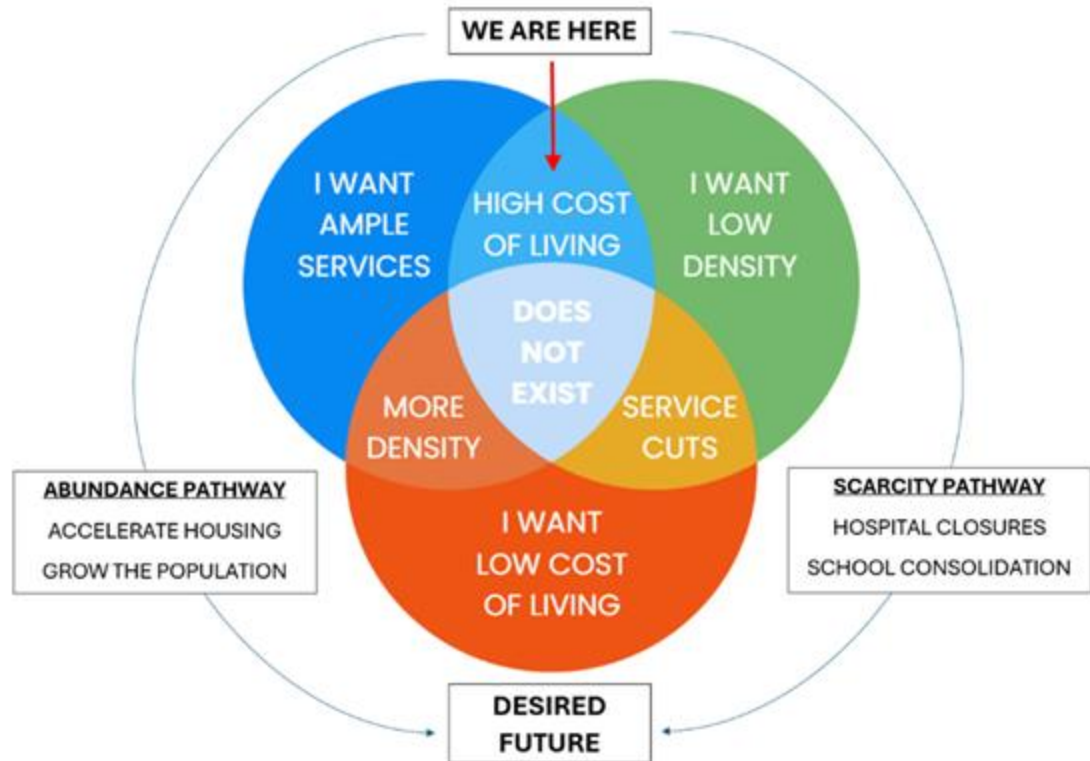


Estimated Latent Capacity = Historical Population Peak - Current Population using Census data from 1791 to 2020.  
A value of 0 does not mean there is no capacity to grow - it highlights where growth is occurring.  
Map: Vermont Futures Project • Source: Vermont Center for Geographic Information • Created with Esri/ArcGIS

## MYTH

Growth and development are a threat to Vermont's environment, natural resources, and beautiful landscapes.





## NUMBERS & NARRATIVES

Language matters. The stories told, whether true or false, influence policy, process and outcomes. Data needs good translators.

OPINION

# **██████████ Developers are not friends of Vermont (i.e., greed is not good)**

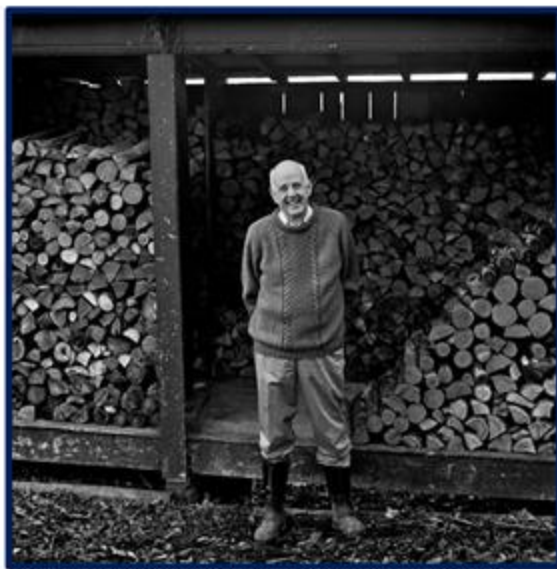
Increased protection of Vermont's social and natural resources is the only viable way to improve our economic outlook.

May 10, 2024, 6:01 am

# The growth machine has arrived in Vermont

“A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”

- Wendell Berry, The Long-Legged House



<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/going-home-with-wendell-berry>

## What is the Windham Regional Commission?

- Serves 27 towns over 920 sq. miles in southeast Vermont.
  - 23 towns of Windham County
  - Readsboro, Searsburg and Winhall in Bennington County
  - Weston in Windsor County
  - Largest: Brattleboro pop.12,000
  - Smallest: Somerset pop. 6
- Mission: to assist towns in southeastern Vermont with providing effective local governance and to work collaboratively with them to address regional issues.



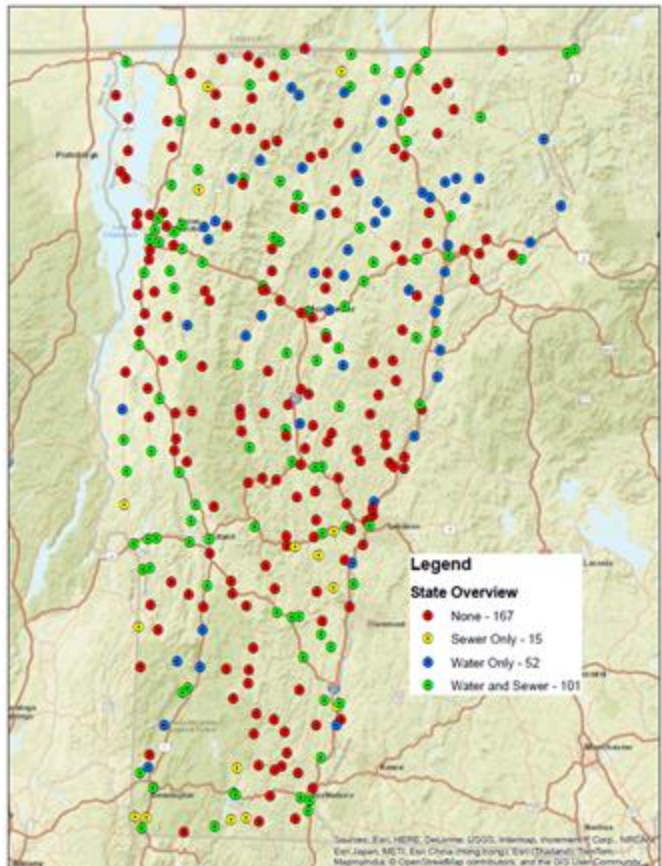
# Vermont's principal land use planning policy goal – Compact settlement

## 24 V.S.A. § 4302 – Purpose & Goals of Municipal & Regional Planning & Development

- ...this chapter shall be used to further the following specific goals:
- **(1) To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside.**
- (A) Intensive residential development should be encouraged primarily in areas related to community centers, and strip development along highways should be discouraged.
- (B) Economic growth should be encouraged in locally designated growth areas, employed to revitalize existing village and urban centers, or both, and should be encouraged in growth centers designated under chapter 76A of this title.
- (C) Public investments, including the construction or expansion of infrastructure, should reinforce the general character and planned growth patterns of the area.
- (D) Development should be undertaken in accordance with smart growth principles as defined in subdivision 2791(13) of this title.

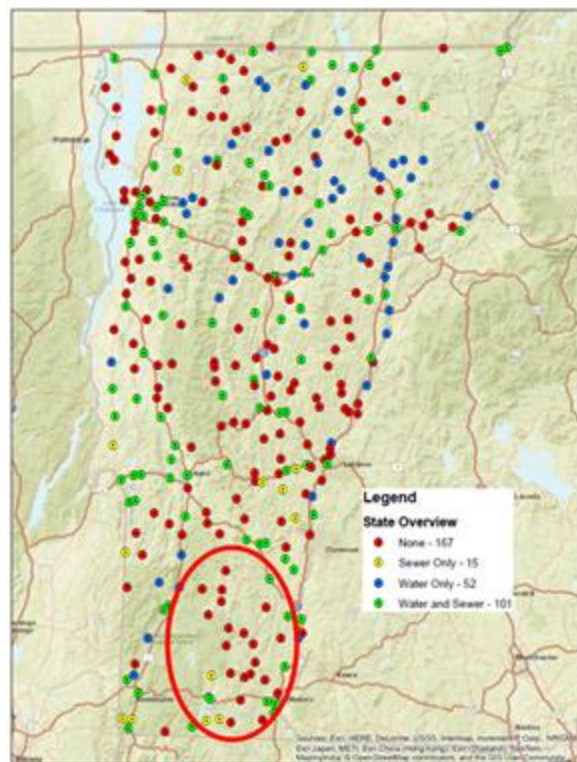
## Planning highly decentralized in Vermont

- 237 towns, 10 cities, 5 unincorporated towns, 4 gores
- Towns can **choose** to have a plan, follow state planning goals, adopt zoning, or otherwise implement plans, and engage in state regulatory frameworks.
- Absence of county government means no aggregator of taxes to plan and implement intermunicipal projects; no aggregator between the municipal and state levels.
- In most areas, we do not make intermunicipal collaboration easy by statute, or through our civic culture.



## Half of Vermont's villages lack community wastewater and/or water infrastructure.

- Limits opportunities for redevelopment and revitalization.
- Anything that intensifies drinking water or wastewater demands 
- In many cases difficult if not impossible to add dwelling units (apartments, homes).
- Makes Vermont's primary planning goal almost impossible to achieve.



Of our 3 designated downtowns, and 27 designated village centers, only 8 do not have significant flood hazard or fluvial erosion areas within them.

And that's a somewhat generous assumption...



<https://www.foxnews.com/weather/floods-vermont-2023-07-10>



<https://www.foxnews.com/weather/floods-vermont-2023-07-10>

#### Weston Theater cancels last two shows; 'Singin' in the Rain' moving to Walker Farm Financial losses multiply as damage to Playhouse, other buildings mount

Cynthia Proulx | Jul 24, 2023 | Comments 0



Shortly after the Monday, July 10 flooding, volunteers gathered to help cleanup the Playhouse. Photo copyright by Rob 48 2023

<https://www.foxnews.com/weather/floods-vermont-2023-07-10>



<https://www.foxnews.com/weather/floods-vermont-2023-07-10>

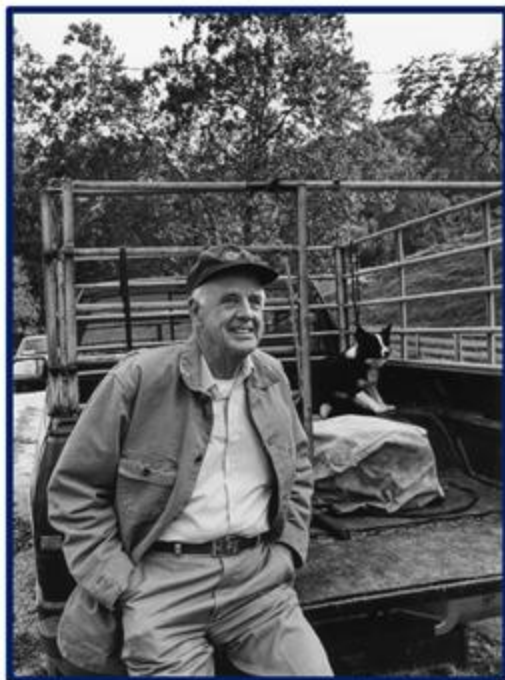
# So....

- What can we build, where?
- How much can we build?
- How do we build to adapt to our new climate, and flood, realities?
- Can we create the economic, housing, and social and civic conditions to enable Vermonters to stay in Vermont?
- How do we make the best and smartest use of the natural, human, and financial resources we have?

How well do we know our own shared Vermont story?

“The significance – and ultimately the quality – of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are taking part.”

- Wendell Berry from “The Work of Local Culture”  
in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (1988)



<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/going-home-with-wendell-berry>



**Kendall Fortney**  
Director for VERSO

## Vermont ReSearch Open Source Program Office (VERSO)

VERSO started at the University of Vermont (UVM) in 2022 focused on building an open community through:

- **Open Research Community Accelerator (ORCA)** - Student internship teams developing open source projects with UVM researchers and community partners
- **Events and Engagements** - Outreach through presenting at events or creating events like the Open Science Summit and PyData Vermont
- **Infrastructure and Policy** - Advocating and developing infrastructure for open practices
- **Open Science** - Supporting UVM Research and the community in implementing best practices for open science



University  
of Vermont

# The Overview

Population: 648,493 (49th)

Growth: -0.03% (50th)

Land: 9,217 sq mi (44th)

Median Age: 40 (47th)

Vermont's state capital of Montpelier is the least populous U.S. state capital.

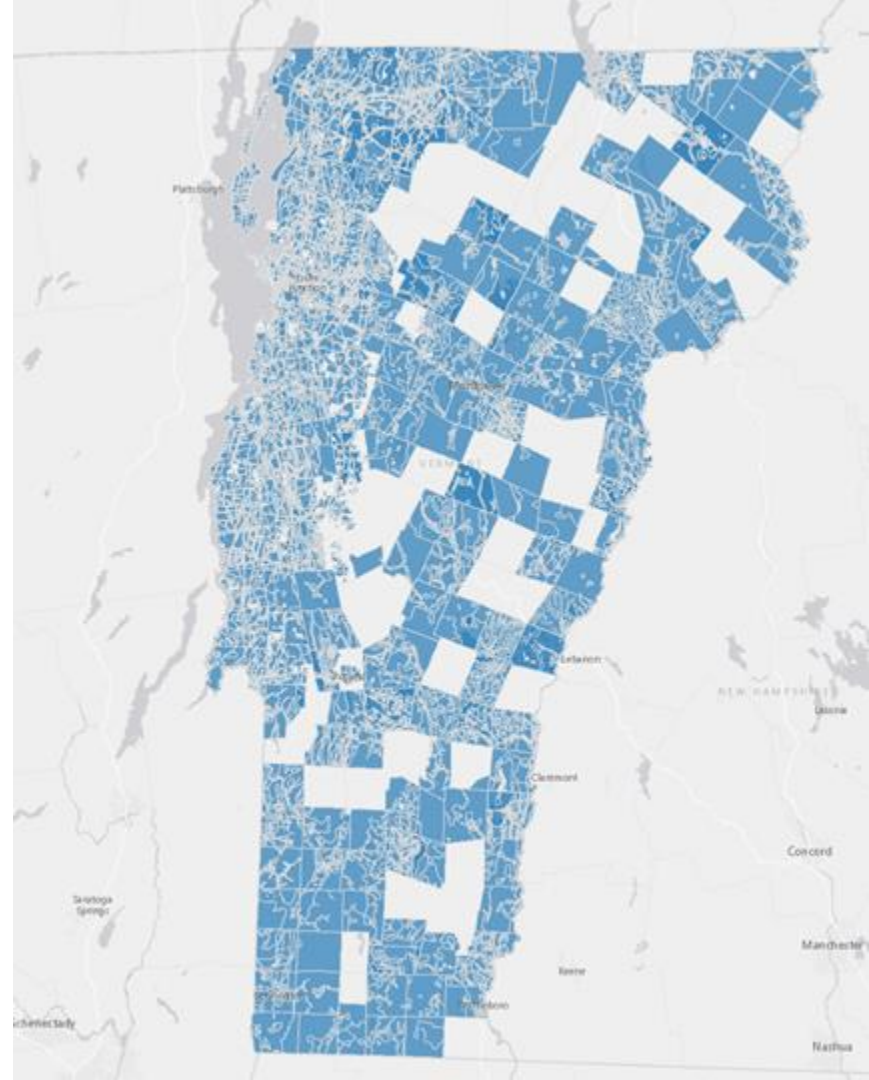
No other U.S. state has a most populous city with fewer residents than Burlington.

## **And yet...**

247 municipalities

(NH with twice the population has 221, CT has 149 with 3.7 million people)

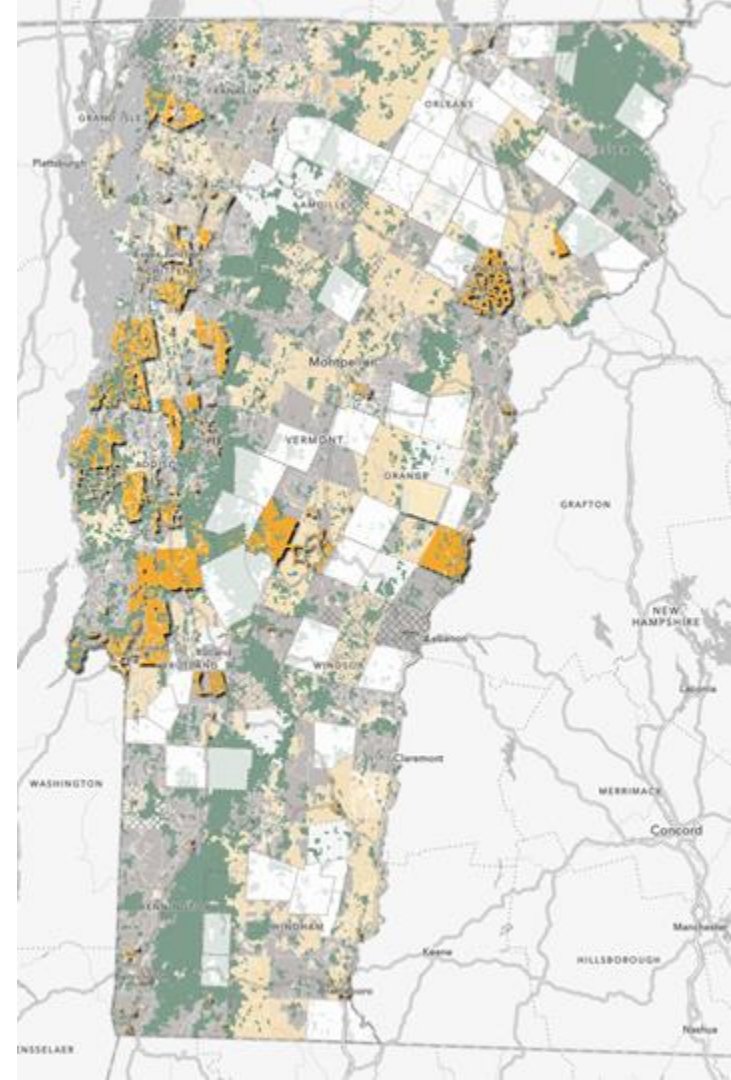
1,739 distinct zoning districts



# The Steering Committee

The Vermont Zoning Atlas is a cross-sector, public-private, multidisciplinary collaboration:

- State of Vermont
- Vermont Association of Planning & Development Agencies
- Center for Geographic Information
- Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission
- Northwest Regional Planning Commission
- Vermont Housing Finance Agency
- Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
- **University of Vermont**
- Middlebury College



Translating academic research or community needs into open source projects through a passionate group of students

### **Student Contributors to VTZA**

*Zoe Sreden, Anoushka Pschorr, Emma Eash, Tucker Schulz, Zachary Winigrad, Aleah Young, Gabe Christiansen, Harrison Taylor, Julianna Elton, Louise Vaillancourt, Zachary Winigrad, Robert Jones-Perpich*

**OPEN  
RESEARCH  
COMMUNITY  
ACCELERATOR**

# Our history

**February 2023**

Start of VTZA

**December 2023**

Donor funds the first  
ORCA Pod

**September 2024**

ORCA completes state  
mapping

**February 2025**

Outreach and data  
tool development

**Summer 2023**

Volunteers map  
first Counties

**May 2024**

Hiring of first  
ORCA Pod

**November 2024**

Beta VTZA Site  
Launch

**September 2025**

VTZA 1.1 update  
started



# Permitting Requirements

## Permitting Requirements for Single Family Home



■ By Right: 70% ■ Requires a Public Hearing: 5% ■ Unzoned: 25%

## Permitting Requirements for Two Family Building (like a duplex or condo)



■ By Right: 50% ■ Requires a Public Hearing: 12% ■ Prohibited: 13% ■ Unzoned: 25%

## Permitting Requirements for Three Family Building

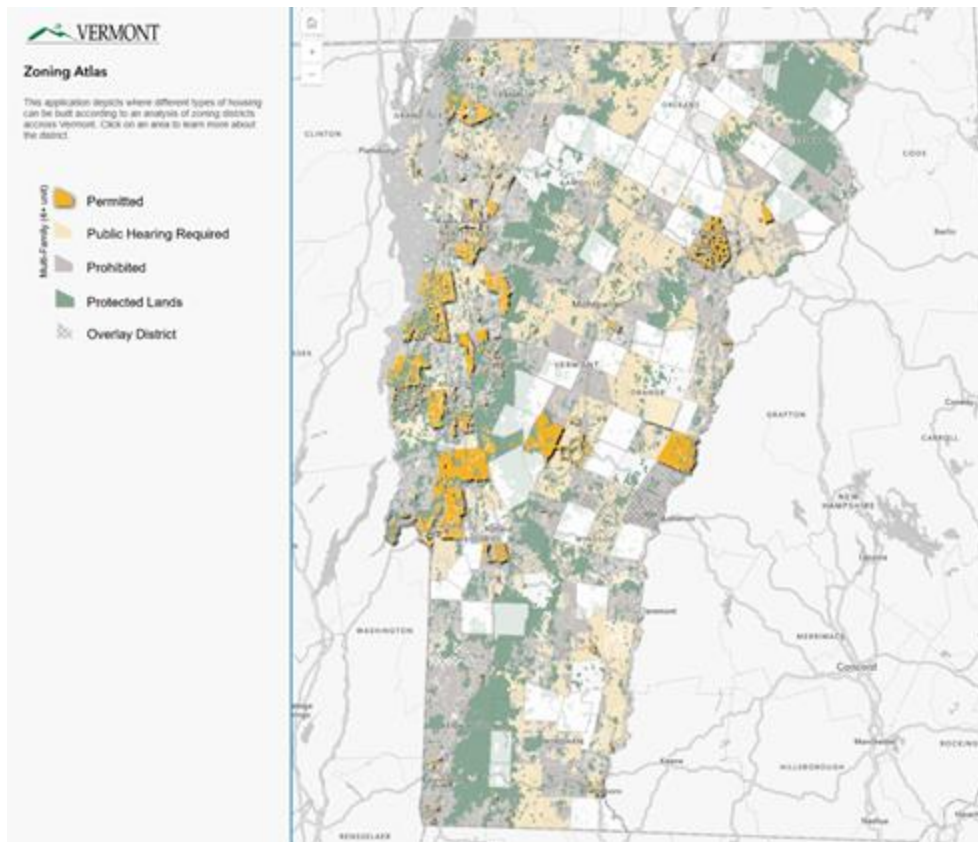


■ By Right: 9.5% ■ Requires a Public Hearing: 28% ■ Prohibited: 37.5% ■ Unzoned: 25%

## Permitting Requirements for Four Family plus Building (like apartment buildings)



■ By Right: 2% ■ Requires a Public Hearing: 34% ■ Prohibited: 39% ■ Unzoned: 25%



# Vermont Zoning Atlas Update

Act 250 was first passed in 1970 as a way to review development plans while considering their environmental, aesthetic and community impacts.

Act 181 passed in 2024 and created a new “tiered” land use system and reduced some of the requirements for more dense areas (and much more)

More than 50% of towns have updates zoning laws in the last year and a half.



## I.) Downtown District Area

Unlimited Dwellings in Downtown Centers (Until January 1, 2027) Requirements: DO; Zoning/Bylaws; Sewer or Water or Adequate Soils

- Area likely Exemption Eligible
- Area likely NOT Exemption Eligible

## II.) Town and Growth Centers & Development Areas

75 Dwelling Units in New Town Center, Growth Center, and Neighborhood Development Area (Until January 1, 2027) Requirements: NTC, GC, NDA; Zoning/Bylaws; Sewer or Water or Adequate Soils

- Area likely Exemption Eligible

## III.) Village Center & Buffer

50 Dwelling Units in and around Villages (Until July 1, 2027) Requirements: VC + 1/4 mile; Zoning/Bylaws; Sewer or Water or Adequate Soils

- Area likely Exemption Eligible
- Area likely NOT Exemption Eligible

## IV.) Priority Housing Projects within Buffer

Priority Housing Project (PHP) Expansion in & around Designations (Until January 1, 2027) Requirements: NDA, DO, GC + 1/4 mile; Zoning/Bylaws; Sewer or Water or Adequate Soils

- Area likely Exemption Eligible
- Area likely NOT Exemption Eligible

## V.) Urbanized Area within Transit Route Buffer

50 Dwelling Units along Urbanized Transit Routes (Until July 1, 2027) Requirements: Tract or tracts of land 10 acres or less, located entirely within a census-designated urbanized areas with over 50,000 residents + 1/4 mile of a transit route

- Area likely Exemption Eligible

# What other data is needed?

*Expanding open dataset with a broad set of community partners is needed to answer the complex problems of housing*

## **Wastewater Infrastructure Mapping**

May 2024-June 2025

Partners

- Windham Regional Commission
- Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) and Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)
- Vermont Center for Geographic Information (VCGI)

## **Drinking Water Political Boundaries & Service Areas**

September 2025-Present

Partners

- Vermont Bond Bank
- Regional Planning Commissions

## **Potential - Permitting Database**

Oct 2025-Present

Partners

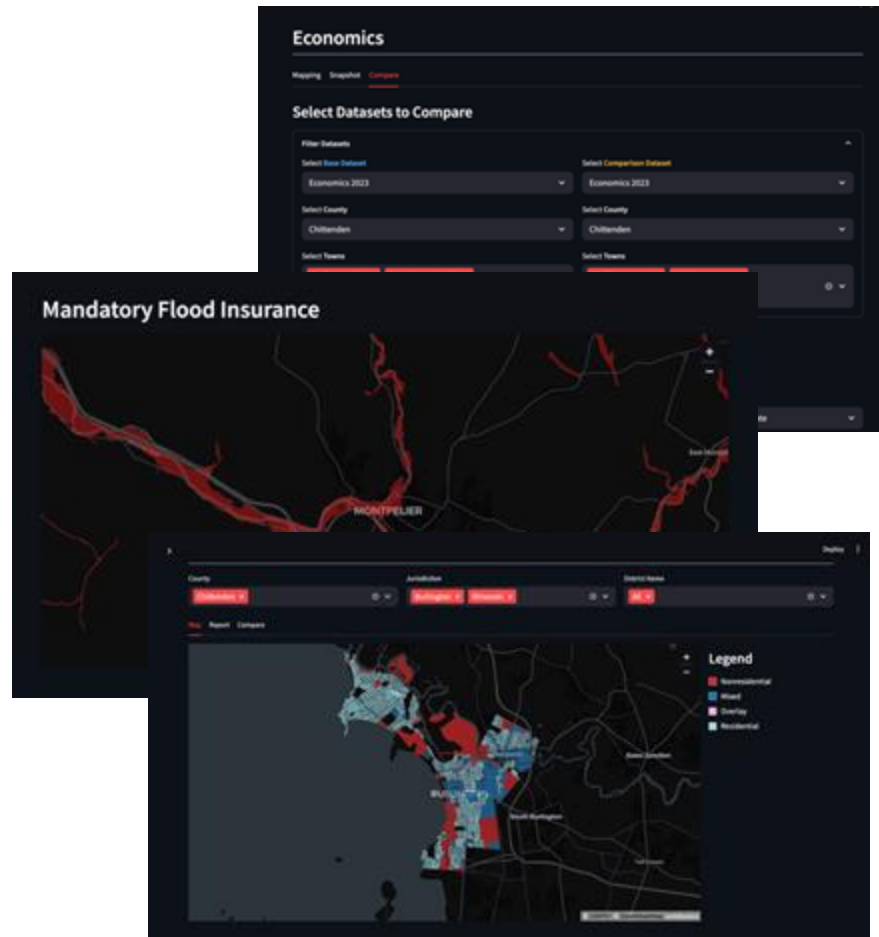
- Under development

# Vermont Data Tool

Most citizens are not geospatial data experts.

Create tools to exploring Vermont Zoning Atlas, Wastewater map, Flooding, Census data, Economic data

- Vermont Livability Map
- Vermont Data Analyzer
- Vermont Data Services Collaborative



# Challenges and Opportunities

By **2030**, for Vermont to address its demographic challenge it needs to add **41,000 new residences**.

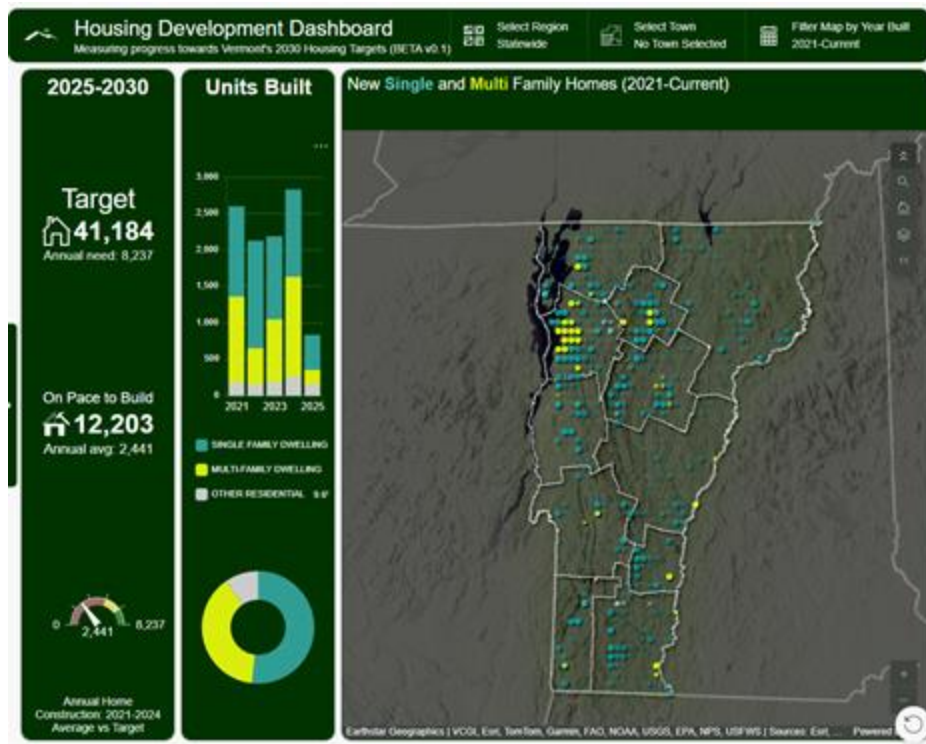
That's translates to **8,200 housing units per year** for the next five years

In **2023**, building permits were issued for **2,456 homes statewide**. That's an improvement over the historic low of 1,300 permits set in 2011, but well below the peak of 4,800 in 1988.

What we are doing:

- Creation of VTZA and sustainability of data collection through Regional Planning Commissions
- Passing and implementation of Act 181
- Launch of Housing Development Dashboard

<https://acd.vermont.gov/press-releases/new-regional-housing-targets-and-housing-data-dashboard-help-set-roadmap-addressing>



A scenic sunset over a large body of water, likely Lake Champlain. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with a few clouds. A sailboat is visible on the water in the distance. The foreground shows the dark silhouettes of trees and rocks. The text "Vermont Data Collaborative" is overlaid in the center.

# **Vermont Data Collaborative**

## Putting it all together

Break into groups of 4-5

Introduce yourselves!

Spend the next ten minutes discussing the following prompts:

- What do we want to keep?
- What do we want to change?
- How do we challenge our assumptions?
- What data do we need to bring it to life?

# Let's Connect!

## Speakers

Chris Company, [ccampany@windhamregional.org](mailto:ccampany@windhamregional.org)

Kevin Chu, [kchu@vtfuturesproject.org](mailto:kchu@vtfuturesproject.org)

Kendall Fortney, [kendall.fortney@uvm.edu](mailto:kendall.fortney@uvm.edu)

Emma Spett, [emma.spett@uvm.edu](mailto:emma.spett@uvm.edu)

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