



VERMONT FUTURES PROJECT

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL
FOCUS GROUP REPORT

JANUARY 25, 2020



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President, Rutland Young Professionals

You can call us Boomerangs, Millennials or Young Professionals, but make sure to also call us Vermonters. There is a strong and growing network of Young Professionals (YPs) building momentum in the state, and therefore, our own future.

Since returning to Vermont in 2016, I've chosen to become involved in my local Young Professional organization, including co-chairing the statewide YP Summit in 2017. As both an engaged member of the young professional community in the state, as well as a Board Member for the Vermont Futures Project, I believe this report helps to accurately summarize in new detail the perspectives of YPs in the state. Equally importantly is that by hosting focus groups within the YP demographic, the Vermont Futures Project created a table at which YPs were welcomed for their feedback and recommendations. In recent years, new YP organizations have cropped up across Vermont helping to generate enthusiasm and local pride, as well as needed social and professional networks. However, even with a state as geographically small as Vermont, a statewide network and voice has been difficult to cultivate. We're hopeful that this report can both provide near term insights, and a step towards long term connection and engagement.

Together, we need to make Vermont more attractive and affordable so next generation will continue to build their lives, their jobs and their businesses here in Vermont. To keep our cohort engaged, the Vermont Futures Project is:

- Creating a YP Advisory Group representing all regions of Vermont
- Engaging the business and community leaders to take actionable steps addressing this cohort
- Educating state and local government officials on the cost of living challenges for this cohort

We look forward to a bright future!

-Laura Pierce

Situation

The Vermont Futures Project promotes the long-term economic health of Vermont. Through leadership, research and education, the Vermont Futures Project seeks to inform the conversation about Vermont's economic future and demonstrate how a healthy economy contributes to Vermont's vibrant communities and unique quality of life. The Vermont Futures Project follows close to one hundred data sets that are organized in a six-pillar system. Each pillar represents a segment of our economy.

Within the Vermont Futures Project's *Workforce and Talent Pillar*, the research shows that while Vermont's population has been relatively [flat](#) for over a decade, its composition is changing rapidly. A growing share of Vermonters are over 50. With little [population growth](#), this means a steady decline in the proportion of Vermonters who are in the early stages of career and business development as well as family formation. This reality of an [aging population](#) has led many in our state to look for ways to reverse these trends. Many Vermonters are eager for positive change and encourage younger generations to stay and/or return to Vermont to build their lives, jobs and businesses. The vision for the Vermont Futures Project is to grow Vermont's economy in a sustainable and responsible manner so our trends can begin to show hope and promise today and for the future.

The energetic presence of young professionals statewide shows Vermont's quality way of life appeals to the next generation, as it always has. The challenges of young people who stay, return or adopt Vermont must be central in any conversation about how Vermont grows. They desire help bridging the gap between salaries and cost of living. They want communities that reflect their own Vermont values. This includes a critical mass of other young people, cultural activity, connectivity, quality housing and a great workplace where they can make a difference. Today, some young people overlook Vermont because they don't see opportunity here. We need to change the narrative about living and working in Vermont and make the commitments necessary to deliver on that promise with a vibrant and growing economy.

To learn more from our younger folks living and working in Vermont, the Vermont Futures Project hired Noah Miller, a consultant from Summit Strategy Group, to support Lori Smith, Executive Director, in organizing several Young Professional focus groups statewide. Lori was the lead facilitator of thirteen focus groups in collaboration with the established Young Professional networks throughout the state. ***Young Professionals are defined as anyone 22-40 years old working in all jobs and all careers.*** The following report sheds light on some of the challenges and opportunities of young people who stay, return or adopt Vermont as their permanent home. The following report presents an executive summary coupled with several recommendations and key strategies from the perspective of "Vermont's next generation of Young Professionals."

Executive Summary

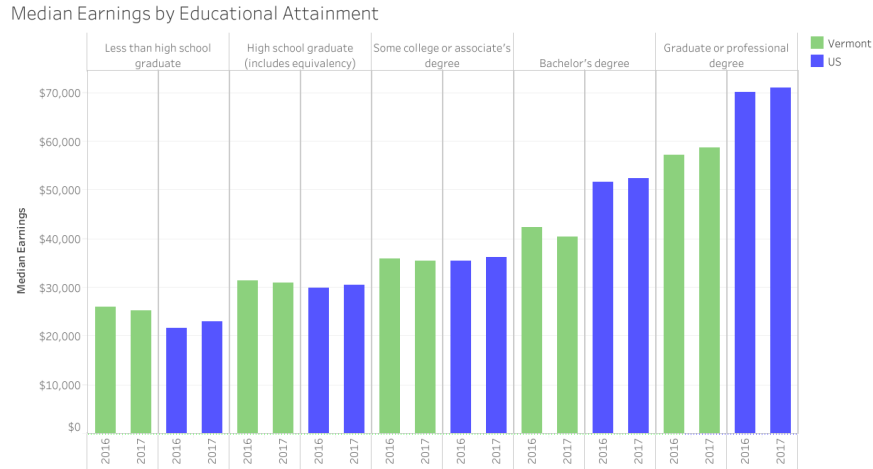
- **Vermont Futures Project’s Goal:** The Vermont Futures Project has identified a need to annually increase the workforce by more than 10,000 people. Many understand that we need to support young people to stay, return and/or adopt Vermont as their home as one way to close our current workforce gap and improve the demographic challenges of our aging population. The Vermont Futures Project launched statewide Young Professional focus groups to learn more from this cohort and uncover possible solutions to help recruit and retain their peers.
- **Vermont’s Young Professional Community’s Collective Voices:** The purpose of this effort was to engage, educate, and empower Vermont’s Young Professionals (YPs), ages 22-40, to voice their thoughts, feelings, and desires for their own economic future along with the state’s long-term prosperity. The thirteen forums throughout the state provided insight into the shared challenges and opportunities that exist from regional to region. These YPs offered several recommendations and ideas that they believe could turn challenges into long-term opportunities for economic development, community building, and state resiliency for a hopeful future.
- **Methodologies:** The Vermont Futures Project utilized a mixed-methodology approach to better understand the experience of Vermont young professionals (YPs) as they strive to build careers, community, and a sense of belonging in the state. To more deeply understand the realities of this cohort, we reviewed data and insights from additional resources. Data from the Burlington Young Professional 2018 survey, former regional YP summits, and congressman’s Peter Welch’s engagement on YP issues were integrated to paint a holistic picture of the current state of Vermont’s young professional community, their aspirations for Vermont’s future, and their recommended strategies for positive change.
- **Key Findings:** The overarching theme of the research project revealed Vermont’s Young Professionals are driven by a common desire to live a balanced life connected to community, family and the great outdoors. Their decision to call Vermont their permanent home is influenced by what they believe is “best about Vermont”. Access to nature and outdoor amenities, family, local food systems, safe communities and the entrepreneurial spirit are all attributes that this cohort defines as Vermont’s special quality of place.

Figure 1 displays what the YPs stated when asked what they believe is best about Vermont.



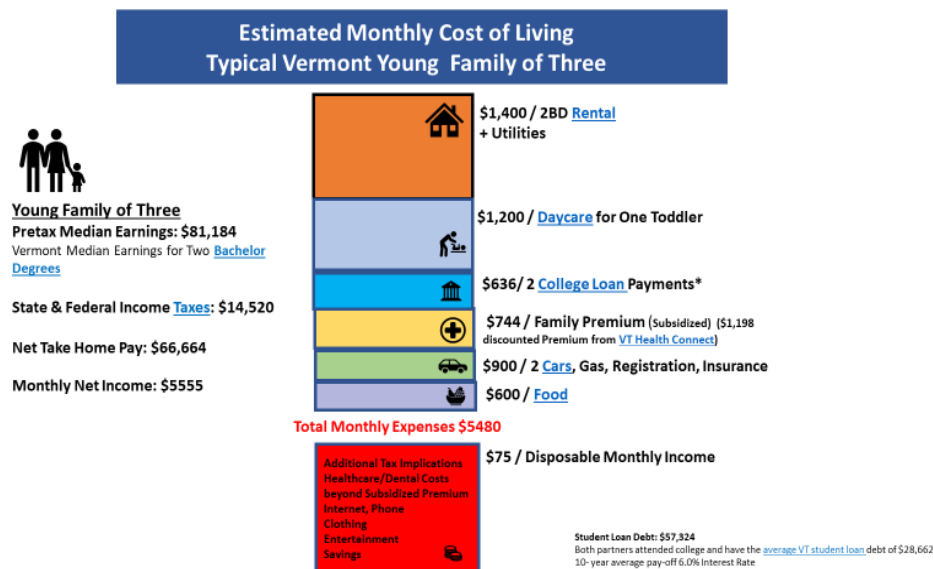
Figure 1

Unfortunately, when asked about their vision for their own “economic future”, the YP’s were less optimistic. The conversation quickly turned to what many call the *Young Professional Opportunity Gap*. This term refers to the financial reality and emotional toll felt by many YPs that limits their ability to move into the “next chapter” of their lives based on the realities of salaries to living expenses ratios. Whether they were discussing starting and/or growing a family, buying a home, their professional growth and advancement or other staples of “growing up”, they expressed concern for the economic future of living in Vermont. The [research](#) below supports the YPs perceptions regarding wages in Vermont vs. the US.



Source: [2017 ACS 1 year estimate](#)

Based on current Vermont research and data, the following graph portrays the reality of what a young family of three is experiencing. It is important to note that the majority of the YPs who attended the focus groups held college degrees and discussed college debt, childcare and taxes as their greatest concerns when focused on having a family. For this cohort, the annual median earnings holding a bachelor’s degree in Vermont is \$40,592 compared to the US median of \$52,484 as depicted in the graph.



Young Professional Voice

The focus group discussions covered several topics from economic security to job opportunities to engaging in their communities. The following statements were heard as common themes from region to region.

- Salaries that are less competitive than other regions close to Vermont
- Lack of affordable single-family homes and high rents near economic centers
- Wages not in line with the cost of living
- Vermont's high taxes and lower wages (compared to national average and other states)
- Limited and high costs for childcare
- Rising healthcare costs and benefit-less employment (smaller employers)
- The burden of student debt to get ahead in life and career
- Feel they are experiencing a greater tax burden due to our small and aging population
- Lack of career opportunities for upward or lateral mobility
- Poor rural infrastructure and investment in updated services like connectivity, housing options, co-working space, etc.
- Minimal public transportation options
- Lack of broadband and poor connectivity especially for remote work options
- Employer/HR hiring practices and technological advancements needing to be updated
- Vermont's volunteer & non-representative legislature
- Feeling of [NIMBYism](#) and reluctance for change
- There are two Vermonts: Chittenden County vs. the rest of the state

Although the macro-level challenges facing Vermont YPs are experienced by young professionals throughout the country, challenges are exacerbated due to Vermont's unique size, geography, political culture, development history, and current demographic composition. Despite these challenges, many YPs are committed to being part of the change they hope to see. Several YPs are working in secure jobs and careers with good salaries but still have concerns about future opportunity if they leave their current job. Many refer to this concern as the "Plan B problem". If plan A doesn't work out, Plan B is a concern.

Despite these fears, most attendees provided the following recommendations for positive change and are willing to engage to help address these concerns.

Salaries/Employer Intervention

- Attract and grow Vermont's business base for greater opportunities
- Bring and/or incentivize larger companies to Vermont, providing competitive salaries, benefits and opportunities for growth
- Create a single source platform to learn job opportunities
- Encourage more remote work infrastructure (co-working spaces, connectivity)
- Encourage companies to support employee development and career pathing
- Educate the HR community to recognize skills and talent leading to higher wage roles
- Develop leadership and mentoring for upward mobility
- Update technology and provide advancement in small businesses
- Introduce and support the trades as promising career paths
- Public recognition of employers who convert internships of all kinds to jobs

- Creation of innovation hubs to increase tech jobs with higher salaries

Housing/Childcare

- Research micro loans/creative grant funding for YP homeownership/childcare savings
- Present creative benefit options for college debt and childcare
- Rent control provisions for YPs with college debt as incentives to stay in VT
- Positive zoning options for more “tiny” houses
- Make [HomeShare](#) application process less cumbersome and more immediate
- Incentives for developers to build vertical housing in town centers
- Tax credits for YPs to invest in aging housing stock and weatherization
- Flexible work options due to childcare and transportation needs

YP Engagement and Communication

- Social media to connect to jobs/networking/legislative topics
- Use of tools such as [Front Porch](#) Forum to connect and communicate
- Creation of Junior Board positions for Board succession planning
- Create Internal Stay to Stay program for YPs to discover other parts of the state
- Regular region to region forums
- Creation of a YP Caucus to have a voice in legislature and local government

Recommendations for Positive Change

Although this list is not exhaustive, many of these recommendations are initial steps that could be taken to systemically change the dynamics of the converging factors and reduce the challenges associated with the “Young Professional Opportunity Gap.” Most of the YPs agree that long-term systemic solutions are required to make Vermont more viable and livable for the next generation of Vermonters. The following recommendations align with the Vermont Future Project’s commitment to closing the workforce gap by growing the number of young people to who stay to build their lives, careers and businesses in Vermont.

Short-Term Recommendations 1-2 Years:

- ***Conduct an Enterprise Remote Workforce Feasibility Study*** – Entire companies are operating on purely remote workforces and the trend is growing as both the fight for talent and global economy intensifies. Complete a feasibility study to assess this trend and include concepts such as cross-industry best practices for remote workforce deployment, a needs assessment based on Vermont communities and the quality of their digital infrastructure, what industries are most suited from a material/operational standpoint for a remote workforce, and what companies within those industries are going through growth phases that would align best with Vermont’s current and potential ecosystem.
- ✓ ***Housing and Childcare Subsidies, Tax Credits, Healthcare Options and/or Microloans for YPs:*** The converging factors of housing, healthcare, childcare and student debt are current barriers to YPs financial, emotional, and social stability within the state. Vermont’s historic value system of taking care of the state’s most vulnerable citizens is now putting the state’s demographic future in limbo due to the “subsidy cutoff or the so-called benefits cliff”. A research study is recommended to uncover the truths of the benefits cliff impacting this YP cohort and the success in other states to address the [Opportunity Grant](#) programs and analyze if other states are succeeding in creative efforts to address this issue.

Employer Education Recommendations:

- ✓ ***Educating and Advancing the Role of Human Resources – “The Future of Work, Skill Transferability, & Upskilling:”***. With our current labor shortage, the HR community can play a significant role creating a talent strategy that is relevant and sustainable. Currently, many HR responsibilities are in business of risk-mitigation around compliance concerns. Now is the time for additional risk taking in how HR addresses their people strategy and talent strategizes. How one hired an applicant 10 years ago is quite different today and the HR community would benefit from education to align with global best practices in talent acquisition. Some key areas to address:
 - ✓ ***The Future of Work:*** Although the “future of work” has several interpretations and many different forecasts of what that will look like, some thematic consistencies include the rise of automation/robotics/AI, which will require reconsidering how jobs are designed and workflow is organized, a human-centric development focus, which will require personalizing development plans aligned with the adapting needs of the business and “one-size-fits-one” employee centered solutions, and establishing an adaptable and empowered internal culture that is able to flex with the dynamics needs of the business, which will require redesigning the role of the HR function as a whole.
 - ✓ ***Skill Transferability and Upskilling:*** One of the greatest barriers to Vermont’s HR community is the lack of understanding of other industries and sectors, and how one’s capabilities, learning agility, and subject matter expertise can be transferred to another environment and mission. By enhancing the baseline knowledge of the Vermont HR community in skill transferability, upskilling and other sector/industry roles, there will be better alignment with business needs and long-term talent and pipeline planning.
 - ✓ ***Statewide Educational Forums for YPs:*** Reaching YPs at work with several educational sessions on topics like policy development, starting and building a business, financial literacy/savings, engaging in local government, board governance, etc.

Coordination of YP Engagement Statewide: Most of the YPs who attended the focus groups felt passionate about getting and staying engaged in creating the positive change they envision. Vermont’s politics are personal and accessible as are our local and state officials. These folks want to learn more, voice more but also play a role in discovering solutions to build their communities for the future. The following are several recommendations for YPs to become more engaged with their peers, their communities and the state:

- ✓ ***Creation of a YP Caucus***
- ✓ ***Creation of Junior Board Positions***
- ✓ ***Setting a Goal or 25% of YPs represented in State and local Government by 2025***
- ✓ ***Statewide YP Organization***
- ✓ ***Internal State to State Initiatives/Networking***
- ✓ ***Annual Conference with Local and State Government and Business Leaders***
- ✓ ***Home of the Welcome Wagon with Regional Ambassadors***
- ✓ ***Social Media Campaign to Share Regional Engagement Initiatives***

Long-Term Recommendations 3-5 Years

- ✓ ***Modernize Act 250*** - Revisit and modernize Act 250’s content and process to reflect the urgency of the demographic, economic, and infrastructure challenges facing YPs.
- ✓ ***Encourage Mixed-Use Vertical Development:*** Providing more people affordable housing options in Vermont while preventing urban sprawl could be reconciled by promoting mixed-use vertical development throughout the state.

- ✓ ***Nurture and Invest in Regional Start-up Ecosystems:*** By focusing regional and state resources on the investment in people, infrastructure, and education, towns could upgrade, enhance, and deepen their historic strengths and commercialize them
- ✓ ***Tax Incentives for Business Community to Address Barriers for YPs Through Collaboration:*** With a resource-constrained state budget, the business community's need for skilled employees, and the barriers facing YPs in growing their careers and families the Vermont business community could collaborate together on a regional level with cross-sector partners to engage with the issues facing their employees and potential recruits.
- ✓ ***Live-Stream Committee Meetings at the State House:*** Several YPS cited barriers to civic participation were due to lack of knowledge, awareness, and access to the legislative process and the issues facing Vermonter's outside of their given communities. Live-streaming committee meetings would provide YP with greater opportunity to be informed and engage in issues that will directly impact their future.

Conclusion

Although not exhaustive, the insights and recommendations from Vermont's YP community reveals a pragmatic optimism for the state's future. However, this pragmatism comes with a caveat; many of these YPs feel that Vermont's current business, institutional, and community leaders aren't fully aware of the "Young Professional Opportunity Gap," that is both real and perceived.

What's most important to understand from this project is that this YP cohort took the time to share their stories, insights and hopes about their economic future in Vermont. These folks are here and are vested in the Vermont lifestyle and quality of life. They make it clear that they want to stay and build their lives, careers and families here but there is a "tipping point". Salary, wages, upward and lateral mobility in their careers and Vermont's cost of living were the top three topics shared in every corner of the state. They provided ideas and solid recommendations for systemic change in these areas.

The Vermont Futures Project's vision is to help secure Vermont's economic future by envisioning a Vermont for all generations to thrive, but we know that our current demographic challenges are real. We need our young folks to stay, return and believe that Vermont is for them and their peers. Despite the obstacles, many YPs shared remarkable passion and love for Vermont. Building on Vermont's strengths and the YPs energy, this generation will innovate and create a future that is bright and sustainable. It's their future and it's time to celebrate their commitment and engagement.

The Vermont Futures Project is committed to the next generation by engaging them in our work to help shape our economic future. Our team will create a Young Professional Advisory Group who will help develop an action plan and timeline for next steps. Also, we will incorporate several recommendations that align with our strategic economic plan currently in development.

Addendum

The Invitation

The following is the invitation sent in each region of the state:

We Value Your Voice: Vermont's Future Depends on It

If you are 22- 40 years old, we would like to learn your insights about Vermont's current economic challenges, your personal economic and work aspirations, and your recommendations on how to secure Vermont's future to be a great place to work, live and play.

The Vermont Futures Project, in partnership with the Statewide Young Professionals Groups, is planning several focus groups around Vermont this fall. As the Vermont Futures Project works to create an actionable statewide plan for sustainable economic growth, we want to hear from young professionals, currently living here, about what is most important for a thriving future.

We look forward to productive dialogue and exchanging ideas on how to shape Vermont's future. Young Professionals refers to all trades, all careers, and all people.

Focus Group Questions

1. What is best about living in Vermont?

As you may have learned by now, The Vermont Futures Project, is a research and education organization focused on using data, partnerships and policy development to secure Vermont's economic future.

As I've stated, you all here represent Vermont's future. The challenges and/or opportunities of your generation who stay, return or adopt Vermont as their home, must be central in any conversation about how Vermont grows and maintains a sustainable economy. This is why we are here today.

After hearing our vision, what does economic opportunity and security mean for you? As you look to your future?

For your community?

For Vermont as a whole?

The Vermont Futures Project reviews and follows close to 100 data sets that we have organized in a six-pillar system. Read the pillars. For the past 2 years, we have been traveling the state talking about the need for 10,000 people needed in our workforce. Every few weeks, another article appears about young people migrating out of Vermont.

1. What do you believe are the contributing factors that folks believe "young people" are leaving?
2. What do you believe are possible strategies, state or local policies that we could act upon to bend this trend? What is most important for your cohort to feel secure in their housing aspirations for their future?

Jobs/Career. Let's talk about your jobs and or careers?

Data Point: 26% of all Vermont Jobs require a 4-year degree or more. When you hear this, what are your first thoughts?

3. What are opportunities to see for your future? What inspires you most about your current career/job situation?
4. What are the possible solutions needed to help your generation feel secure?

Community and Civic Engagement

5. What does engagement mean to you?
What actions could you take to be better informed, engaged in community or state, be part of policy discussions?
6. Would you recommend working-age friends or family from elsewhere to move to Vermont? If so, why or why not?
7. If you could wave a magic wand? What could Vermont or this community do to help your future be brighter and secure?

Methodology

Lori Smith, Executive Director, facilitated thirteen focus group discussions in partnership with the statewide Young Professional Groups. These sessions were 90 minutes in length at the locations below. A total of 137 YPs attended these sessions.

	Location	Date	Number of Attendees
1	Winooski: Marathon Health	October 8 th	8
2	Burlington: Gallagher Flynn Company	October 29 th	12
3	Burlington: Cigna	November 14 th	14
4	Rutland: GMP	November 13 th	13
5	Rutland- Heritage Federal Credit Union	November 13 th	10
6	Rutland: Heritage Federal Credit Union	November 14 th	9
7	Central VERMONT: Vermont Mutual	November 6 th	12
8	Central VERMONT: Blue Cross Blue Shield	November 7 th	8
9	Central VERMONT: National Life Group	November 22 nd	10
10	Brattleboro- Mocha Joe's	October 21 st	11

11	Brattleboro: The Richards Group	October 22nd	9
12	Bennington: SWMC	November 18th	21
13	NEK-Passumpic Bank	December 10th	12

Young Professional Network Groups and Collaborators

Burlington Young Professionals-Erin Bombard
 Southern Vermont Young Professionals, Sara Lang
 Rutland Young Professionals, Laura Pierce,
 Shires Young Professionals, Matt Harrington
 Central Vermont Young Professionals, Tonya Barnett
 Northeast Kingdom Young Professionals, Sunny Naughton

About Summit Strategy Group

Summit is a California-based corporate communications and public affairs firm specializing in corporate strategy, reputation, issues management and crisis communications. Our founding principle is that every client deserves and requires a custom-built team of the best talent: Agile thinkers equipped with precision tools that yield crucial insights necessary to navigate and succeed in today’s constantly evolving landscape. Our unique business model allows us to deploy bespoke client teams of world-class talent when and where they are needed, and to scale according to client requirements.

About the Vermont Futures Project

The Vermont Futures Project is an independent non-partisan organization with a goal of providing a vision that supports and encourages long-term economic growth for Vermont, providing data and recommendations to achieve this goal. The Vermont Futures Project will position the economy in the center of a statewide discussion about Vermont’s future, enriching that discussion with data, benchmarks, and research – demonstrating how a healthy economy provides opportunities for people and contributes to Vermont’s unique quality of life.



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