

# **VITAL COMMUNITIES**



## **QUALITY-OF-LIFE SURVEY**

### **Report to the Community**

**April 2006**

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*Additional copies are available for \$10.00 each.*

- ☞ Excel spreadsheets are available for download at [www.vitalcommunities.org](http://www.vitalcommunities.org):
  - **Survey Data\_Total**
  - **Survey Data Sorted by Sub-Region of our Service Area** (North, South, East, West, Center)
  
- ☞ Available upon request (please call 802-291-9100 x 111):
  - **Survey Data Sorted by Town**
  - **“Voices”**: All Narrative Responses to Questions #34 and #43
  - **Demographics of Survey Respondents**



## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in the results of Vital Communities' 2005 quality-of-life survey. If you were one of the 932 people who filled out our survey, or one of the 266 people who attended a public forum at which we announced the results, many thanks for your participation! Both groups gave generously of their time and opinions, making this project meaningful.

### **What is Vital Communities?**

Vital Communities is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1993. We offer collaborative programs to help strengthen community in 69 towns in Vermont and New Hampshire (see map, page 2). Our mission is to engage citizens in community life and to foster the long-term balance of social, environmental, economic and cultural well-being in our region. At the town and regional levels, we help people work to balance multiple (and sometimes opposing) forces in order to protect the things we all value: things like farms, jobs, and good schools. We also help people try to solve civic problems in order to make our communities even better.

Since 2001, Vital Communities has been working on four regional issues: agriculture, housing, transportation, and connection to the land ("sense of place"). We operate **two programs** and **two regional partnerships**. The programs are called *Valley Food & Farm* and *Valley Quest*. The partnerships are the *Upper Valley Housing Coalition* and the *Upper Valley Transportation Management Association*. You can learn more about Vital Communities by visiting our website at [www.vitalcommunities.org](http://www.vitalcommunities.org).

### **What was the quality-of-life survey project?**

Vital Communities periodically asks the people who live in our service area about the overall condition of our towns and region. We listen to residents' needs and concerns. When an issue arises in multiple towns, we help build partnerships of individuals, business leaders, town officials, and many others to work on that issue together.

In 2005, it was time for us to take the pulse of public opinion again. Local leaders are making choices that are extremely important for this region in the decade ahead. In ten years, we'll have to live with the consequences of these choices. Vital Communities wanted to hold a light up to help citizens and leaders see the choices and make them consciously. We wanted to offer people a new opportunity to reflect on what makes their

towns and region strong, and what needs to be done in order to make them stronger. We wanted to share this information with town officials and with the many others who may find it useful as they make decisions about their work.

For the first time, we decided to collect this information via a survey. Since it was our first such effort, and since we did not have a large budget, we chose a non-scientific approach.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Survey design:**

Staff and Board members worked together to design the survey instrument (see Appendix A). Starting with a template—a quality-of-life survey published in 2000 by the Herald Tribune of Sarasota, Florida—they made additions and changes to create a survey for our service area. They drew on the input we received in 2003 when we conducted focus groups with 24 people from across this region. These 24 participants were community and business leaders whose work and interests afford them a regional viewpoint. We asked them to describe the greater Upper Valley region's strengths and challenges, as well as threats to its future. In what ways would they like to see this region change? In what ways would they like to see it remain the same? From hundreds of issues and observations, we distilled 4 major themes:

- **Growth:** the large, ongoing influx of new residents to this area
- **Public funding cutbacks** (starting at the federal level, then passed on to states and then to municipalities)
- **Bedroom Communities:** dispersed housing that is increasingly distant from where people work
- **Inexperience at working regionally** to address region-wide issues

These themes informed the writing of our survey questions.

In order to reach a wide audience, we planned from the beginning to publish our survey in local newspapers. We therefore designed the survey to fit within one full newspaper page. This spatial limitation affected our survey design. For questions 2-33, we offered respondents a 2-choice scale (Agree, Disagree) rather than a 5-choice scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, No opinion, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Many respondents were dissatisfied with this yes-or-no design—they would have preferred a wider response

scale. Respondents often elected to leave a question blank, and those answers were recorded as “No Opinion.”

Another complaint was the fact that we did not include definitions for the 32 Ideal Community Components in our list. Each component was described in only a few words. In some cases, this left the component open to a wide range of interpretation, which frustrated many respondents.

These are both legitimate complaints with our survey design, and both were unfortunately caused by the spatial limitation mentioned above.

### **Survey distribution:**

We ran the survey from March-August 2005. It was open to all members of the general public who live or work in one of the 69 towns in our service area. We printed it in the Eagle Times, the Connecticut Valley Spectator, and the Vermont Standard newspapers. We mailed 20 copies to each Town Administrator or Clerk. Resource Systems Group posted the survey on our website. We alerted the 10,000 people on Vital Communities’ mailing list that the survey was available either online or in print. We ran transaction ads in the Valley News with the survey’s web address and our offer to mail a copy to anyone who wished to fill it out. And we emailed press releases to organizations and media outlets. Through these methods, we ‘got the word out’ as widely as we could in ways that were not time-intensive. Since our staffing on this project was limited, we hoped that our net was cast widely enough that we’d receive surveys from a diverse sample of residents.

We experienced one problem with our survey distribution: many people who tried to take the survey online found the process frustrating. To answer each question, the online respondent had to click on a circle next to his/her chosen answer. The circle would then be filled in by a black dot. Many people found it difficult to see if a circle was filled in, or *which* circle was filled in. They thought they had clicked on a circle, but when they attempted to proceed to the next question, a message appeared saying that they had not selected an answer. They often thought that the survey program was malfunctioning. When survey takers contacted us about this problem, we explained the need to look closely at the circles and encouraged them to try again. We greatly regret the frustration that these respondents experienced, and we likely lost some surveys from people who gave up.

As mentioned above, our survey distribution was scattershot. We did not pay survey professionals to recruit participants in order to meet demographic or geographic quotas. We therefore ran the risk that our respondents would be a relatively homogeneous

group of citizens who were already engaged at the civic level, had already heard about Vital Communities, and were willing and able to fill out our survey. We believed that even if we did end up with a homogeneous sample, there would still be meaning and value in hearing the opinions of hundreds of local residents.

Some people disagree. Regrettably, we did end up with a homogenous sample of respondents (see “Results,” below), and we have heard both from survey takers and forum participants that our survey was not worth doing if it did not yield results representing everyone who lives in our service area. One danger, they said, lies with people who will discuss the survey results as though they represent the views of everyone in this region. They may not be careful to remind their audiences that our group of respondents did not represent the diversity of our region’s population.

We agree that unfortunately, this could happen. On the pages of this report that include data and charts, we include a caution against extrapolating these results to represent the views of all the region’s residents. *We urge anyone who discusses these findings to include the same warning.* We regret that we cannot present statistically inclusive survey findings that would more easily be used by this region’s residents to further their community work. Yet we hope that readers will still find value and interest in the opinions of 932 individuals who live in the greater Upper Valley region.

### **Distribution of survey results:**

We closed the survey at the end of August 2005. We spent the next two months analyzing the data, planning five public forums (one in each sub-region of our service area), preparing a presentation of our survey results, and customizing the presentation for each sub-region. We advertised the forums through a wide variety of communication channels. The dates and locations were as follows:

- October 27, 2005           Haverhill, NH
- November 1, 2005        Wilder, VT
- November 3, 2005        Bellows Falls, VT
- November 8, 2005        Royalton, VT
- November 10, 2005       New London, NH

These forums, held on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 5:30-7:30 p.m., attracted a total of 266 people. Each forum began with a light supper, followed by opening remarks and a PowerPoint presentation of survey results. We presented data for our overall service area as well as data for the sub-region in which we were located that evening. We then facilitated a group discussion of questions about, and reactions to, the

survey results. It was very meaningful for us to hear community members speak about key issues and trends and to observe the high level of civic engagement in these groups of citizens.

We will mail a copy of this report to each person who attended one of the above forums. We will also share our survey results with media outlets, regional planning commissions, selected nonprofit organizations, and anyone who requests a copy. Finally, we'll mail a copy of this report, as well as a customized report on individual town results, to the officials of each town in our service area. Please feel free to reproduce and share this report.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS: OVERALL

### **Division of our Service Area into “Sub-Regions”:**

Most residents of Vital Communities’ service area identify with a much smaller geographic area than that encompassed by this survey. In other words, citizens identify with the town(s) in which they live and work, and the adjacent towns, but not with the whole 69-town region that we serve. Therefore, we tracked each survey respondent’s town of residence and grouped our results into five geographic “sub-regions” in order to report results for smaller sections of the region as well as for the total area. We drew arbitrary boundaries to divide the 69 towns into 5 sub-regions: north, south, east, west and center (see map on page 2).

### **Demographics:**

932 people completed our survey, representing .7% of the 136,366 people who live in our 69-town region. The majority (61%) live in our service area’s 11 central towns. The other sub-regions were represented as follows: 12% north, 11% west, 9% east and 7% south. Respondents represented 86% of the towns in our service area (59 out of 69 towns).

57% of survey takers were women; 43% were men.

The ages of our respondents were:

Age 16 to 24:	4%
Age 25 to 34:	14%
Age 35 to 44:	22%
Age 45 to 54:	24%

Age 55 to 64: 20%  
Age 65 or older: 15%  
(1% did not respond)

The highest levels of education were:

Attended some high school: 1%  
Graduated from high school / GED: 3%  
Attended some college: 7%  
Received an associate college degree: 4%  
Received a bachelor's degree: 31%  
Received a master's degree: 26%  
Received a doctoral or professional degree: 11%  
(17% did not respond)

The household annual incomes were:

Less than \$25,000: 8%  
\$25,000 - \$49,000: 21%  
\$50,000 - \$74,999: 25%  
\$75,000 - \$99,999: 16%  
\$100,000 - \$149,999: 16%  
\$150,000 or more: 10%  
(4% did not respond)

Demographically, therefore, a slight majority of our survey takers were female. A substantial majority were between the ages of 35 and 64. Our respondents were also more likely to be financially well-off and educated at the college level than is the average Upper Valley resident.

**Data:**

Our survey data are found in Appendix B. For each question, results are listed in six columns: one for total responses (all answers taken together) and five across which we sorted the total data by geographic sub-region. We listed each person's answers both in the Total column *and* in the column for their town's sub-region. Tracking the data by sub-

region helped us learn whether some issues are considered important in one part of our service area but not in another and whether opinions vary between the different sub-regions.

The same data that are listed numerically in Appendix B are presented as graphs in Appendix E.

Survey data sorted by each of our five geographic sub-regions are found in Appendix C. If you would like to see a printout of survey data from just one town, please call (802) 291-9100 x 111 to request the data you need.

First, we'll look at data from the region overall. Then we'll look at similarities and differences in the data when they are broken out by sub-region.

### **Overall results:**

Our survey began with a list of 32 Ideal Community Components. Respondents were asked if their town, and if our region (Vital Communities' service area), is meeting each ideal. Survey takers were largely in agreement concerning many components—that the region either is, or is not, achieving them. Concerning others, they were *divided* over whether or not the region is achieving that ideal. It must be noted that many respondents did not feel knowledgeable enough about some components at the regional level to agree or disagree. When no answer was given, we recorded the response as “no opinion.”

Respondents were largely in agreement that this region has: **friendly people** (90%), a **sense of personal safety** for residents (85%), a **clean environment** (84%), **adequate stores and services** (78%), **support for charities** (78%), **plenty of recreational facilities** (78%), an **enjoyable entertainment scene** (77%), a **stimulating cultural scene** (75%), **good schools** (74% agreed), **accessible health care** (72%), and **religious and spiritual diversity** (68%). The *region* scored high marks for these 11 community ideals.

Concerning five of them—good schools, friendly people, support for charities, a clean environment, and a sense of personal safety—respondents said that their *town* is also succeeding in these areas. In the other six areas, there were respondents who believed that the region *is* succeeding while their own town is *not*: religious and spiritual diversity (73 people), adequate stores and services (236 people), plenty of recreational facilities (107 people), a stimulating cultural scene (237 people), an enjoyable entertainment scene (310 people), and accessible health care (83 people). These respondents believe that these important needs cannot be met in their own towns but can be met elsewhere in the region.

Survey takers also largely agreed that this region does NOT have: **enough affordable housing** (said 77 %) or **racial and ethnic diversity** (said 70%). The region

scored slightly better than respondents' towns on these two issues: 22 people said that the region, but not their town, has enough affordable housing; 48 people thought the region, but not their town, is racially and ethnically diverse.

The region drew mixed opinions from our survey group concerning the remaining 19 community components. In some cases, there was still a clear majority on the side of either agreement or disagreement. A majority agreed that this region has: **vital town centers** (64%), a **strong sense of community** (62%), **reasonable traffic conditions** (59%), an **effective court system** (58%), and a **well-diversified economy** (54%). A majority also agreed that this region does NOT have: **well-planned development** (said 63%), a **convenient public transit system** (said 58%), **adequate sidewalks and bike paths** (said 56%), or a **low poverty rate** (said 50%).

For the following components, respondents were divided, with a high percentage of "No opinion" answers:

- **Enough job and income opportunities** (47% agreed, 43% disagreed, 10% no opinion)
- **Liveable wages** (48% agreed, 42% disagreed, 10% no opinion)
- **Enough open space conserved for the public** (49% agreed, 34% disagreed, 17% no opinion)
- **A strong farming economy** (36% agreed, 45% disagreed, 18% no opinion)
- **Available child care** (36% agreed, 25% disagreed, 39% no opinion)
- **Available senior care** (41% agreed, 19% disagreed, 40% no opinion)
- **A well-functioning safety net for the needy** (32% agreed, 40% disagreed, 28% no opinion)
- **Appropriate zoning** (27% agreed, 42% disagreed, 31% no opinion)
- **Appropriate building regulations** (33% agreed, 29% disagreed, 38% no opinion)
- **All public service positions filled** (37% agreed, 16% disagreed, 47% no opinion).

Appendix E contains these data in graph form. It includes 32 pages of charts: one page for each Ideal Community Component. On each page, one chart shows what respondents said about their town, and another chart shows what they said about this region.

In our survey, we offered a blank line (Question #34) where respondents could write in other community ideals or comments about their town. Some of the input we received is included in Appendix D. (Town officials will receive all survey comments

from residents of their town.) Here are a few examples, selected at random:

- “My town has a unique blend of community-supported and traditional agriculture.”
- “For a very small rural community, we have an incredible sense of togetherness and a lively artistic community.”
- “People have a high willingness to serve on community boards and committees. There is also conflict between loving the "rural life" and desiring that modern technological advances be available.”
- “My town does not have adequate ridgeline development provisions.”
- “This town has many good qualities; however, there is no control over the drug and alcohol problems in the apartment complexes. The Town has cut the budget for the police department and added to their duties, which makes it hard to control the crime rate.”
- “In my town, there is still too much put on an individual's personal goals rather than the good of the majority, because we lack an overall plan for the community.”
- “My town needs civic groups for youth (scouting, 4-H, etc.) and adults (community theater, chorus, etc.).”
- “My town has limited housing that is especially targeted for seniors. It is worn out and declining by socio-economic standards... There is definitely a need for revitalization.”
- “My town has a growing sense of its position as a desirable place to live...sales of homes indicate that to those who have lived here for awhile.”
- “My town needs a better supermarket.”
- “My town does *not* have facilities for disabled persons (supervised independent living) – especially for young adults.”
- “There is a high willingness to serve on boards and committees; a high degree of compassion for families or individuals in crisis; and a high interest in learning about ‘what’s going on.’”
- “My town does not have environmental stewardship or protection of natural resources.”
- “Our planning commission is learning that it has the muscle to manage growth.”

- “We have a population of people with good character and common sense.”
- “My town has the best of all worlds...rural character, but quick access to very good shopping, medical care, and cultural activities.”
- “I wish there were more events which brought locals together...I wish I knew more people by name.”
- “We have excellent fire and emergency services with exceptionally well-trained volunteers, and a good library that meets the needs of citizens without overbearing rules.”
- “I have comfort in knowing that my community will be sustainable for my entire lifetime based on a well-thought-out master plan.”
- “We have too much traffic and not enough hockey rinks!”
- “My town is a great place, but in a fragile region. We need to work together to build respect for our natural and cultural environment. If we can retain a common vision and balance, we can leave our children and our country with something truly special.”
- “My town is very diverse and village-oriented. This makes any town-wide initiative difficult.”

Next, we asked survey takers to review all 32 community components that we had listed and to choose *three* ‘that should be the most critically important for this *region* to focus on.’ We asked them to rank those three in order of importance, with the first being the most important. A table with all of the answers is printed in Appendix B, and a graph of these data is included in Appendix E. We tabulated the answers to this question in two different ways: (1) a simple count of the total number of votes for each component, and (2) an analysis that weighted most-important votes more heavily than second- and third-most-important votes. The two methods yielded very similar results.

In method #1, we counted the total number of votes for each component (i.e., number of most-important, second-most-important, and third-most-important votes). For example, Good Schools received 205 most-important votes, 91 second-most-important votes, and 61 third-most-important votes for a total score of 357. With this method, we found six components that scored higher than 200 votes (out of 2,755):

Good Schools:	357 votes (12.96%)
Enough Affordable Housing:	318 votes (11.54%)
Liveable Wages:	249 votes ( 9.04%)
A Clean Environment:	224 votes ( 8.13%)
Well-Planned Development:	219 votes ( 7.95%)
Enough Job & Income Opportunities:	216 votes ( 7.84 %)

It can be argued that “Liveable Wages” and “Enough Job and Income Opportunities” are close enough in meaning that those two categories could be combined. Doing so gives the new “Jobs & Wages” component a total score of 465 votes (16.89%), placing it at the top of the list as respondents’ *most important issue* for this region to focus on. After these Top Six components, the next-highest were a Well-Diversified Economy (136 votes) and a Strong Feeling of Community (136 votes). After those, the next-highest components dropped to 83 votes and below.

In method #2, we weighted most-important votes at 100%, second-most-important votes at 66%, and third-most-important votes at 50%. Using the example above for Good Schools, we calculated: 205 most-important votes at 100% (205), plus 91 second-most-important votes at 66% (60), plus 61 third-most-important votes at 50% (30.5). The weighted total for this component is 296. With this method, we again found a clear Top-Six list containing the same six components as the list from method #1. Here, these six components each received a weighted score of 150 or more (the next-highest components received scores below 100):

Good Schools:	296
Enough Affordable Housing:	234
Liveable Wages:	189
A Clean Environment:	169
Enough Job & Income Opportunities:	158
Well-Planned Development:	157

Again, combining “Liveable Wages” with “Enough Job & Income Opportunities” yields a total (347) that puts “Jobs & Wages” in first place as respondents’ *most important issue* for this region to focus on. Both methods also show that Good Schools are respondents’ second-most-important issue, and Enough Affordable Housing is the third-most-important. A Clean Environment and Well-Planned Development rounded out respondents’ list of top priorities.

The second half of our survey contained seven multiple choice questions. Responses to all seven questions are printed in Appendix B, and graphs of these data are included in Appendix E. In summary, a majority of survey takers believe that this region's population level is "about right" (82%) and the overall quality of life is "excellent" (63%) or "satisfactory" (29%). Also positive is the fact that 97% of respondents believe that they can have some amount of impact in "making their community a better place to live": 31% said they could have a small impact; 46% said they could have a moderate impact; and 20% said they could have a big impact. These respondents feel empowered to help create positive change.

We also asked survey takers to comment on school funding and on the region's cultural, entertainment and recreation facilities. Concerning school funding, 65% of respondents said that their town's public schools receive either "adequate funding" (45%) or "more than enough funding" (20%) to provide a good education. 18% said they are underfunded, and 5% said that they are "grossly underfunded." Concerning the region's cultural, entertainment and recreation facilities, only 40% of survey takers felt that these facilities "meet the needs of people at all income and age levels." 49% told us that: there are not enough facilities (19%); they primarily serve people with leisure time and money (23%); they don't adequately serve older people (4%); or they don't adequately serve young people (3%). This is an area for improvement at both the town and regional levels.

Finally, we asked two questions about attitudes toward growth. The first was, "Which one of the following strategies is the best way to handle growth?" 54% of respondents urged the region's citizens to keep the brakes on: "Allow growth only if it won't hurt quality of life." 38% felt that "slow but steady growth" should be allowed. Only 4% wanted to "Stop growth now," and only 5% wished to "Actively encourage growth." In response to the second question, a majority of survey takers were either "somewhat confident" (55%) or "very confident" (10%) that their town government "has the ability to protect quality of life *and* meet the needs of growth." However, 30% were "not at all confident" in their town government's ability to allow growth in ways that will not harm our current standard of living.

The survey's final question was open-ended: "What would you recommend to maintain or improve the quality of life in this region?" Survey takers gave us 64 pages of comments in response to this question. A random sample of these answers is found in Appendix D. (Town officials will receive all survey comments from residents of their town.)

Over the following six pages, we list a random selection of these answers, sorted by topic:

**Growth:**

- “We need careful growth, an eye on *kinds* of growth, and the ability or knowledge to preserve our natural areas.”
- “Be wary of too much growth on Rt. 12A and in other areas. I would hate to see the Upper Valley become a small suburb similar to the towns surrounding Burlington. This will only lead to more traffic and crime.”
- “Let planned growth take place...it builds the tax base, brings new people and new ideas to the region!”
- “Stop growth altogether and make this a nice, rural place to live, not a place of spreading suburban sprawl.”
- “Community leaders need to work together to develop a broad strategy for growth, encouraging affordable housing and transportation that is then implemented at the local level. We are quickly heading towards gridlock – we need real leadership willing to gain general consensus around some contentious issues and drive changes of some perhaps-unpopular decisions.”
- “This region has too much growth without good inter-town, inter-state communication.”
- “We are foolish to think we can stop growth. But we can channel it with good future planning...”
- “We need a very clear regional plan developed by citizens of the area from different backgrounds which is then supported by the individual communities thereby giving a larger sense of community to the region.”
- “Limit the number of big box stores coming into the area.”
- “We need careful regional planning that values quality-of-life factors, so we don’t turn into another region of cookie-cutter housing, industrial and commercial developments named after the places they replaced, where you can’t see most of the stars at night, where leaf blowers and lawn mowers replace birdsong, where safe water and healthful air are memories, and where every activity comes with a price tag.”
- “Limit growth. If people want to live in cities, they should move to the city.”
- “We have a lot to lose if growth is not appropriately managed.”

- “We need better planning with consideration to all socio-economic sectors of the community. Not just restrictions, but planning. Innovative, non-political, realistic planning...trying new things while preserving the old and traditional.”
- “Region-wide growth and master planning are needed, similar to the Hanover and Lebanon Planning Commissions’ joint meeting...contiguous planning commissions coming together to “see” each other’s plans and zoning – to foster more across-town-borders planning.”
- “We need a development plan and zoning in place ASAP.”
- “The next 30 years of growth are potentially very scary.”
- “Growth is the economic engine which gives this region its vitality. Support the fueling of that engine.”
- “We need new multi-family residential growth in areas within walking distance of shopping and work...with apartments above stores, like Europe.”
- “We need sensible zoning and building regulations to maintain what is wonderful about the Upper Valley.”
- “Focus on a sense of beauty in creating new roads, business, buildings, schools.”
- “Community leaders need to work together to develop a broad strategy for growth, encouraging affordable housing and transportation, that is then implemented at the local level.”
- “Town voters must be willing to give their local governments the tools to regulate growth and development.”

### **Housing:**

- “The major problem in the region is the lack of affordable housing, which causes a labor shortage and forces some seniors to move from where they have spent most of their lives.”
- “Build housing where the jobs are, so that plenty of land is left over for farming and wild spaces.”
- “Reuse existing buildings for well-planned, high-density housing.”
- “Place a moratorium on all housing development until rock-solid projections affirm how we can absorb any more people: sewer, water, roads, cars, schools.”
- “We need well-designed, clustered housing in the centers.”

- “There is an inability of moderate-income families to purchase a decent home.”
- “There is a huge lack of affordable housing for people with disabilities.”
- “Affordable housing=More savable income=Less commuting time=More family time=More leisure time=More time devoted to community=Stronger towns and communities”

### **Transportation:**

- “The public transit network needs to be sufficiently extensive in service hours, territory, and frequency to attract riders who would otherwise drive.”
- “Build a new bridge from DHMC/Centerra to I-91.”
- “Focus growth and development so it supports the use of public transportation and pedestrian & bike travel to jobs and services.”
- “Traffic is a terrible problem.”
- “We need to plan **now** for mass transit.”
- “Public transportation is bravely done, but could be far better.”
- “Do away with large, centralized parking, such as DHMC and the College... outlying park-and-rides served by public transport would save huge amounts of fuel and cut atmospheric pollution.”
- “We need transportation for those too elderly or disabled to get to bus stops.”
- “We need intentional development of off-road bike/pedestrian pathways connecting neighborhood and town centers...and public transit.”

### **Regional Cooperation:**

- “We need thoughtful, continuing dialogue among towns and interest groups in the region.”
- “I feel my town and others in the region don’t collaborate enough on issues such as planning, land protection, communication, and even transportation.”
- “We need more cooperation between NH and VT.”
- “We need more joint efforts of the two Regional Planning Commissions.”

- “Needed: more public discourse.”
- “VT and NH interests need to work together for the common good.”
- “The region, as a whole, has great potential and enough brain power to advance into a better society.”
- “We need regional planned development rather than stopping planning at town borders.”

### **Environment:**

- “Discourage activity that impinges on the quality of life for others – loud noises, bright light, lighting that illuminates the night sky.”
- “Let’s focus on riverside parks...if we don’t do it now, it will never happen.”
- “Keep the river in mind!!”
- “There’s not one restaurant with a river view.”
- “Teach people about this natural environment and how to enjoy it, so they don’t abuse it, destroy it, or take it for granted.”

### **Opposites:**

- (1) “The region needs progressive zoning, plus growth ordinances.”  
 (2) “This region needs less emphasis on zoning.”
- (1) “Although my town doesn’t provide many services, or much cultural enrichment, it is not a problem for me because there are more things available in neighboring towns.”  
 (2) “This region...needs more places to shop, so we don’t have to drive at least a half-hour to buy a birthday present!”
- (1) “No more excessive school funding.”  
 (2) “Pass school budgets so teachers have the funding to properly educate our children.”
- (1) “Develop ways to welcome and retain the people from other states who are moving to the area for quality of life. They are improving our tax base and local economies.”  
 (2) “Slow down the rate of people moving into the area.”

## Other:

- “This region needs police protection.”
- “Share educational resources; create target schools.”
- “Let’s bus the kids!”
- “We need community centers to play the roles once filled by churches.”
- “We need local control and NOT CONSULTANTS or out-of-state officials who have no loyalty or interest in preserving tradition or health.”
- “We need more restaurants, fast eating places – encourage Arby’s or something different than the usual McDonalds to move in...”
- “We need more business opportunities and a livable wage.”
- “We need a mall, restaurants, activities to attract people to come and spend time and money here and give jobs to people.”
- “Let citizens take care of themselves and give them the freedom to put their paychecks where they want.”
- “This region needs social and cultural opportunities for young people...by which I mean night clubs.”
- “We need more gathering places near downtown areas.”
- “We need more after-school, weekend, and holiday opportunities for school-aged children and adolescents.”
- “This region needs spaces or events in which the generations can connect.”
- “ ‘Pay folks a living wage and give them four walls,’ as Jimmy Stewart said in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and the rest of the issues will take care of themselves.”
- “Each town should have a strong and effective conservation commission. Schools should have high expectations for ALL students to learn and provide adequate resources to make that happen.”
- “We need lower health care costs and frequent public transportation for commuters on Routes 89, 91, 10 & 12.”
- “Towns and businesses need to continue to work to comply with the ADA and include people with disabilities. There is a HUGE shortage of accessible housing and accessible work/recreation opportunities. People with disabilities need to be included when people talk about diversity, not just race or other factors.”
- “Maybe we need to provide a local alternative to health insurance so that people can pursue independent businesses without a threat to family health. Some kind of regional pool to make health insurance affordable for the self-employed?”

- “Towns with lower-reputation schools need to bring their systems up to par with those of towns with higher-reputation schools. Families will then seek to live in a broader array of towns, which will alleviate many of the economic and social pressures that exist in the region today.”
- “Instead of being angry with one another, let’s have some tolerance!”
- “Population is increasing, traffic is getting heavier, and home prices are forcing people of average means to live far from their places of work.”
- “Somehow get people to value what we DO have: open space; small locally owned businesses responsive to our input; participatory democracy; a relatively clean environment; stars visible at night.”
- “We need more quality restaurants, not too expensive but nice ones. A really good diner, too!”
- “This is ‘A Wonderful Life’ compared to many, many other places, but it’s not as good a quality of life for *all* kinds of people as we could possibly provide—we do really well, but we could do better.”
- “Property taxes are too high! I have lived in PA, OH and VA and have never encountered a burden like this.”
- “Continue to foster a sense of community while allowing for a free market economy to flourish to create a vibrant economy for job creation and for places for consumers to spend their \$\$\$!”

For more comments from our survey takers, please see Appendix D.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS: BY SUB-REGION OF OUR SERVICE AREA

Appendix C sorts survey responses by sub-region of our service area. (There is one table for all responses from the northern sub-region; one table for all responses from the southern sub-region; etc.)

What differences do we see between responses from the five sub-regions? First, we’ll look at respondents’ *priorities* for issues that need our attention most urgently—those issues that we should quickly begin to work on as a region. Then we’ll take a brief look at each sub-region to see how respondents differed in describing strengths and needs in their towns.

## Highest-Priority Issues:

Regardless of where they live, respondents were unanimous in choosing the highest-priority issues for citizens of our service area to address. The same six issues made the Top Six list in each sub-region, but respondents ranked them in different orders of importance.

Most respondents placed the highest value on good schools. Respondents from the north, south and east agreed that good schools are the region's highest priority. Responses from the center *tied* Good Schools and Enough Affordable Housing as the most important issues. And respondents from the west said that Enough Affordable Housing was their top priority.

Survey takers from the west and center were the only respondents who placed highest priority on increasing the supply of affordable housing. Enough Affordable Housing was the fourth-highest priority for eastern respondents, the fifth-highest priority for southern respondents, and the sixth-highest for northern respondents.

After Good Schools, eastern and northern respondents listed Liveable Wages as their second-highest priority. Liveable Wages was also the second-highest priority of western respondents, after Enough Affordable Housing.

Closely related to Liveable Wages is the issue of Enough Job and Income Opportunities. Southern respondents rated Jobs as their second-highest priority. With Wages as their third-highest, these respondents expressed more urgency than other sub-regions about increasing economic possibilities for that area's residents. Both northern and western respondents listed Wages as their second-highest priority and Jobs as their fourth-highest priority, also indicating economic pressure on residents of those areas.

Well-Planned Development was the second-highest priority of central respondents and the third-highest priority of eastern respondents. While these survey takers therefore feel strongly about emphasizing careful planning as our towns and cities continue to grow, Well-Planned Development was a lower priority for respondents from the north (fifth-highest), south (sixth-highest), and west (sixth-highest).

A Clean Environment was the third-highest priority of both central and northern respondents. It was rated fourth in importance by southern respondents and fifth by eastern and western respondents.

To summarize these geographic differences between respondents' priorities:

- Northern and southern respondents felt less affordable housing pressure and more urgency to increase jobs and wages;

- Eastern respondents had a particular interest in well-planned development;
- Western respondents had a particular interest in affordable housing; and
- Central respondents placed less priority on increasing jobs and wages and higher priority on affordable housing and well-planned development.

While this section has described survey takers' priorities in addressing community issues, respondents also told us whether or not they believe their town is already achieving the ideals that we listed in questions 2-33. The sections below look at particular strengths and challenges of the different sub-regions according to our respondents.

### **Northern Sub-Region:**

There were 111 respondents from the northern towns in our service area. Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, survey takers from the north had the *highest* percentage of agreement that their towns have a Strong Farming Economy (65% agreed) and Reasonable Traffic Conditions (85% agreed). They also had the highest percentage of agreement that their towns have Enough Affordable Housing, although only 35% agreed.

Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, northern survey takers had the highest percentage of *disagreement* that their towns have:

- Enough job & income opportunities (88% disagreed)
- A stimulating cultural scene (76% disagreed)
- A low poverty rate (75% disagreed)
- An enjoyable entertainment scene (74% disagreed)
- Appropriate zoning (68% disagreed)
- Appropriate building regulations (61% disagreed)
- Religious & spiritual diversity (44% disagreed)

They also had a relatively high percentage of disagreement that their towns have:

- A convenient public transit system (92% disagreed)
- Liveable wages (73% disagreed)
- Well-planned development (66% disagreed)
- Ample, varied recreational facilities (53% disagreed)

Northern respondents had the *least* amount of confidence in their town governments' ability to protect quality of life while meeting the needs of growth: 41% said they were "not at all confident" that this could be accomplished by their town officials.

### **Southern Sub-Region:**

There were 70 respondents from the southern towns in our service area. Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, survey takers from the south had the *highest* percentage of agreement that their towns have Accessible Health Care (76% agreed), Available Senior Care (65% agreed), a Well-Functioning Safety Net for the Needy (54% agreed), and Racial & Ethnic Diversity (although only 28% agreed). They had a *relatively high* percentage of agreement that their towns have Religious & Spiritual Diversity (76% agreed) and Enough Affordable Housing (although only 31% agreed).

Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, southern survey takers had the highest percentage of *disagreement* that their towns have:

- A well-diversified economy (80% disagreed)
- Liveable wages (75% disagreed)
- Well-planned development (70% disagreed)
- Adequate stores & services (59% disagreed)
- Ample, varied recreational facilities (59% disagreed)
- An effective court system (39% disagreed)
- Good schools (38% disagreed)
- Reasonable traffic conditions (36% disagreed)
- A strong feeling of community (36% disagreed)
- All public service positions filled (33% disagreed)
- A clean, healthy environment (26% disagreed)
- A sense of personal safety (13% disagreed)

They also had a relatively high percentage of disagreement that their towns have:

- A convenient public transit system (88% disagreed)
- Enough job & income opportunities (85% disagreed)
- A stimulating cultural scene (69% disagreed)
- An enjoyable entertainment scene (68% disagreed)
- A low poverty rate (67% disagreed)

Southern respondents were the *least* satisfied with: (1) overall quality of life in the region (23% said it “needs improvement”); (2) the amount of funding that their schools receive (19% said they are “grossly under funded”); and (3) their towns’ cultural, entertainment and recreation facilities (only 27% said that those facilities *do* meet the needs of people at all income and age levels).

### **Eastern Sub-Region:**

There were 83 respondents from the eastern towns in our service area. Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, survey takers from the east had the *highest* percentage of agreement that their towns have Appropriate Zoning (61% agreed) and Well-Planned Development (58% agreed). They had a *relatively high* percentage of agreement that their towns have Reasonable Traffic Conditions (84% agreed) and Enough Affordable Housing (although only 34% agreed).

Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, eastern survey takers had the highest percentage of *disagreement* that their towns have a Strong Farming Economy (86% disagreed) and Vital Town Centers (49% disagreed). They also had a relatively high percentage of disagreement that their towns have an Enjoyable Entertainment Scene (72% disagreed), a Stimulating Cultural Scene (68% disagreed), and Adequate Stores & Services (57% disagreed).

Despite these challenges, 69% of eastern respondents said that the overall quality of life in the region is excellent (the second-highest level of satisfaction, after 70% of central respondents).

### **Western Sub-Region:**

There were 100 respondents from the western towns in our service area. Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, survey takers from the west had the *highest* percentage of agreement that their towns have a Strong Feeling of Community (85% agreed), Vital Town Centers (81% agreed), Religious & Spiritual Diversity (77% agreed), a Stimulating Cultural Scene (63% agreed), and an Enjoyable Entertainment Scene (57% agreed). They had a *relatively high* percentage of agreement that their towns have a Strong Farming Economy (54% agreed).

Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, western survey takers had the highest percentage of *disagreement* that their towns have a Convenient Public Transit System (94% disagreed), Enough Affordable Housing (93% disagreed), a Well-

Functioning Safety Net for the Needy (57% disagreed), Available Child Care (55% disagreed), and Accessible Health Care (47% disagreed). They also had a relatively high percentage of disagreement that their towns have Liveable Wages (69% disagreed).

### **Central Sub-Region:**

There were 568 respondents from the central towns in our service area. Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, survey takers from the center had the *highest* percentage of agreement that their towns have Good Schools (95% agreed), an Effective Court System (87% agreed), Ample, Varied Recreational Facilities (76% agreed), Available Child Care (57% agreed), and a Convenient Public Transit System (although only 39% agreed). They had a *relatively high* percentage of agreement that their towns have a Stimulating Cultural Scene (61% agreed) and an Enjoyable Entertainment Scene (54% agreed).

Compared to responses from all the other sub-regions, central survey takers had the *second-highest* percentage of *disagreement* that their towns have Enough Affordable Housing (90% disagreed) and a Strong Farming Economy (78% disagreed).

Central respondents were the most enthusiastic about overall quality of life in the region (70% said it's excellent) and with school funding levels (70% said that schools receive adequate or more than enough funding). They were also the most satisfied with their towns' cultural, entertainment and recreation facilities (42% said they meet the needs of people at all income and age levels).

## **CONCLUSION**

We encourage you to study the opinions of our survey takers—concerning the overall region and your own geographic sub-area—and to draw your own conclusions about the strengths and challenges that they expressed. How do your own views agree with or differ from theirs? Which components of your community satisfy *you* the most and the least? How, and with whom, can you work to make improvements? We hope that these survey results assist you in continuing your dialogue with other citizens and groups about how your town, and this region, can move forward toward a shared vision.

One of Vital Communities' conclusions from this survey is that our respondents see the greater region as a resource that fulfills important needs that are not addressed by their

own towns. Although they identify more strongly with their town, they rely on the *region* for:

- The ability to earn a liveable wage and be part of a diversified economy;
- A larger number of job opportunities;
- A larger number of needed stores and services;
- A system of public transportation linking them to important locations;
- Varied recreational facilities and opportunities;
- Stimulating culture and entertainment;
- A safety net for the needy; and
- More options for child and older-adult care.

The residents of this region may not realize the degree to which their behavior is regional, or the degree to which their quality of life is enriched by the opportunities they enjoy in other towns. If it is true that we work, play and shop in towns throughout this area, then perhaps it's time for our minds to catch up with our actions: we could better protect and improve our individual and collective quality of life by identifying as much with the region overall as we do with our own towns. If we share a psychology of positive interdependence, and act on it, we can more effectively address change and work together on the many important issues that cross town boundaries. Our responses to these issues will determine whether our standard of living improves, declines, or remains the same over the coming decade and beyond.

97% of our survey respondents believe that they can make a difference in making their community a better place in which to live. That optimism is the foundation of strong civic engagement and progress toward shared goals. Our survey results tell us that people throughout Vital Communities' service area are struggling with similar civic challenges. These issues often stem from, and affect, the region as a whole. Often, they are not amenable to town-level solutions. The more our citizens work together across town boundaries, the better we can create the social, economic and environmental conditions that we desire for *all* residents of this region.