

Best of both worlds: Protecting Vt, adding jobs

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MONTPELIER — In an effort to preserve the character of Vermont's rural landscape and create jobs, the Vermont Council on Rural Development will tout legislation this week that it says would do both.

The council is the force behind a bill in the Legislature that would create a Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Fund and a board to administer the fund.

The goal is to use loans, grants and technical support to seed business growth in the agriculture and forest products sectors, two areas that advocates argue are ripe for greater development in Vermont.

"We have tremendous seeds with this local foods movement," said Paul Costello, the executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

Costello argues that the new fund and 13-member board, which would include members from state agencies, could have a major impact on rural development in the state.

What has happened in Hardwick, where local food businesses have blossomed, could spread throughout the state and Vermont could draw people from around the country who are interested in local, value-added businesses, supporters say.

"We believe if we're going to invest in this way, it's going to attract young people from all across the country who are interested in what's going on," Costello said.

The flip side of that vision is a state that becomes overdeveloped, said Costello, forever changing the rural landscape of farmland and forests that many residents and visitors love.

The legislation, which is an outgrowth of a study the council completed last fall, asks for \$3 million to help set up the board's infrastructure and begin lending financial support to businesses.

In a year in which lawmakers face a budget gap of about \$46 million and battles over spending loom, it may be hard to persuade the Legislature to spend money to create a new program.

But Costello said that if state officials are committed to the cause, then the money is there.

"Politics is all about making choices," he said.

Sen. Vince Illuzzi, chairman of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs, said the surge of new agricultural businesses in the last decade proves that the sector can grow jobs.

But it's not certain whether money can be set aside this year for a new program.

"There's no reason not to discuss it," he said. "Whether we embrace it with an appropriation remains to be seen. I'm a co-sponsor of the bill because it's a worthy discussion to have. I'm not yet committed to making it a must-pass bill."

Illuzzi, who bemoaned what he characterized as the legislative branch's lack of independence from the Shumlin administration, said that if the governor wants the bill to pass, it will.

"It's really going to be the governor's call if he wants to proceed on this initiative," said Illuzzi.

Chuck Ross, the secretary of agriculture, said the Shumlin administration hasn't formed a position on the bill.

"I think the administration has an understanding of the importance of the working landscape, so the general thrust is something we're supportive of, and the details we haven't had a chance to study yet," said Ross.

There have been efforts over the years to create an agricultural renaissance in Vermont, and advocates of the working landscape bill say this is the next logical step, because it brings together many of the parties who are working toward similar ends.

A coordinated effort is key and doesn't exist today, said Costello.

"If you're a value-added products business seeking help with financing or regulatory questions, you might knock on 15 doors before you get an answer, and you might get different answers," said Costello.

The Council on Rural Development is planning a news conference Wednesday at the Statehouse to highlight the bill. On Jan. 18, four committees from the House and Senate plan to hold a public hearing at the Statehouse on the legislation

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