

Rhode (Island) Scholar: Ted Brady's Vision for VLCT



The chorus of Little Rhody's official state song goes like this: "Rhode Island, oh, Rhode Island; surrounded by the sea.* Some people roam the earth for home; Rhode Island, it's for me." Fortunately for us, erstwhile Rhode Islander and current VLCT Executive Director Ted Brady ultimately decided it wasn't for him, not after he began journeying two hundred and twenty-some miles north-northwest to Vermont to savor skiing adventures as a youth; not after he received what he calls "life experiences" by responding to emergency calls in Hinesburg, Colchester, and Winooski with a fire and rescue team; and especially not after he attended and graduated from St. Michael's College, where his commencement speaker was Patrick Leahy. The senator must've made a good impression because Ted soon was working for him as a deputy press secretary and field representative. Still later, he led the Vermont office of U.S.D.A. Rural Development, served on the board of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, and worked in Governor Scott's Administration at the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. That's a lot of development, twenty years' worth all told, during which time Ted learned nearly everything there is to know about community and economic development at the federal, state, and local levels. Especially the local level.

"The reason Vermont is so interesting and dynamic is because we still respect our local level of government," he says. "That's not just a good democratic process; it also allows each community to express itself in the people that govern it, the policies they make, and the culture it creates.

"I like to say that once you've been to one, small, rural community [in Vermont], you've been to one, small, rural community," Ted says. "Each is unique, each is different, each is interesting. Every community has an asset that no other one really has." And Ted thinks that if a town can find a way to spotlight that asset – to invest in it and really own it – the town's quality of life will improve. In Vermont, nurturing that unique identity is an essential component of community and economic development.



He cites as an example the town of Burke and the hundred-plus miles of non-motorized, multi-use, recreational trails that surround it (kingdomtrails.org/). The trail network exists not on public land but on the properties of one hundred private landowners. And because both the landowners and the town have long valued outdoor recreation, their selectboard embraced and supported the idea, resulting in an asset that genuinely reflects the community's values.

Another example is Hardwick, which for several years has been experiencing a renaissance in the local food movement. Its [Center for an Agriculture Economy](#) believed a place-based agricultural economy coupled with intentional community development would be a viable path to enrich Hardwick's future. "It all happened because a group of locals thought it was a very important value," says Ted. They sold the idea to Hardwick's local officials, who also saw it as a way to improve the quality of life for their local residents while simultaneously creating economic development and interest in the town from elsewhere.

As VLCT's executive director, Ted wants to make sure this healthy relationship is respected by policy makers at both the state and federal levels. He wants Vermont's local leaders to share his belief that local government is the most important piece of what defines Vermont. "I want to turn the league into a stronger resource for these communities as they try to govern in the twenty-first century," he says. He mentions equity and evolving technology as issues local officials – which may include volunteers who have full-time day jobs – need to be able to understand so they can better represent their community.

"The breadth of what the league does for municipalities is overwhelming at times," he continues. "Having a Municipal Assistance Center doesn't mean we only answer questions on municipal law. It means that we have to have three of the foremost experts on Vermont municipal law [in the state] working here." It's more than looking up the answer to a question in a reference book. It's about thoroughly understanding



legal precedence and how the law is practiced in the field, and then being able to provide concise and timely guidance to VLCT's members.

Ted is equally upbeat regarding VLCT's Advocacy team. "Karen Horn [Public Policy and Advocacy Director] and Gwynn Zakov [Municipal Policy Advocate] are incredibly respected and capable public policy advocates who represent the interests of our towns," he says. Ted is also impressed with VLCT's legislative policy committees – he calls them a network of savvy municipal officials – who develop recommendations for what they want legislators to do regarding local government during the ensuing legislative session.

"My most important message is that I want to build a league that serves the modern needs of communities," says Ted. "Those needs comprise some of the most complex social justice issues we face, as well as some of the most complex financial issues, and technology issues. My goal is to be out in the field as much as possible in the coming months to meet with selectboards, town clerks, town managers – with anyone who will take the time to share with me their perspective on the kinds of services and resources they need from VLCT, now and in the future."

As Ted Brady charts VLCT's path with an irrepressible enthusiasm and eagerness, it's easy to see why he now prefers lyrics from Vermont's official state song: "They say home is where the heart is, these green mountains are my home."

David Gunn

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* Not true! Rhode Island borders Connecticut to the west and Massachusetts to the north and east. Only the southern side of the state calls the sea its neighbor.

