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COMMENTARY

Linda Sullivan: Economic development — the Vermont challenge

By **Commentary**

Dec 26 2017 10 Comments



Editor's note: This commentary is by Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, a Democrat who represents the Bennington-Rutland District in the Vermont House of Representatives and is a member of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development. This is the first of a three-part commentary. Part 2 will be published Wednesday and Part 3 on Thursday.

I set out here, in this first of three installments, to address one of our state's more perplexing challenges — our inability, and perhaps even our collective unwillingness, to develop effective strategies to expand economic opportunities for Vermonters.

I do not mean to cast Vermont negatively or to be pessimistic. We have a lot going for us. We are unbelievably blessed by the natural beauty of our state, and by the openness, social awareness, progressiveness and generosity of individual Vermonters. There is tremendous citizen engagement. Our government works pretty well. It's remarkably accessible and transparent. On the business side, we enjoy vibrant hospitality and food industries and we rightfully nurture our farming communities and rural culture. There are a lot of things that are working well.

But in terms of dynamic economic growth and development, we seem to be just treading water. While we have good employment numbers and our smaller businesses and our hospitality industry provide many with excellent jobs, there is a relative shortage of jobs that present true "professional development" and "career advancement" opportunities. I'm referring here to the types of jobs that exist in more populated states and in distant cities, where workers have the ability to develop alternative career paths, grow professionally, enjoy job mobility, and experience real long-term wage growth.

Because of the relative absence of such opportunities across Vermont, I'm concerned that we're not retaining many of our talented young people or enticing them to return after their college years away. That makes it difficult, as well, for dual-career couples with families to thrive or for Vermont to attract talented professionals from other states with "trailing spouses." Our aging demographic and flat population-growth projections has to, in turn, discourage external investments that would result in a greater supply of affordable housing, in a deeper pool of health care providers, in more child care options and even in our enjoyment of consistently acceptable cellphone service.

Of course, we also have not only this big appetite for spending (laudably, to take care of less fortunate Vermonters) but are hampered by having a limited commercial tax base from which to spend. We have as a state decided to rely most heavily on property taxes to fund the ever-growing cost of essential services (education, police, water and fire). Our real estate tax burden effectively results in increased housing costs across the board (that is, to renters too), depresses our residential resale markets and in the process, discourages relocation here.

I hear often of what I think of as "half solutions": We need to create more educational and training opportunities for our young people; we need to create a greater supply of affordable housing to house working families; we need to attract more physicians; we need to raise the minimum wage; we need better internet and cell service. I refer to these as "half solutions" because you can't just train people to hold diverse, higher-paying jobs that either don't exist or are geographically dispersed, create more housing for a workforce that is only marginally growing, bring more doctors to service small and sometimes distant patient populations, forcibly increase labor costs for our small-business economy unable readily to raise prices to cover wage increases, or prompt business investment in communications infrastructure to service a relatively small consumer base.

I have come to the unremarkable (but seemingly controversial) conclusion that we cannot meaningfully expand economic opportunities for Vermonters by sitting back and patiently relying on homegrown "organic" growth. We need to develop better strategies to also attract business to this state. We need to be looking for opportunities to bring clean technologies here – businesses that will capitalize on the tremendous assets we have, our environment, our people, our institutions. We need to grow our tax base. We need to grow, period. More consumers, more families, more young professionals, more business, more opportunity.

That does not mean we have to surrender to industrial or commercial sprawl, to sacrifice natural assets or to compromise our Vermont culture and values. Those are complete non-starters. Rather, it means developing sharply hewn strategies to attract (and then retain) good, environmentally conscious, Vermont-friendly businesses to the state. We don't seem to be working on such a strategy in any meaningful way.

We have today available to us, in my opinion, some ready-made branding opportunities — around green technologies and environmental sustainability — that Vermont can and should develop. At the same time, we badly need to mitigate a significant perception problem that in the view of many has discouraged external investment, economic development and job growth in our state — Vermont's very unique land development law, Act 250.

Although a Legislative Commission on Act 250 has been formed to look generally at improvements to the law, the commission may end up having a discussion that does not also incorporate a full and robust conversation about what we envision the Vermont economy to look like in the next 10, 20 or 50 years. In my opinion, we cannot calibrate Act 250 without developing a clear vision — and strategy — around our long-term economic future. The burden is on our voters and businesses to come forward and demand that we have this larger conversation, and to show up and speak loudly when the Act 250 Commission begins next year to solicit public input.



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