

My Turn: Vermont's competitive advantage **By Bill Stritzler • May 1, 2009**

Many of today's visitors to Smugglers' Notch Resort are too young to remember when Gov. Phil Hoff's administration launched their enormously successful "beckoning country" campaign in the 1960s. Their actions threw open the state's doors to down-country people yearning for fresh air, open space and a slower pace of life. They came in droves back then, and they still do today. This influx of visitors generates an economic bonanza, bringing in over \$1.5 billion per year to this state and supporting over 33,000 jobs.

Vermont's landscape of compact villages, farms, fields, forests and mountains is a tremendous economic asset, and an asset we need to take care of. Visitors at Smuggs come for the amenities and experiences we offer, but being in Vermont is definitely part of the draw. Our rural landscape supports a wide range of businesses -- skiing, hiking, bicycling, boating, hunting, fishing, bird watching and sightseeing all grow out of this. And don't forget the economic punch of foliage season.

Agriculture and forestry also employ many people in rural locations, and contributes more than \$300 million to the Vermont economy. Beyond the basics of milk and wood, our farms and working forests spin off countless **business** innovations -- in specialty foods, biofuels, hospitality and green-certified furniture manufacturing, to name a few. The demand for locally produced food is growing here, and through the Internet, local Vermont businesses also have access to a global marketing platform. A maple sugar maker near us in Johnson has regular customers from Europe and Asia.

Vermont's quality of life is a competitive advantage, one that inspires entrepreneurs to start businesses here and helps us to attract and retain a solid labor force. To cite a classic example, this is how IBM wound up in Essex Junction. With a few variations, this is my personal story, too.

To protect the landscape that defines Vermont, our General Assembly created the Housing and Conservation Board in 1987. Every legislature since then has continued this initiative, conserving hundreds of farms, miles of hiking trails, town beaches, swimming holes, parks, and natural areas for people and wildlife. VHCB has proven to be one of the best public investments we could make in this state's communities, in its economy and in our way of life. Can you imagine Vermont without this crucial investment that helped to create 9,400 permanently affordable homes and apartments, to conserve more than 490 and protect 250,000 acres of forestland and important natural areas over the last 20 years? Recognizing the value of our intact landscape and livable communities, legislators in the Vermont House worked very hard to reverse drastic funding cuts to the VHCB program that were proposed in the administration's budget. Now the chance to protect what we value about Vermont passes into the capable hands of the conference committee.

Let's recognize the value of our conserved landscape, applaud the development of affordable homes, and take responsibility for our own future. Now is the time to focus on

our strengths and not neglect one of the best and most lasting investments we can make in Vermont.