

Rep. Scott Campbell *Rebuild Community*

Nice phrase, "rebuild community." I think it crisply sums up both what ails us as a society and what we can do to fix it.

Our lives have become increasingly "independent," as labor-saving machines turn what was once a team effort into a solo one. From farm equipment to power tools to computers to social media, our industrial might has increased material living standards — but at a cost both environmentally and socially that we have not fully reckoned with.

Socially, independence offers individual freedom, but it also increases isolation. So many ills can be attributed to isolation: depression, anxiety, drug use, crime, suicide. Isolation tears at the fabric of society. COVID, of course, has only heightened isolation.

Independence is also the basis of a market economy. Producers compete independently on price and quality; consumers benefit. The market, however, cannot by itself account for the cost of polluting the air and water. As a result, environmental degradation tears at the fabric of our common home.

The antidote to social isolation is building opportunity and engagement. The antidote to environmental destruction is building shared responsibility.

The role of public policy, in my view, is to balance individuality and community, independence and responsibility — or as Vermont's motto has it, freedom and unity.

More concretely, rural Vermont, particularly the NEK and St. Johnsbury, confronts an aging population, dwindling tax base, and increasing costs of vital services.

Some people focus on these concrete issues and the immediate short-term. Vermont is unaffordable, they say, by which they mean (as I have pointed out before) taxes are too high and must be cut. But that is the wrong focus on so many levels.

(a) Cutting taxes means cutting services.
(b) The problem isn't actually tax *rates* ("high tax" states like California and Massachusetts

are doing just fine) but tax *base*. (c) Since no one likes taxes, "no new taxes" is an easy election slogan — actually, it's pandering.

In fact, Vermont always has far more needs than we have revenue to support.

The more responsible, but harder, question is what strategies best address long-term problems.

Strategies that mitigate social isolation and environmental degradation — that increase opportunity and engagement, and that foster shared responsibility — also build our tax base by building a sustainable economy and attracting and retaining young families. If there is a simple prescription for improving

affordability, increasing the proportion of working-age families is it.

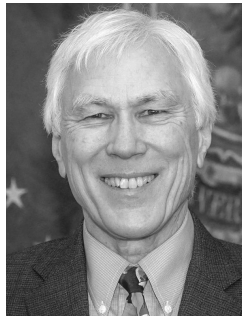
In dire times, like next year's COVID-curtailed budget, cutting programs may be necessary. But if so, it will be a drag on, rather than a boon to, Vermont's economy.

Controlling costs always matters of course. But prosperity, like business growth, comes from investment. What are the wisest investments to build shared prosperity?

My list includes: build out broadband; increase the availability and affordability of childcare; step up funding for all campuses of the Vermont State College system; build more affordable and market-rate housing; improve access to healthcare; support and integrate the arts and recreation economies; and transition to a low-carbon economy — to name a few critical investments.

I think voters are best informed when candidates discuss the role of government, their analysis of our challenges, and their priorities for addressing them. I'm disappointed my opponent, by his recent paid commentaries, seems to believe attacks and negativity are how Vermonters expect their public servants to behave.

St. Johnsbury has seen hard times for 50 years. But it is still the cultural and economic hub of the region. We will thrive again. We can and we will rebuild community.



PAID COMMENTARY

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