
Act 59 Regional Stakeholder Listening Session Report

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County Conservation District
Date: March 31, 2026



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1. Introduction

The Bennington County Conservation District (BCCD) hosted a regional listening session on March 19, 2026, at the Arlington Commons, to gather public input on the Act 59 Draft Expanded Framework. This session was part of a state effort to ensure that the development of Vermont's Conservation and Biodiversity Plan reflects the lived experiences and priorities of Vermonters across diverse regions.

BCCD's role in this process is non-advocacy and facilitative. The district does not take a position on Act 59; instead, we have provided a trusted, local venue where community members can speak openly.

All feedback collected through this session has been synthesized and anonymized for inclusion in this report.



Act 59 Regional Stakeholder Listening Session

Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection

Bennington County Conservation District | March 19th, 2026 | Arlington Commons

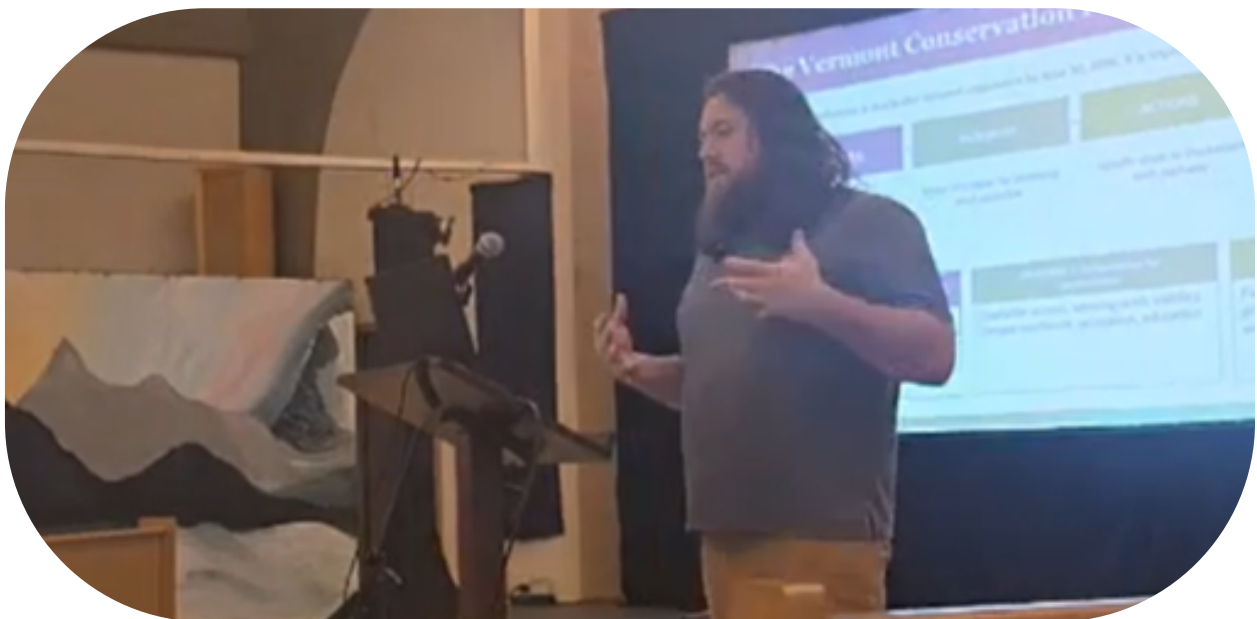
2. Methods

2.1 Session Format

The listening session was held in Arlington, Vermont, with a hybrid option for accessibility (facebook live). This venue was chosen primarily for its central location within the county.

The session began with a slide presentation, followed by open discussion, dinner, and a symbolic “vote-with-your-dollars” activity.

Participants ranged in age from (estimate) 30 to 60 and represented an even mix of men and women. Participants included community members, forest landowners, farmers and producers, municipal officials and planning commission members, natural resource professionals, recreation advocates, and concerned citizens.



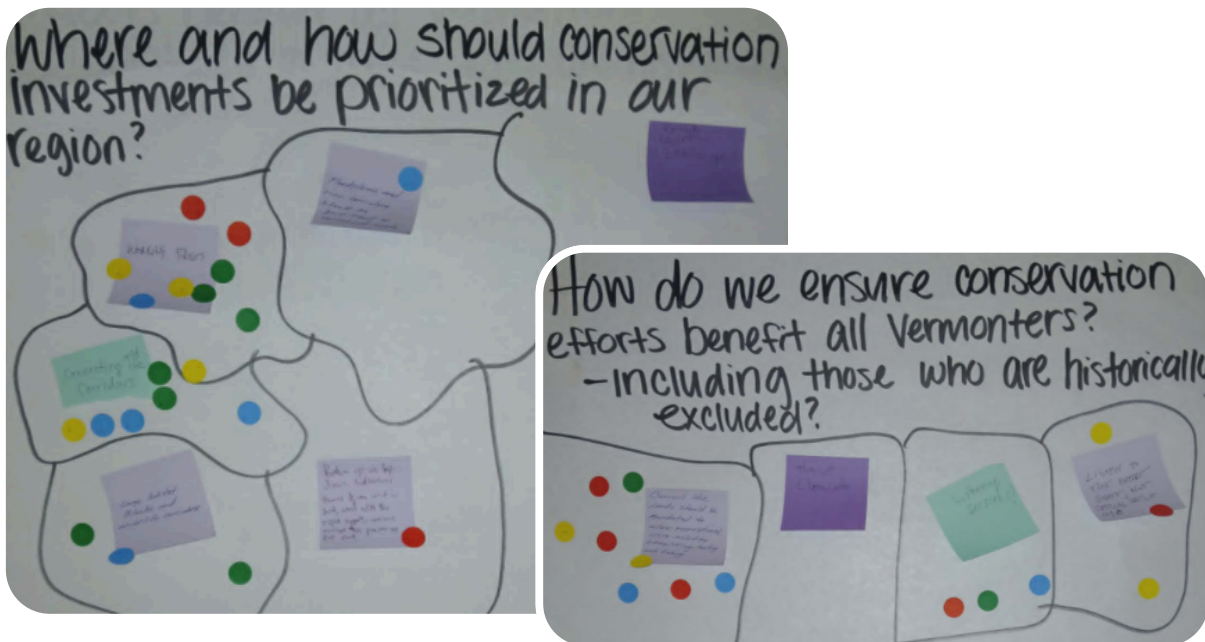
2.2 Soliciting Feedback

Sticky-Note Idea Boards: Participants responded to prompts by writing ideas on sticky notes and placing them under the corresponding question.

“Vote With Your Dollars” Prioritization Exercise: Each participant received a sheet of stickers representing \$42K each (1 sheet = \$1 million) to allocate toward issues they believed deserved the most investment.

Facilitated Discussion: Participants elaborated on their written ideas, asked clarifying questions, and responded to others’ perspectives.

Online Feedback Form: An online form remained open for public comment. Responses included detailed written comments on the draft plan.



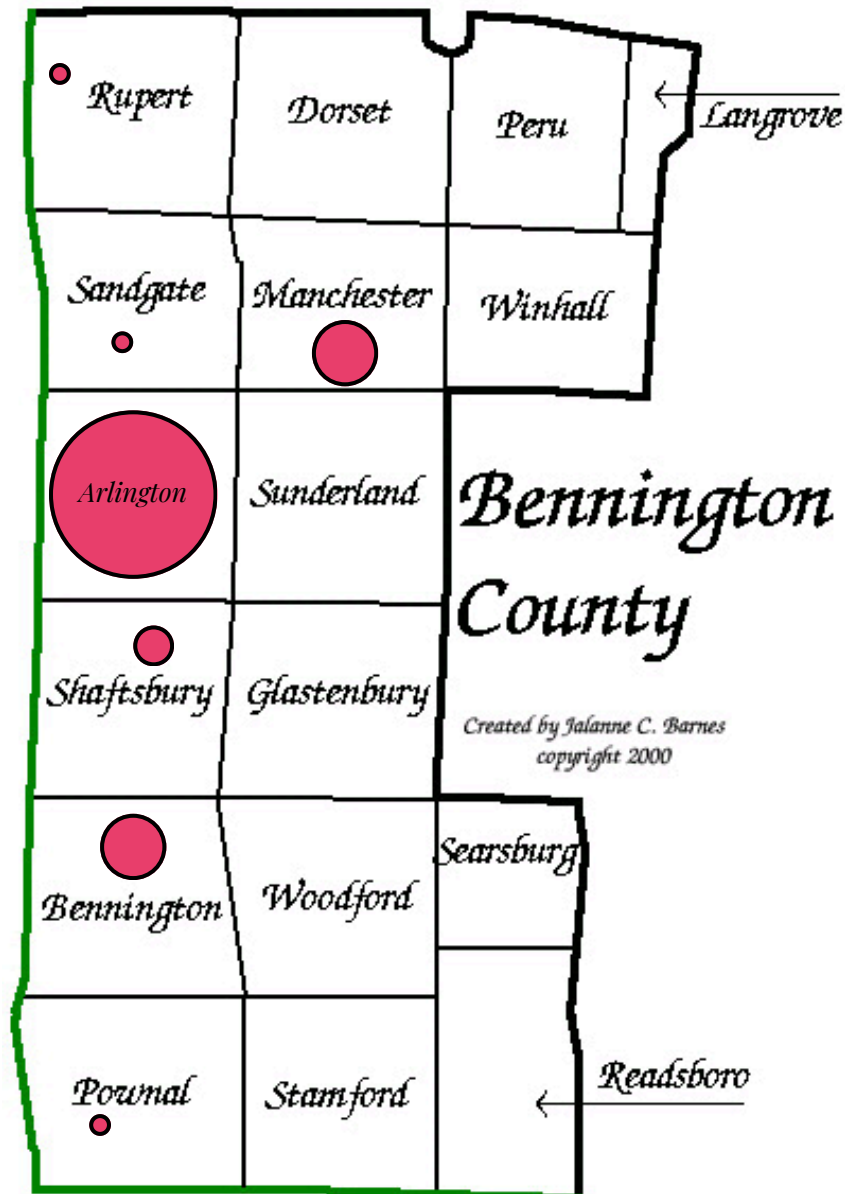
3. Results

3.1 Participation Overview

A. Pre-Event: Twenty-four individuals submitted RSVPs on our webpage, representing Arlington, Shaftsbury, Bennington, Manchester, Pownal, Sandgate, North Rupert, Middletown Springs, and Hartland. Respondents included forest landowners, farmers, municipal officials, natural resource professionals, and community members.

Many indicated active involvement in conservation, including current use enrollment, VLT easements, river corridor restoration, local planning and mapping, recreation management

B. In-Person Attendance: Attendees represented a similar cross-section, with strong participation from Arlington and surrounding towns.



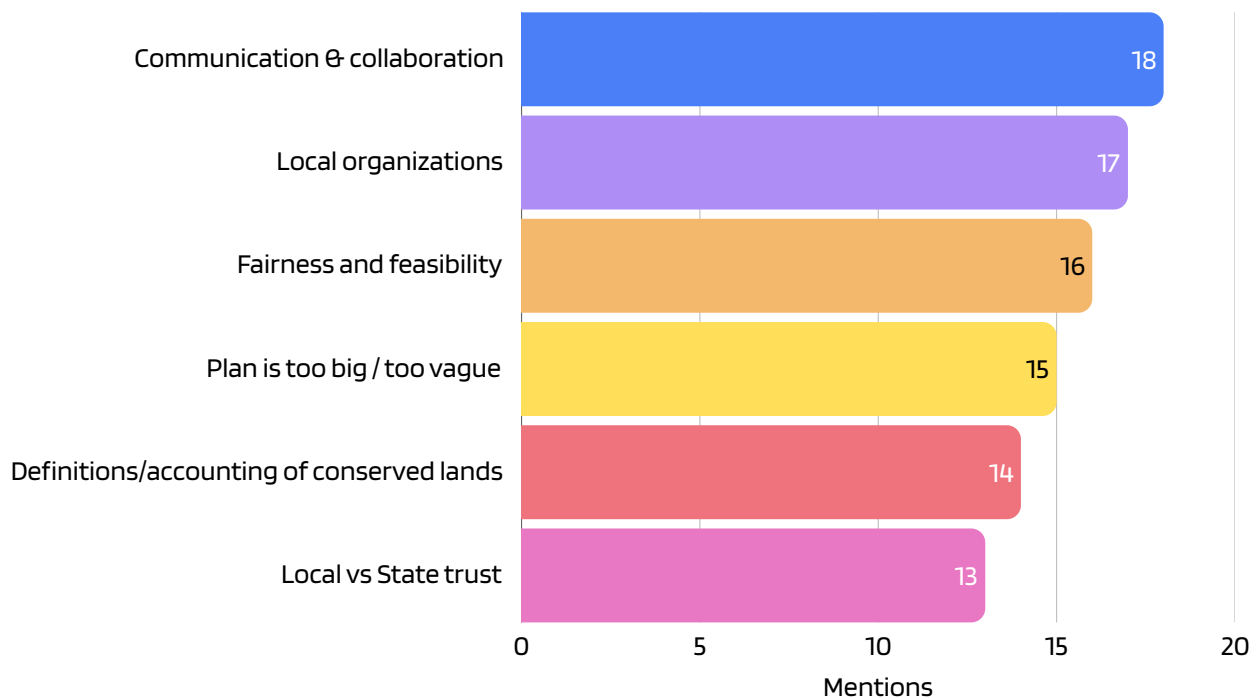
3.2 In-Person Exercise Results

Participants directed the highest symbolic investments toward:

- supporting the forest products industry;
- conserving active farmland and forestland, and;
- ensuring that local conservation districts are involved in implementation.

Connecting wildlife corridors also emerged as a clear priority, as well as calls for better mapping, more outreach and education, and affordable housing for working families.

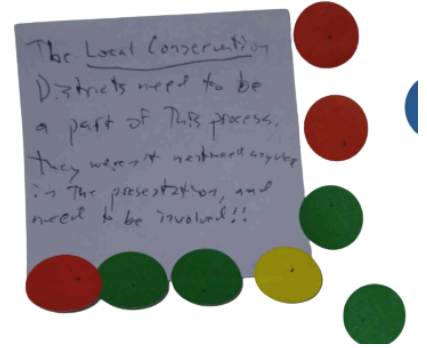
Concerns about demographic and economic pressures surfaced as well, including the negative impacts of wealthy out-of-state buyers/second homes, the rise of short-term rentals, and the loss of access to land traditionally used for hunting, fishing, and recreation. Many participants argued that short-term rentals should be taxed as commercial use, reflecting a broader desire for policies that support a year-round economy.



3.2 In-Person Exercise Results

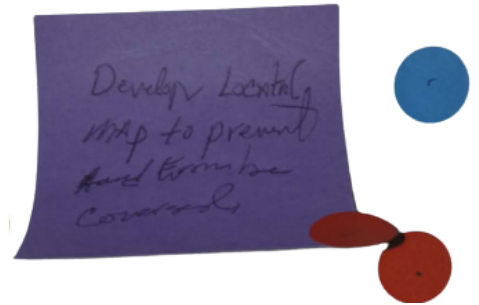
D. Investment priorities

1. Local conservation districts must be involved (21 votes)
2. Support for forest products industry (17 votes)
3. Active farmland and forestland (15 votes)



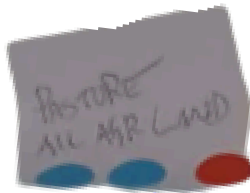
E. Collaboration opportunities

1. Tax short-term rentals as commercial (5 votes)
2. Include towns and community members (3 votes)
3. Retiree volunteers and school partnerships (2 votes)



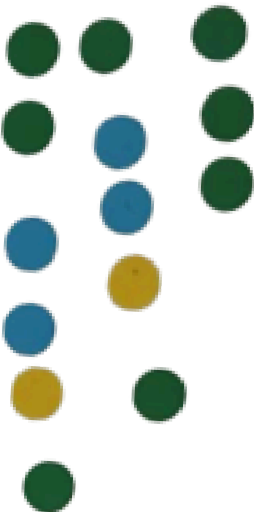
F. Community resource needs

- Local maps to guide conservation decisions (11 votes)
- Affordable housing (10 votes)
- Education investment (7 votes)
- Outreach and technical assistance (6 votes)



G. Agricultural practices to support

1. Pasture and all agricultural land (17 votes)
2. Forestland grazing (15 votes)
3. Ensuring conservation benefits all Vermonters
4. Mandate recreation access on Current Use lands (8 votes)
5. Listening sessions and statewide engagement (3 votes each)



H. Regional conservation priorities

1. Working forests (10 votes)
2. Wildlife corridor connectivity (6 votes)
3. Floodplains and river corridors (1 vote)

3.3 Online Feedback

Online submissions provided detailed commentary, including:

1. Support for integrating climate, ecology, and working lands;
2. Concern that the plan is overly expansive and lacks specificity;
3. Desire for clearer definitions and mapping criteria;
4. Recognition of the ecological importance of the Taconic Range;
5. Concern about fragmentation from estate lots and long driveways;
6. Interest in term easements for certain situations;
7. Concern about the long-term stewardship burden on local organizations; and
8. Desire for tax relief for small parcels in critical wildlife areas.



4. Analysis

Throughout the evening, people spoke from direct experience with their land and communities, raising questions about unclear definitions, daunting feasibility, and the practicalities of implementing a statewide conservation framework in a region with limited working landmass and municipal capacity.

A central theme was the need for clarity around what counts as “conserved” land. Participants repeatedly returned to the question of whether Current-use land (actively managed and stewarded but not permanently conserved) should be included in the conservation inventory. **When put to a vote, every person in the room raised a hand in support of including current-use working lands under managed conservation plans as conserved lands.** Many expressed that sustainably managed farmland and forestland already contribute significantly to ecological health and should be recognized accordingly.

Participants also expressed that Act 59 and related legislation feels top-down/“one-size-fits-all” and undermines Vermont’s long tradition of local governance. Several described the bill as divisive or unworkable, that this approach imposes unrealistic expectations on rural towns, and fails to account for the cultural and economic importance of working lands.



4.1 Themes

A. A plan that feels too big and too vague

The plan is not sufficiently grounded in clear goals, definitions, or practical boundaries. People struggle to see what, exactly, will happen and why.

Key elements:

- Tries to cast a wide net; details and priorities hard to track.
- Lack of specificity about which lands, which land types, and regulatory implications.
- Confusion about how the plan interacts with existing regulations and conservation projects.



B. State policy legacies

Reactions to the plan are heavily filtered through past experiences with state policies on taxation, land use, and education.

Key elements:

- Stories about farmers being taxed off their land and forced to sell.
- Current-Use framed as a “rich man’s program” with poor enforcement.
- Belief that the state “screwed it up” before and may do so again.
- Concern that money is being “wasted” while schools and other needs go underfunded.
- Calls for “no state control” and resistance to state-led interventions.

4.1 Themes

C. Disagreement on what ‘working’ in ‘working lands’ means

Respondents share a strong attachment to land but differ on what good stewardship looks like, especially around logging, easements, and active management.

Key elements:

- Excitement around integrating climate, ecology, and working lands.
- Desire to protect mountains, open lands, and water resources from development.
- Concern that easements may lead to “very conservative logging” or minimal management.
- Conservation as protection vs. conservation as active use.
- Recognition of critical wildlife corridors and under-protected regions.

D. Fairness and feasibility

Questions of equity, cost, and practicality run through the comments: landowners, towns, and local organizations worry about tax burdens, lost revenue, and the long-term workload of stewardship.

Key elements:

- Desire for tax relief for land kept open or in critical wildlife corridors.
- Concern about how towns will make up lost tax revenue.
- Worry that conservation may reduce land value or restrict future uses.
- Recognition that long-term easement stewardship is resource-intensive.
- Questions about whether landowners will be compensated and how.



4.1 Themes

E. The promise and strain of local organizations

Local organizations are more trusted and attuned to community priorities, but also potentially overburdened.

Key elements:

- Preference for local organizations over outside entities
- Local orgs valued for understanding community priorities and context.
- Concern that permanent easements would consume too much local capacity.
- Suggestions that local easement-holding be used selectively or as term easements.
- Desire for more funding and staffing to match expectations.

F. Alignment and Collaboration

Respondents want meaningful collaboration: shared definitions, shared maps, and shared decision-making about priority lands.

Key elements:

- Need for consistent definitions across agencies (swamp, wetland, riparian, floodplain).
- Desire for sophisticated connectivity mapping to guide tax relief and conservation.
- Recognition that federal protection has stalled, so state and local roles must be clearer.
- Interest in state investment in organizational capacity and technical tools.


4.2 Methodological Limitations

The exercises blended qualitative and quantitative elements. Open-ended prompts sometimes elicited numerical or ranked responses, while prompts intended to produce measurable inputs instead generated narrative responses. This mixing of response types makes it difficult to apply consistent analytical methods across all data.

Additionally, responses were shaped by group dynamics, time constraints, and others' contributions. Sticker-based "voting" provided a useful snapshot of perceived priorities, but it should not be interpreted as a statistically representative measure.

Similarly, qualitative comments captured valuable nuance but varied widely in depth, specificity, and relevance to the prompt.

Together, these factors mean that the findings should be understood as directional rather than definitive; useful for identifying themes, surfacing concerns, and guiding further inquiry, but not suitable for precise quantitative comparison or formal statistical analysis.



Listening
Session?



5. Narrative Summary

This session brought together a community that cares deeply about Vermont's natural beauty, ecological health, and working landscape traditions. Participants expressed strong support for conservation goals, wildlife connectivity, and most strongly the inclusion of sustainably managed lands (agricultural and private) in statewide accounting of conserved lands. Simultaneously, they voiced significant concerns about top-down mandates/government overreach, unclear terms and definitions, and the potential for Act 59 to divide our rural communities and economies. The feedback gathered points to the desire for a conservation plan that:

1. is clear;
2. meaningfully involves local stakeholders, and;
3. is honest about the ecological realities of those whose livelihoods and identities are interdependent with Vermont's landscapes.



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Appendix

VERMONT LEGISLATION HAS SET BOLD GOALS

Conserve
30% of the
state by
2030
Conserve
50%
of the
state
by
2050

The Draft Vermont Conservation Plan (Act 59) is open for public input, and decisions made in 2026 will shape regional conservation projects for decades.

Together, we'll discuss:

- What excites you about the plan
- What's missing
- Where funding should be prioritized
- What resources our region needs
- How to balance conservation with community vitality

SCAN HERE



**THURSDAY, MARCH 19 4PM
THE ARLINGTON COMMON**

This event is free and open to the public. Registration is encouraged.

To register, scan the QR code or go to [our event page](#)

All are welcome:

**Landowners • Farmers • Foresters • Municipal leaders
Recreation advocates • Planners • Nonprofits • Community members**



Coordinated in partnership with Rutland County NRCD
& Poultney Mettowee NRCD



Public Comment - Act 59 Draft Expanded Framework

If you missed the regional Act 59 Listening Session, you can still make your voice heard by sharing your thoughts on the [Draft Expanded Framework](#) through this public comment form.

Use this form to respond to any of the discussion prompts, offer general feedback, or highlight issues that matter most to you. All comments will be shared with the state planning team and incorporated into the regional summary for Southwestern Vermont.

Name: (required)

Email (This will only be used for follow-up or clarity, we won't send you junk!) (required)

Zip Code: (required)

Looking through this draft plan, what's an issue or idea that jumps out at you that you like and/or that excites you? (required)

Given the realities of limited capacity and funding, where do you see the greatest need for more state investment? (required)

Where do you see opportunities for more efficient collaboration, both at the state level and in your region? (required)

**What is something you would like to see in the plan but that you don't see so far?:
(required)**

What's something you see in the plan that you don't understand or would like to have clarified? (required)

What resources does your community need for this work? (required)

What benefits and concerns do you see when easements are held by local organizations, such as the BCCD, instead of organizations based outside the county? (required)

Do you feel the Draft Expanded Framework for the Vermont Conservation Plan adequately reflects the role that local organizations can play in long-term stewardship and easement holding? (required)

What changes would you like to see in the plan to better recognize the role of local organizations? (required)

What resources or support would help landowners feel more confident engaging in conservation easements? (required)

Do you have general comments on the Act 59 Draft Expanded Framework or conservation needs in Southwestern Vermont? (required)

Submit

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this process and for contributing your perspective!

What resources does your community need for this work?

QUALITY STAFFING

More support and resources

Additional training for staff

My staff are so busy that I can't do it. Sorry, my provider, please.

Don't look at the program and think it's impossible

What types of agricultural practices should be explicitly supported within Act 59's framework?

Support
for
agriculture



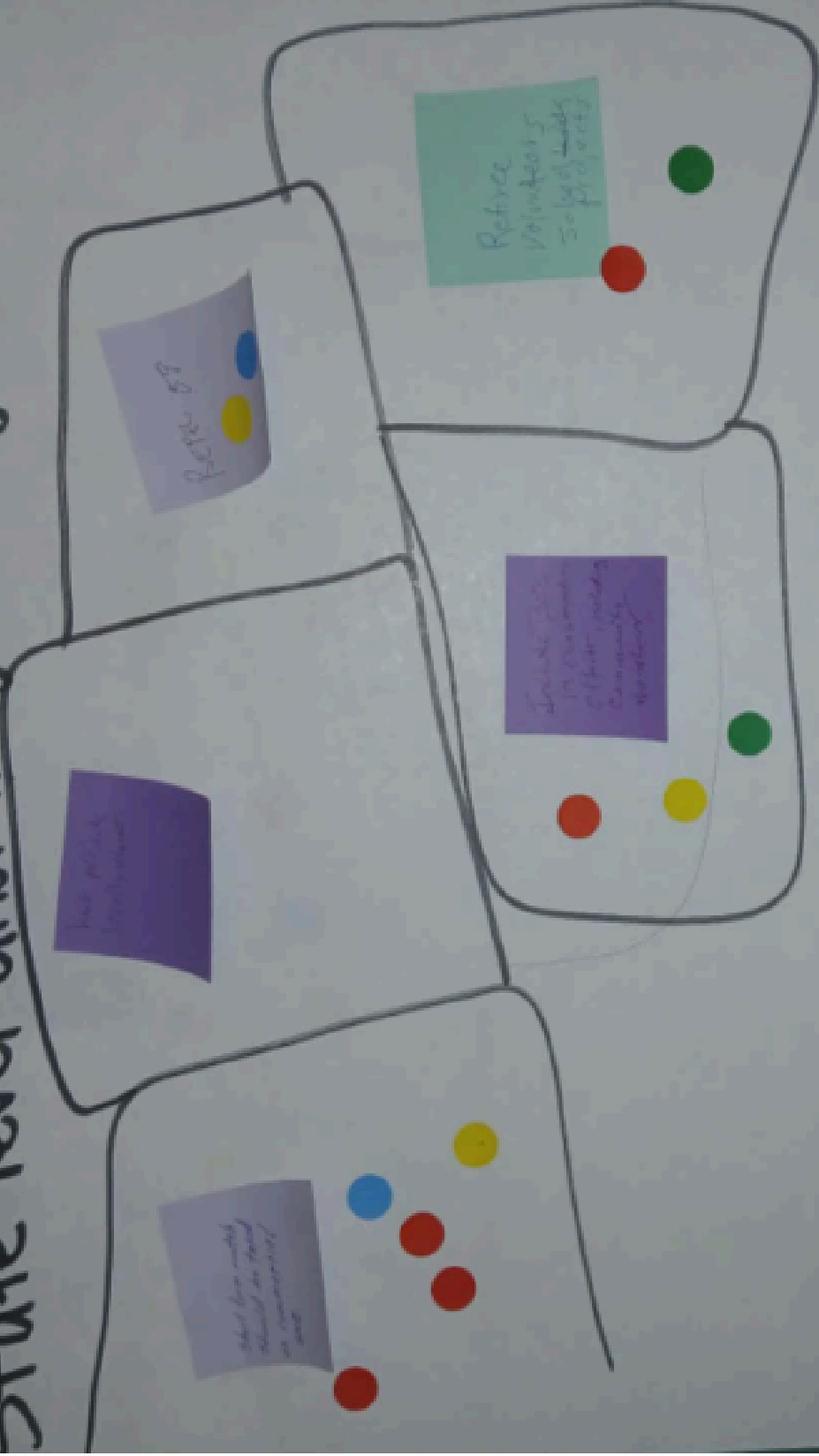
Out



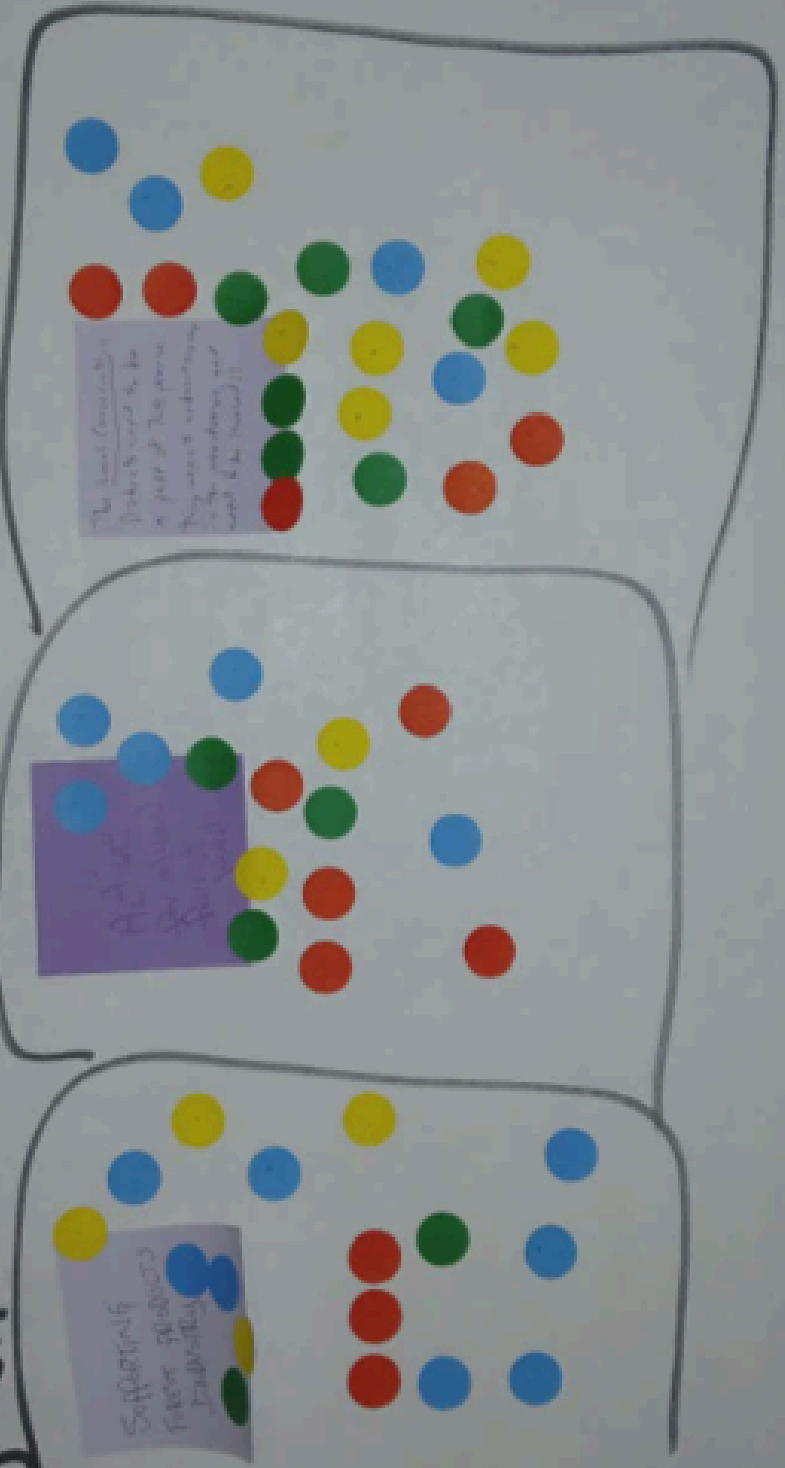
Do you find
such a
practical program



Where do you see opportunities for more efficient collaboration, both at the State level and in your region?



Given the realities of limited capacity + funding, where do you see the greatest need for more state investment?



What is something you see in the plan that you don't understand or would like to have clarified?

Why are we following this route?



Why are we following this route?



Why are we following this route?

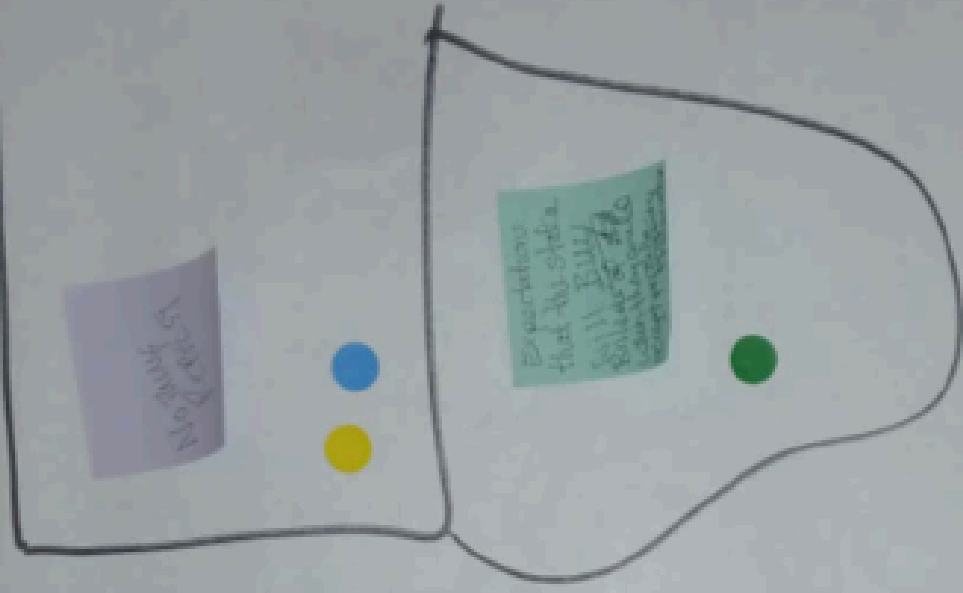
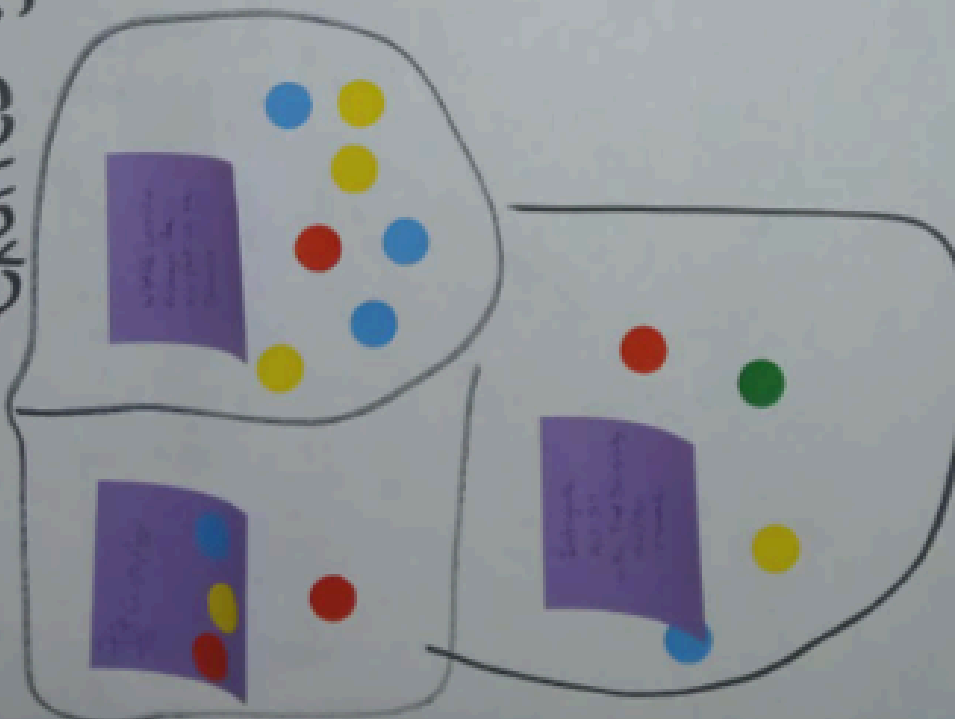
What is something you would like to see in the plan but that you don't see so far?

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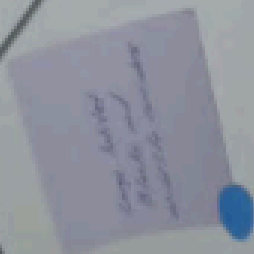
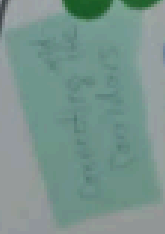
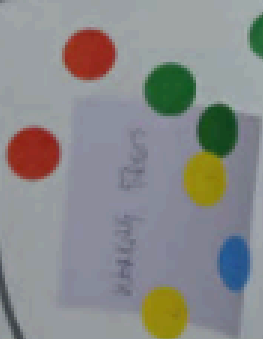
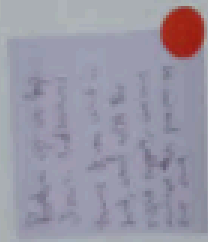
A hand-drawn rectangular box containing a purple sticky note with the text "Count all Citizens As low" and a blue dot. To the right of the sticky note are three colored dots: a red dot, a yellow dot, and a blue dot.

A hand-drawn rectangular box containing a purple sticky note with the text "Include Private Contributions Private Citizens" and a yellow dot. To the left of the sticky note are two red dots and a yellow dot.

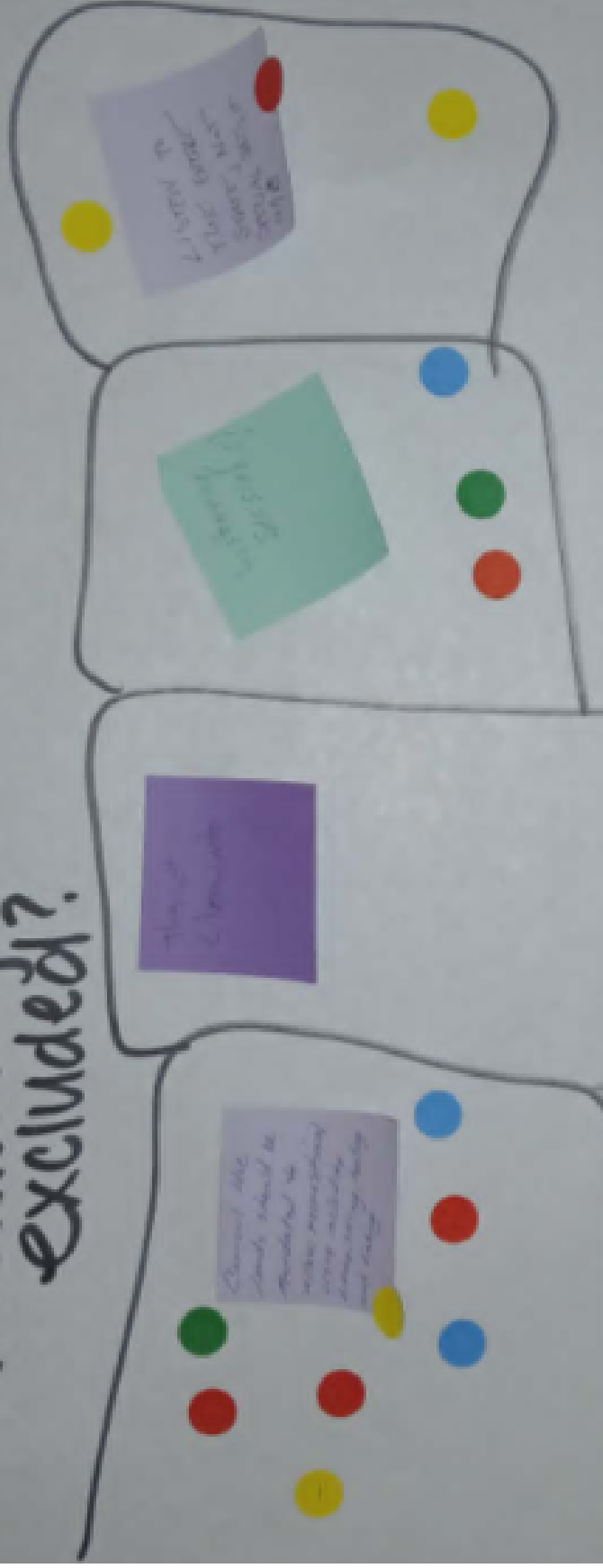
Looking through the draft plan
what is an issue or idea that jumps
out at you that you like and/or
excites you?



Where and how should conservation investments be prioritized in our region?



How do we ensure conservation efforts benefit all Vermonters?
-including those who are historically excluded?



Link to the Act 59 Listening Session Presentation:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1cnFcSAHuDGNzUgjllhwGyjnzj6q_Nq026cEUhUcw8E8/edit?usp=sharing