



A Year of Public Interest Victories | Annual Report 2011



## FROM THE DIRECTOR



In late spring 2011, I was incredibly proud to see VPIRG staff invited by Governor Peter Shumlin to speak at *five* separate bill signing events. As far as I can tell, we've never before had a year in which four members of our staff were recognized by the governor for their leadership in passing five different bills in a single legislative session.

By the time of the fifth and last bill signing ceremony—this one for the landmark health care reform legislation—Governor Shumlin said something to the effect of “and of course VPIRG played a major role in getting this bill passed too,” when he introduced our Health Care Advocate, Cassandra Gekas to speak.

It was almost a given that if a major bill was passed in 2011, our team of advocates and organizers were involved.

I can assure you that no other group in the state had a track record like that for the year. The health care legislation alone was a remarkable achievement. It rejects the unsustainable status quo on health care and puts our state on a path to providing high quality, affordable care to every Vermonter.

But health care was just the starters. As you'll see in the pages that follow, we also helped to lead the charge on clean energy, recycling and election reform victories. Our successes came not just in the State House but in communities across the state. And even as we put innovative new policies in place, we also helped to jumpstart our green energy future by making it easy for Vermonters to go solar.

On a personal note, I can tell you that the future has new meaning for us at VPIRG, where four members of our staff became parents for the first time in 2011. It's an exciting and inspiring time for all of us. And I can assure you, though we're a little tired, we're more committed than ever!

Paul Burns, Executive Director

“I was pleased to work closely with VPIRG advocates on a number of major successes this year. On bills dealing with landmark health care reform, clean energy incentives, and keeping kids safe from mercury exposure, I knew I could count on VPIRG for accurate information, principled advocacy, and strong public outreach.”

— Rep. Shap Smith, Speaker of the House

### ABOUT VPIRG AND VPIREF:

Founded in 1972, the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) is the largest nonprofit consumer and environmental advocacy organization in the state. As a 501(c)4 nonprofit advocacy group, VPIRG conducts non-partisan public interest advocacy in support of priority public interest issues and campaigns and seeks legislative and policy solutions to issues affecting Vermonters. Donations to VPIRG are not tax deductible.

VPIRG established the Vermont Public Interest Research and Education Fund (VPIREF) in 1975 as its 501(c)3 outreach and education arm in order to conduct independent research and public education on the range of issues on which we work. Donations to VPIREF are tax deductible.

For 40 years, we have brought the voice of Vermont citizens to public policy debates concerning the environment, health care, consumer protection and democracy. The common mission of VPIRG and VPIREF is to promote and protect the health of Vermont's people, environment and locally-based economy by informing and mobilizing citizens statewide. VPIRG advocates and organizers use independent research, policy analysis, public outreach and grassroots mobilization to design and implement effective strategies for each of our campaigns.

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#### Cover photos/Background

Clean Energy Associate Leah Marsters and Board Member Crea Lintilhac at Sheffield wind farm.

#### Cover photos/Insets

Top Left: Health Care Advocate Cassandra Gekas at major health care bill signing ceremony. Top Right: Clean Energy Director James Moore at major clean energy bill signing ceremony. Bottom Right: Health Care Advocate Cassandra Gekas speaking at Midwives bill signing ceremony. Middle: Environmental Health Advocate Charity Carbine-March speaking at mercury-lamp bill signing ceremony. Bottom Left: Executive Director Paul Burns speaking at National Popular Vote signing ceremony.

Clean Energy Advocate James Moore with Mayor Mary Hooper and representatives from Sunward at the Solar Montpelier launch.





# With Solar Communities, clean energy future is bright

In December 2011, VPIRG's innovative program to spur solar installations came to an end. The overwhelming success of the program meant that, in order to reach as many Vermonters as possible, it needed to expand beyond VPIRG.

It turns out that a simple idea—going solar should be easier, more affordable and community-organized—has changed the game, revolutionized the business of solar, and helped build the clean energy future that Vermonters want.

In just a few short months, each of our solar communities of Waterbury, Williston, Shelburne, Charlotte, Hinesburg, Montpelier, and Addison County witnessed exponential growth in the number of solar installations—by 100, 200 and even 500%! Overall, VPIRG helped 275 families get their electricity or hot water from the sun.

VPIRG's venture into solar installations will bring the state lasting rewards, both environmental and financial. We reduced Vermont's reliance on dirty energy sources thanks to the nearly 600KW of new solar capacity installed through our program. The program generated over \$4 million in sales for our local solar business partners and helped support our broader clean energy program work. Moving forward, those who went solar through the program will save money every year, year after year, and be protected from the unpredictable cost of dirty energy.

Solar Communities represented a fundamentally different way of achieving our Clean Energy goals. The project took us beyond our traditional tactics of research, State House advocacy and grassroots organizing, but it was a risk worth taking. Solar Communities complemented our work on longer-term policy changes so that hundreds of local renewable energy projects were developed in a span of weeks and months, not years.

The momentum and best practices we brought to the renewable energy table in Vermont continues on. A core group of staff involved with the Solar Communities project launched a new business in 2012 in order to take this idea to the next level. And other solar developers learned from our success as well. We wish them and all of Vermont's solar and other renewable energy businesses great success!



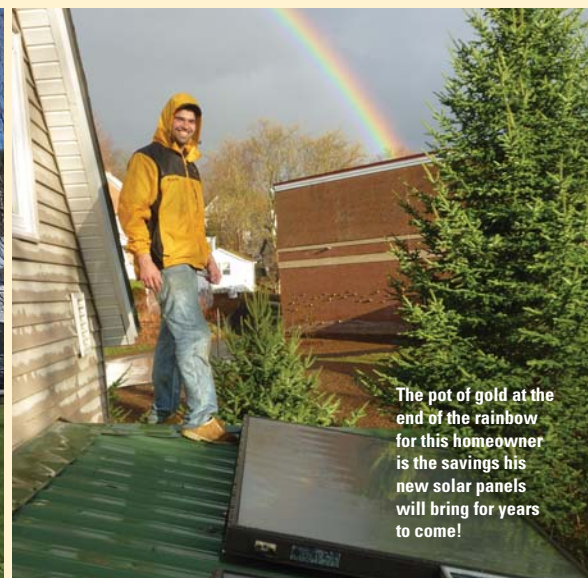
**VPIRG  
ENERGY**



## SOLAR HOT WATER IN ADDISON COUNTY



Tom Allen and Stephanie Venema show off their new solar panels in Moretown.



The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for this homeowner is the savings his new solar panels will bring for years to come!

# RETIRING VERMONT YANKEE

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Successfully countered Entergy's campaign for a "do-over" vote in the legislature
- Filed amicus brief together with Conservation Law Foundation in Entergy lawsuit; won on the preliminary injunction ruling.



It's never too early to make your voice heard. It's his generation that will inherit the toxic legacy that VY and other nuclear plants leave behind.

"Entergy's lawsuit is an attack on state authority, attempting to deny us a voice regarding whether Vermont Yankee will run past March 2012, even though Entergy has known since 2002 that it could not operate the plant past that date without state approval."

—Governor Peter Shumlin, quoted in *Burlington Free Press* 7/18/11

\*Source: U.S. PIRG Report *Too Close to Home: Nuclear Power and the Threat to Drinking Water* 2012

## Entergy's legal assault on Vermont

The year began on a high note following our hard-fought legislative victory in 2010 to send Vermont Yankee into retirement on time in 2012. During the course of 2011, the forum for debating the future of the nuclear plant would be expanded beyond the legislature to include the federal courts. And by year's end, it was looking more likely that the plant could remain open beyond its scheduled closure date.

**Some 3,114,882 people receive their drinking water from sources within 50 miles of Vermont Yankee. That ranks it 4th on the list of top U.S. nuclear plants threatening Americans' drinking water supply.\***

Going into the 2011 legislative session, it was clear that Entergy was going to do everything it could to get the legislature to reconsider the Senate's 26–4 vote to retire Vermont Yankee as scheduled in March 2012. In late 2010 and throughout the 2011 legislative session, Entergy blanketed the state with expensive and misleading ads in a desperate

attempt to convince legislators to reconsider last year's vote. VPIRG was there every step of the way, working with a broad coalition of organizations to ensure that legislators stood their ground. In the end, we prevailed when Entergy failed to get its "do-over" vote.

When it became clear the legislature was not going to cave in to Entergy's pressure, company executives decided to go back on their word yet again and sue the state of Vermont, claiming our state lacks the authority to weigh in on Vermont Yankee's future. This came despite Entergy having signed a document in 2002 stating that it would respect Vermont's authority to determine its energy future.

The state won the first legal round when U.S. District Court Judge Garvan Murtha denied Entergy's request to keep the plant running while the case wound its way through the courts. But the case dragged on longer than anyone had anticipated and there was no final decision from the judge by year's end.

*Judge Murtha ultimately sided with Entergy in striking down key sections of Vermont law. He didn't give Entergy everything it wanted though, and the state retains some important oversight of the nuclear plant.*

*VPIRG will continue to play a supporting role as the federal case is appealed, pressing the Public Service Board to deny Entergy's request for a new lease on life for VY.*







## CLEAN ENERGY

# Building Vermont's clean energy legacy

It was a tremendous year for VPIRG's Clean Energy program. To make investing in renewable energy more affordable for the average Vermonter, VPIRG led a major advocacy, organizing and research push for new legislation. When legislators expressed a willingness to consider bold new steps, we presented VPIRG's research on innovative policies to help Vermonters go solar and heat their homes more efficiently.

Experts deemed Vermont's new clean energy legislation—containing many of the VPIRG-crafted proposals—one of the best in the country.

We aimed our summer citizen outreach campaign at Governor Peter Shumlin, urging him to put forth a truly visionary state energy plan. The influence of VPIRG's four month door-knocking campaign—not to mention the 13,000+ postcards VPIRG gathered—proved to be a game-changer. The Comprehensive Energy Plan released in the fall of 2011 put Vermont on the path to lead the nation in clean energy.

**VPIRG's summer outreach program visited more than 65,000 homes in Vermont. That's over 25% of all households in the state!**

During the summer and fall, the state's clean energy future actually began to take shape. Solar installations started to appear in every corner of the state, and the 40 megawatt (MW) Sheffield Wind Project held its ribbon cutting ceremony in late October. And after Lowell residents voted 3 to 1 in favor of the Kingdom Community Wind project in 2010, construction of the 63 MW wind farm began in September.

**"We've spoken with tens of thousands of Vermonters from one end of our state to the other, and we've found extraordinary support for the development of local clean energy resources including wind, solar and small hydro projects. Most people understand that as long as we're using energy, we have an obligation to produce it as well."**

—VPIRG Executive Director Paul Burns

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

VPIRG played an instrumental role in the passage of 2011's big clean energy law. The legislation will:

- Ensure that Vermonters who've installed solar panels on their homes or businesses can sell energy back to their electric utilities at a fair market price.
- Eliminate subsidies for heating oil. Instead, those dollars will go to help Vermonters switch to local clean heating options and invest in energy efficiency.
- Remove costly red tape, making it even easier for Vermonters to go green and get their energy from the sun.
- Create new programs to save Vermonters money by reducing upfront costs for clean energy and energy efficiency-related home improvements.



VPIRG Clean Energy Advocate James Moore stands with Governor Shumlin at the signing ceremony for 2011's major clean energy law.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- VPIRG led the charge for Act 48, which established the vision, guiding principles and timeline for Vermont's path toward a health care system that is affordable, transparent and fair by:
  - Establishing the goal of reforming Vermont's health system: "To provide comprehensive, affordable, high-quality, publicly-financed health care coverage for all Vermont residents."
  - Creating an independent, five-member board (the Green Mountain Care Board) to oversee Vermont's adoption of universal health care.
  - Setting the timeline for creating a health insurance "exchange" so Vermonters can make apples-to-apples comparisons of multiple plans and purchase insurance more efficiently.
- Coordinated the multi-pronged campaign to end discrimination by requiring insurance companies to cover midwifery services, including home births.
- Partnered with legislative, administration and community leaders to hold 16 health care forums reaching 600 Vermonters statewide geared toward answering Vermonters' reform questions and gathering their thoughts.

"It's time to put patients first, and bring high-quality, affordable health coverage to every Vermonter. And we make things easier, save money, and grow jobs while doing it. We take care of each other, it's the Vermont way."

—VPIRG Executive Director Paul Burns

## Winning new health care benefits for Vermonters

VPIRG's compelling one-two punch of strong policy advocacy and grassroots engagement was deemed so instrumental in the passage of health care legislation this year that VPIRG staff was invited to speak at two bill signing ceremonies by Gov. Peter Shumlin. This included the number one legislative priority of the year—the Health Care Reform law.

**Every day, nearly one in three Vermonters face the reality that one major illness could mean losing everything, including their home. And most have insurance.**

This new law promises to bring high quality, affordable health care to all Vermonters.

Advocacy, collaboration, and community were the watchwords of VPIRG's work on health reform this year. Not only did VPIRG lead the

charge for the bill in the State House, but we pushed to shed light on premium rate increases and allow Vermonters to weigh in with state regulators, before they can approve an insurer's request. In May, our field organizers hit the ground running, orchestrating 16 public forums in key legislative districts around the state that connected over 600 Vermonters with decision makers.

VPIRG also helped to build a network of Vermonters dedicated to shaping a health care system that works for people, not profits. VPIRG advocates also went toe-to-toe with the powerful health insurance lobby to win expectant mothers' freedom to choose how and where they give birth.

VPIRG's campaign to share with lawmakers the personal stories of Vermont families ultimately helped end 10 years of insurance industry discrimination against women whose low-risk pregnancies give them the option of choosing safe and less costly home birth options.



VPIRG Health Care Advocate Cassandra Gekas shakes Governor Shumlin's hand before speaking at the signing ceremony for the bill promising to bring high quality, affordable health care to all Vermonters.





**HEALTHY  
ENVIRONMENT**

# Healthier environment, healthier people

In politics, common sense isn't always common. But whether it's protecting Vermont consumers from a known neurotoxin, making sure the cleaning products used in classrooms aren't giving our kids cancer, or defending the state's most successful recycling program from industry attacks, common sense is what guides VPIRG's work to protect Vermont's people and environment.

To shield Vermonters from small levels of mercury found in many energy efficient light bulbs, VPIRG worked to pass a law that holds producers responsible for proper recycling. The law established safe, free and convenient places to recycle high-efficiency bulbs, so you can continue to make good, efficient choices about light bulbs without risking mercury exposure.

VPIRG also led the charge to protect children from the harmful chemicals lurking in too many Vermont classrooms. The "Green Cleaning" bill will ensure that schools use safer cleaning products, instead of conventional supplies containing toxic chemicals—many of which are linked to asthma and cancer, along with a number of developmental and reproductive disorders. Passionate advocacy and coordinated earned media campaigns pushed the bill through both houses of the legislature, though final passage of the legislation didn't happen until January 2012.

While we pressed successfully for new policies to protect Vermont's people and our environment in 2011, industry threats also forced us to play defense. VPIRG coordinated a campaign to fend off special interest

attempts to weaken or eliminate the popular Bottle Bill recycling program.

Under Vermont's Bottle Bill, 85% of the containers covered are returned for recycling. This extraordinary level of recycling success is one reason why Vermonters love the program.

**More than 9 out of 10 Vermonters support the current law and 86% would like to see it expanded to include beverages like water and sports drinks.**

**"VPIRG is one of the few groups that is working on toxics and energy issues, so it made sense for us to make sure that consumers had a safe and convenient place to drop off their energy efficient light bulbs, which do contain tiny amounts of mercury."**

— VPIRG Environmental Health Advocate Lauren Hierl



The Waterbury Rapids Swim Team is one of over a hundred organizations across Vermont who support our state's most successful recycling program, the Bottle Bill.



## DEMOCRACY



## CONSUMER PROTECTION

# Protecting Vermont's democracy and consumers

## DEMOCRACY

### National Popular Vote

As a resident of a “non-battleground” state, do you sometimes feel that your vote for president doesn’t matter as much as someone who happens to live next door in New Hampshire? VPIRG helped pass a bill in 2011 committing Vermont to a National Popular Vote for president. It’ll work like this: if states representing a majority of the votes in the Electoral College enact the same bill, the electoral votes from participating states will be awarded to the presidential candidate who receives the most popular votes in all 50 states. This will ensure that every vote counts and each state is relevant.

### 400 Citizens Protest Citizens

In late November, VPIRG co-sponsored an event in Montpelier with Clean Yield Asset Management that drew over 400 people to register their opposition to the U.S. Supreme Court’s atrocious decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which granted corporations the right to spend unlimited amounts of money to promote or defeat federal candidates.

Featuring faculty from Vermont Law School, prominent nonprofit advocates and socially responsible business leaders, including Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, the event built support for a state resolution urging Congress to pass and send to the states for ratification a constitutional amendment making it clear that corporations are not people and money is not speech.



Executive Director Paul Burns shares a few remarks at the signing ceremony after helping to pass 2011’s National Popular Vote bill.

## CONSUMER PROTECTION

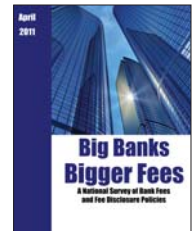
### VPIRG Releases 25th Toy Safety Report

Every year, after visiting national toy stores, malls and dollar stores, our researchers publish the annual *Trouble in Toyland* report in November. By exposing the serious safety hazards in many kids’ toys, the report remains an important part of VPIRG’s fight to keep our children safe. The 2011 report identifies for parents the choking, strangulation, and even toxic exposure hazards in popular children’s toys, and continued to help us advocate for stronger state laws to protect our children.



### VPIRG Helps You Bank Smart

Did you know that since the 1980s, when Congress largely deregulated consumer checking and savings accounts, banks have pursued a covert agenda to gouge consumers into paying too much? Fees—raising them, making them harder to avoid and even inventing new ones—are how they do it, our study found. Titled *Bigger Banks, Bigger Fees*, the 2011 report brings a number of troubling bank practices to light.



Read the full reports at [www.vpirg.org/resources](http://www.vpirg.org/resources)

### Telephone Bill Cramming

In 2011, VPIRG fought to end the deceptive practice known as “cramming,” which involves adding hidden—and typically unauthorized—charges to your telephone bill. A bill that would put the freeze on cramming passed the House, but stalled in the Senate.

“Make no mistake, the *Citizens United* ruling has radically changed the nature of our democracy, further tilting the balance of power toward the rich and the powerful at a time when already the wealthiest people in this country have never had it so good.”

—U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont





**GRASSROOTS  
ORGANIZING**

## People-powered progress

The number of public interest victories won in 2011 is, in large part, thanks to everyday Vermonters who stepped up to be a part of the solution. At VPIRG, our Field team's goal is to help citizens do just that. We let you know when issues that impact your health and environment are at stake and how you can take action to make change. When those small actions—a simple call or email to a representative—are magnified across the state, our elected officials make decisions that reflect the public interest.

**Our Redeem to Rebuild bottle drive collected some 130,000 bottles and cans for recycling and raised more than \$8,000 for storm relief efforts!**

In 2011, we built upon years of conversations at the door about Vermont's energy future to generate 13,000 comments to the Governor calling for a strong Comprehensive Energy Plan. This work helped steer the Administration to create a visionary plan with a goal of obtaining 90% of our state's total energy needs from renewable sources by 2050.

What defines us, at VPIRG and as Vermonters, is that we don't back down from a challenge. To implement our ambitious vision for a future where turning on the light doesn't harm the planet and going to the doctor is a trip we can all make and afford, we need to come together, learn, participate and take action. Our grassroots field program is dedicated to making this happen.

We're about more than bringing people into the political process. Following Tropical Storm Irene, VPIRG organized a statewide "Redeem to Rebuild" bottle drive to raise funds for the Vermont Farm Disaster Relief Fund. We lined up over 50 redemption centers to participate from every corner of the state, so that Vermonters could pitch in to the relief effort by doing something as easy as recycling.



Leah Marsters, a VPIRG Field Organizer, listens to Mike Marshall, owner of Depot Beverage in Waterbury, speaking about his involvement and the overall success of the two-month Redeem to Rebuild bottle drive that raised \$8,000 for storm relief.



VPIRG Field Director Liz Edsell, discusses upcoming opportunities for action on clean energy with activists at the annual Environmental Action conference in November.



Governor Shumlin hears about the widespread support for a bold energy plan from the VPIRG summer canvass team, which knocked on over 65,000 Vermont doors in 2011 alone.



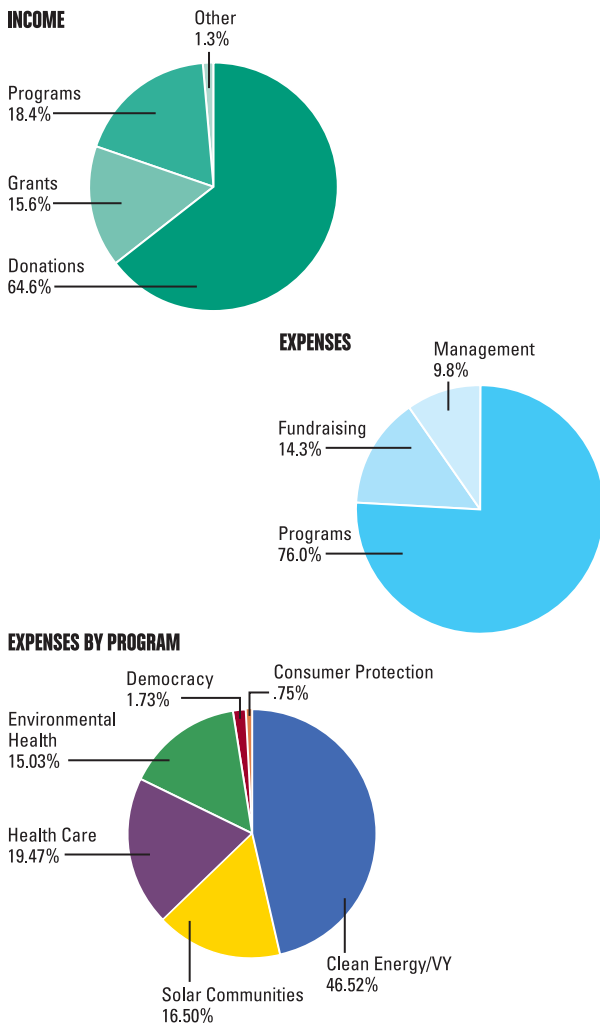
**"As a canvasser, I've spoken with thousands of Vermonters. I've seen firsthand how much support there is for local, clean energy. I feel lucky to be a part of making that a reality."**

—Dylan Zwicky, four-year VPIRG canvasser

# Stable Funding—Solid Programs

For the fourth year in a row, VPIRG has raised over \$1 million to support its work. We are humbled by the strength of support we receive from thousands of Vermonters, especially the more than 2,000 members who increased their giving this year. In total we received over 27,600 gifts from more than 10,000 Vermonters and added 3,364 new members to our roster.

VPIRG and VPIREF combined to raise \$1,380,738 and spend \$1,434,575. Once again, individual donations from Vermonters remain the largest source of income for our organization. New this year, our Solar Communities program accounted for roughly 18% of our income and 16.5% of our expenses. And while clean energy remains our largest program area, this year VPIRG made notably larger investments in our work on health care reform and environmental health (including work on the Bottle Bill).



# Together, we're building a better tomorrow—THANK YOU!

The entire staff and board of trustees are thankful for the commitment and support from VPIRG members. It's the support of our members that inspires all of us to work even harder to achieve the victories detailed in this report. Together, we're moving Vermont forward.

While we wish we could thank every donor here, the generosity of those listed below deserves special recognition.\*

## FOUNDATIONS:

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Jerry Greenfield and Elizabeth K. Skarie Foundation  
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VPIRG members celebrating Vermont Energy Independence Day on a tour of the wind farm in Sheffield, VT.



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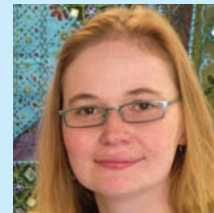
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