



Annual Report **2020**



Letter from the Director



In December, I celebrated 20 years at VPIRG. That means I've been drafting letters like this for annual reports for two decades. And in all that time, I can certainly say I've never had to reflect on a year like this.

I realize I'm not breaking any new ground in telling you that 2020 was a year unlike any other. The COVID-19 pandemic brought incredible challenges and hardships, and though we were fortunate in many ways, VPIRG was not untouched.

At its heart, VPIRG is a people-first organization—interpersonal connections drive our work. Whether it's connecting with thousands of Vermonters on their doorsteps all across the state, organizing events to demonstrate our people power, or advocating with lawmakers in the halls of the State House—face-to-face interactions are deeply embedded in VPIRG's DNA.

Because of that, 2020 was arguably the most challenging in our nearly 50-year history.

But as I said, we were fortunate too. Most importantly, none of our staff became seriously ill. VPIRG members continued to fuel our

work with thousands of grassroots donations. And despite all the challenges we faced, VPIRG still secured several incredible victories for the public interest.

Inside these pages you'll read how VPIRG:

- Led the charge to make sure that every active, registered Vermont voter received a ballot in the mail so they could safely participate in the 2020 General Election – and helped smash Vermont's voter turnout record in the process.
- Helped overcome a gubernatorial veto to enact one of the most significant pieces of climate legislation in state history.
- Successfully stopped several industry attempts to use the pandemic to rollback hard-won environmental protections.
- Won important gains like expanded broadband access, hazard pay for frontline workers, and a moratorium on utility shutoffs to address essential needs during the pandemic.

These would be major accomplishments in a normal year. But when you consider that

all of this was done amid a global pandemic that completely upended all of our plans and strategies, the results are even more impressive.

I've never been prouder of the dedication and ingenuity of VPIRG's wonderful staff and the commitment of our generous members. And that's saying something because I've had some really proud moments these past 20 years.

Of course, there's still so much to be done. As we rebuild from this pandemic, we must also confront the challenges of systemic racism, the climate crisis, environmental pollution, a broken health care system, and threats to our democracy.

But I'm optimistic, because ultimately, we have the people we need to meet these challenges head-on and build a Vermont that works for all of us.

Onward,

Paul Burns

Executive Director, VPIRG

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◀ VPIRG staff take advantage of some good weather to gather for a masked, socially distant backyard training session in late October - the first time everyone had been together since the office closed in March!

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 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 nearly 50 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 individuals and communities across the state. 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.

Table of Contents

DEMOCRACY

370,968 Votes: How VPIRG Helped Vermonters Vote 4

COVID RESPONSE

A Year Unlike Any Other: Protecting the Public Interest in a Pandemic 8

SUSTAINERS

Sustainer Highlight 10

CLIMATE & CLEAN ENERGY

A Turning Point: Passing the Global Warming Solutions Act 11

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Remaining Vigilant: A Q&A with Marcie Gallagher 14

YEAR IN REVIEW

2020 Year in Review 16

FINANCIALS

Powered by You: Our 2020 Finances by the Numbers 20

Trustee Profiles 21

MEMBERSHIP

Supporters 22

370,968 Votes

HOW VPIRG LED A DIVERSE,
COORDINATED EFFORT TO MAKE
SURE VERMONTERS COULD
VOTE SAFELY IN A PANDEMIC
AND HELPED SMASH THE TURNOUT RECORD IN THE PROCESS.





WE BELIEVE THAT OUR DEMOCRACY WORKS BEST WHEN WE ALL PARTICIPATE.

Guided by that belief, VPIRG has fought over the years for a series of measures that have led to voting in Vermont being easier and more accessible than in almost any other state in the nation.

But in 2020, external factors ranging from a global pandemic to a veritable war on truth led by the American president seemed poised to undermine our efforts to ensure a more participatory and inclusive democracy.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, VPIRG led a diverse coalition of groups urging legislators to pass

a law empowering Governor Phil Scott and Secretary of State Jim Condos to enact important changes to election procedures that would help to keep voters and election officials safe. This included the power to put a universal vote-by-mail plan in place for the general election.

Pre-COVID, five states

had already successfully adopted vote-by-mail systems that had proven effective. In fact, these vote-by-mail states tend to be among those with the highest rates of voter participation. We felt sure that strong policy, coupled with a robust public education and voter turnout effort, could lead to similar results here in the Green Mountain State.

Secretary Condos and his staff developed a plan to mail every active, registered voter in Vermont a ballot for the general election, but the governor refused to sign off on the plan, saying that he wanted to wait until after the primary election to decide. This would have been too late to launch a universal vote-by-mail system statewide.

So, VPIRG advocates quickly returned to the legislature pressing for a new bill granting full authority to the Secretary of State to make universal vote-by-mail a reality during the pandemic. Legislators wasted no time in passing the bill, though not a single Republican supported it in the Senate and twice as many Republicans voted against it in the House as voted for it. Gov. Scott had pledged not to stand in the way, and he did not veto it. But he did not sign it either. The bill, S.348, became law in early July without his signature.

Once that battle was won, we turned immediately to our education and outreach work. In partnership with Secretary Condos and our terrific business and organizational partners, we embarked on a multi-channel outreach campaign educating Vermonters about how to vote safely and securely by mail in the primary election.

THANKS IN LARGE PART TO THESE EFFORTS, PARTICIPATION IN THE 2020 PRIMARY ELECTION WAS 39% HIGHER THAN THE PREVIOUS RECORD

with a majority of ballots – more than 120,000 of them – cast by mail.

This was an amazing success, but it was just the lead up to the all-important general election. We next faced a massive disinformation campaign, fueled by the president and his followers, right-wing media, and certain foreign powers intent on creating chaos and strife in our nation.

There were even groups and political leaders in Vermont who joined the fray by spreading false information about mail-in voting. In fact, in September a small group of current and former Republican officials sued Vermont's Secretary of State in federal court over his plan to mail ballots to every registered voter. VPIRG was prepared to intervene in the case, but it was quickly dismissed by a federal judge.

With the legal obstacles cleared, we focused on our education and outreach efforts. We brought on two talented Democracy

& Youth Organizers and, using lessons learned from the summer's Virtual Canvass operation, combined traditional grassroots organizing tactics with digital outreach to ensure that more Vermonters than ever before participated in the 2020 general election.

At the heart of our get-out-the-vote efforts was our "Vote Safe Ambassador" campaign, which utilized a "vote tripling" strategy where participants pledged not just to vote themselves, but to get three friends or family members to vote as well. We signed up nearly 800 Vote Safe Ambassadors – many of whom were young or first-time voters – and distributed nearly that many blue "VOTE" masks to help amplify our message.

We also sent more than 160,000 emails and close to 11,000 text messages, called nearly 3,000 voters on the phone, recorded informational videos explaining how to vote by mail that were viewed more than 20,000 times, and compiled a comprehensive database listing the locations and procedures for ballot return sites across the state.

Ultimately, a variety of factors – voters recognizing the significance of this particular election, tireless get-out-the-vote efforts by VPIRG and our allies, and the unprecedented ease of voting

access thanks to Vermont's decision to mail every registered voter their ballot for the general election – led to some pretty incredible results.

A RECORD-SETTING 370,968 VOTES WERE CAST IN THE 2020 VERMONT GENERAL ELECTION,

shattering the previous general election record by more than 44,000 votes and representing a 73.27% turnout of registered voters.

These numbers alone are impressive, but the feedback we received from voters across the state only underscored the success of this election; voters loved the ease and safety of voting from home, as well as the opportunity it provided to thoroughly research candidates and make more informed decisions.

Simply put, once you find a way to make it easier for people to vote, there's no turning back from that.

That's why in 2021 we're leading a coalition of groups pressing to make mailed ballots a permanent policy in Vermont for all future general elections.



"Vote by mail should be the system that everybody is looking for, because it not just helps us people with disabilities but also seniors and other people that are still so underrepresented."

-Matthew L.
Alburgh, Vermont



"When I came to the US as a young adult, I learned quickly how important it is to vote in this democracy. Voting by mail makes it easier for everyone to be able to exercise their right to vote. If you have young kids at home, if you are housebound for health reasons, or if you just cannot make it to the polls during the polling hours, voting by mail ensures there is no excuse not to vote."

-Trine B.
Burlington, Vermont



"Voting by mail this year was a wonderful experience. Quick and easy, it also gave me more time to research the candidates and the issues. I sincerely hope that we will make mail voting the norm in Vermont going forward."

-Meaghan M.
Essex Junction, Vermont



"Voting is a right, not a privilege. And it should be accessible to all people, even those that can't get to the polls on Election Day."

-Henry W.
Essex, Vermont

A YEAR UNLIKE ANY OTHER:

PROTECTING THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN A PANDEMIC



On March 13, 2020, VPIRG staff left our Montpelier offices for what turned out to be the final time in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic completely upended our expectations for the year. And while the onset of this crisis certainly changed what our priorities were and how we went about our work – it didn’t change why we do this work: to protect the health and well-being of Vermont’s people and environment.

NEVERTHELESS, THE PANDEMIC TESTED VPIRG’S ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY PERHAPS UNLIKE ANY OTHER EVENT IN OUR NEARLY 50-YEAR HISTORY.

And our amazing staff and incredible members all across the state stepped up to ensure that not only did we navigate the pandemic, but actually remained an effective force for defending the public interest at a time when it was most necessary.

Shifting Priorities

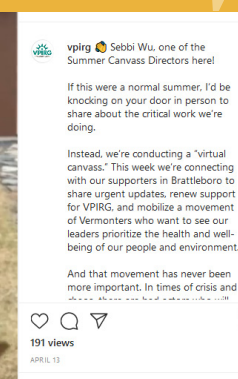
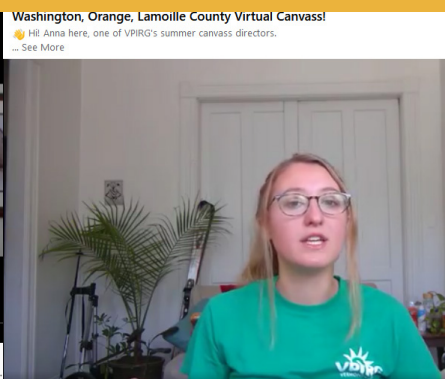
By mid-March, the Vermont legislature was about halfway through the 2020 legislative session. VPIRG had made progress on many public interest priorities and was readying to marshal the grassroots support necessary to get several key bills past the finish line before the legislature’s typical adjournment in May.

Of course, all that changed once the reality of the pandemic and its impacts became clear. The legislature moved to entirely remote work, and the rest of the session (which ultimately

stretched to September) was primarily focused on the immediate response to the pandemic.

That meant:

1. Some of our efforts were understandably delayed—like S.295, a bill to ban harmful PFAS chemicals in certain consumer products, which unanimously passed the Senate, but was not ultimately taken up by the House.
2. Some of the issues we were already working on took on even greater urgency—for example, our work to ensure every Vermonter has access to affordable, high-speed internet became even more critical as everything from health to education to participation in our democracy moved online.
3. We had to take on new issues we had not prioritized heading into 2020—for instance, making sure every Vermonter could vote safely



in a pandemic, or reinstating a moratorium on utility shut-offs so that no-one would have to go without heat or electricity during a pandemic winter.

Accordingly, VPIRG shifted our focus, orienting our work around three key principles we referred to as the 3 Vs: Voting, Vigilance, and Values:

VOTING: Making sure no Vermonter would have to choose between their safety and casting their vote.

VIGILANCE: Guarding against industry attempts to take advantage of the crisis to rollback critical safeguards and thereby threaten public health and our environment.

VALUES: Making sure that we never lost sight of fundamental priorities like the climate crisis, and ensuring that the pandemic recovery effort would benefit all Vermonters and leave no one behind.

IT WAS WITHIN THIS FRAMEWORK THAT VPIRG STAFF, MEMBERS, AND ALLIES GOT TO WORK FIGHTING TO SUCCESSFULLY:

- Ensure that every active registered Vermont voter received their ballot by mail
- Prevent waste-giant Casella from rolling back Vermont's recycling laws
- Support policies to get at least 9,771 Vermont households connected to broadband for the first time, including 2,200 to high-speed fiber to the home.
- Convince some of the largest companies in the country to step up and help their employees by applying for Vermont's essential worker hazard pay program

A Different Kind of Organizing

The pandemic didn't just change the types of issues we worked on, it changed the very nature of how we advocated for the public interest.

The achievements of VPIRG and our members in 2020 are made all the more impressive when one considers we were without so many of the advocacy and organizing tools we've come to rely on since our inception.

Our State House advocates couldn't catch legislators in the hallway to show them research debunking the misleading testimony they just got from industry lobbyists.

We couldn't hold in-person media events to demonstrate the diverse support for public interest priorities.

Our organizers couldn't put together citizen lobby days to bring Vermonters directly to Montpelier to speak with their elected officials.

And we could not go door-to-door in every town in the state to build grassroots support for VPIRG. For the first time in decades, we were forced to cancel the VPIRG Summer Canvass.

But all of this presented the opportunity for us to adapt and sharpen some new organizing skills. And we took to that opportunity with gusto.

In May we launched the first ever VPIRG Virtual Canvass. Instead of knocking on doors, we reached out to VPIRG's thousands of members statewide using every method we could think of that didn't involve in-person contact: email, social media, text messaging, snail mail and, perhaps most notably, hitting the phones like we never have before

Throughout the summer, we organized a series

of VPIRG webinars to provide our members with the opportunity to learn more about our priority issues and digitally connect with decision makers.

By the fall, we were putting our refined digital organizing techniques to use in service of a massive "Get Out The Vote" campaign, and we even worked out how to safely and successfully do some in-person organizing: setting up tables with large QR code signs so the public could take action at a distance, with zero contact.

Looking Ahead

Like everyone else – we look forward to a 'return to normalcy' as we exit the worst of the pandemic. But we also recognize that the impact of this pandemic will be felt for a long time.

VPIRG will continue to fight to ensure that the recovery is one that puts the public interest first. And we'll do so by adding the tools and skills we've developed during this most challenging of years to the proven tactics we've honed over the last half-century.

2020 WAS A CHALLENGING YEAR FOR ALL OF US.

But amidst all the chaos and upheaval, one thing has remained constant: the commitment of Vermonters like you to standing up for what's right and supporting the public interest. And here at VPIRG, we couldn't be more grateful.

While our organization has not been immune from the impacts of the ongoing public health and economic crises, we have weathered the storm – and even taken on new and exciting public interest work – thanks to the continued support of our members. One group in particular stands out in these uncertain times: our Sustainers.

These committed monthly givers are the lifeblood of our public interest organization. As the name “Sustainer” implies, they truly do sustain our work and ensure that no matter what happens (including a global pandemic), VPIRG will be here to stand up to the powerful, big-money special interests and protect the health and well-being of Vermont's people and environment for years to come.

In 2020, it was the dedicated support of our Sustainers that

allowed us to pivot rapidly to meet the moment and address some of the most pressing needs facing Vermonters. Some of our biggest wins for the year, like ensuring that every active, registered Vermont voter received their ballot in the mail for the general election, running our first ever “Virtual Canvass,” and formally launching a racial justice initiative, would not have been possible without our monthly givers.

Want to help ensure victory on key public interest priorities and set us up to successfully take on any unexpected twists and turns that 2021 may throw our way?

Then, please, sign up as a Sustainer today at www.vpirg.org/BecomeASustainer or by calling our Membership Coordinator, Molly Feldman, at (802) 223-5221 x14.

By becoming a Sustainer with a recurring monthly gift, you'll be supporting our continued fight to protect Vermont's people, environment, and locally-based economy at a time when the stakes have truly never been higher.

Sustainer Highlight

“I think VPIRG leads the way in legislative work and they hit on all the issues that are important to me... it is the campaign finance and clean energy work that's kept me involved since the early 1990s.”

– Susan Ritz, Montpelier





a turning point:

PASSING THE GLOBAL WARMING SOLUTIONS ACT

and Setting Vermont on a Path toward Bold Climate Action



THE PASSAGE OF THE GLOBAL WARMING SOLUTIONS ACT IN 2020 MARKED A SIGNIFICANT TURNING POINT ON VERMONT'S PATH TO CLIMATE ACTION.

When the Solutions Act became law in September, Vermont's climate goals (which we have not been meeting) became legally binding requirements and the Vermont Climate Council was established to develop a plan to meet those requirements in a way that emphasizes equity and resilience in our communities.

The enactment of the Solutions Act was a moment built on years of organizing and advocacy work that would not have been possible without the massive public support

shown by Vermonters of all backgrounds, from every corner of the state.

Leading up to the 2020 legislative session, thousands of Vermonters took to the streets as part of the Global Climate Strike, and hundreds of young Vermonters convened the first ever Youth Climate Congress. In speeches and conversations at these events, and all across the state, people were talking about one landmark bill: the Global Warming Solutions Act. When elected officials entered the State House in

PASSING THE GLOBAL WARMING SOLUTIONS ACT

and Setting Vermont on a Path toward Bold Climate Action



January, our advocates were ready to seize that momentum to create real change.

Within the first two weeks of the session, VPIRG advocates and our allies had secured over 80 cosponsors of the bill – well beyond the votes needed for it to pass in the House. But we didn't stop there – the goal was to secure a veto-proof majority, which required over 100 House votes. This would ensure that should Governor Scott veto the Solutions Act (spoiler: he did), we could be confident that the legislature would have the votes to successfully override that veto (which they did!).

Securing 100 votes in the House is no easy feat. It took countless meetings with legislators and conversations with swing votes in the State House cafeteria, just the right research delivered at just the right time, and, most importantly, a nonstop stream of effective organizing.

For the public interest to win the day, the public needs to be heard. To make sure that can happen, we work hard to make it easier for Vermonters to be a part of the legislative process. The Solutions Act was a textbook example of how that work can allow Vermonters to make a huge impact.

In the two short months prior to the onset of the pandemic and the closing of the State House, our staff led an effort to organize press conferences, lobby days, and other grassroots actions for constituencies often not fully heard on climate action – youth, members of the faith community, health care workers, and rank-and-file employees of businesses around the state.

In late February, that work paid off as the Solutions Act went to the House floor, where it passed in a vote of 105-37: a veto-proof majority.

But we all know what happened next: the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was the State House soon shut down, with the legislative process going digital, but the priorities of everyone in Vermont (VPIRG included: see story on Pg.8) shifted towards addressing COVID-19 and the health and economic crises it wrought.

Many of our other priority climate bills were put on hold, but we knew we had to do everything possible to turn the Solutions Act into law in 2020. When the legislature came back for a special session in August, we set to work ensuring that the bill made its way through the Senate, and eventually to the governor's desk.

As you already know, Governor Scott made the decision to veto the Global Warming Solutions Act, despite overwhelming support for the legislation. We were disappointed, to say the least. But we were confident VPIRG members and our allies in the legislature and around the state would muster the support necessary to override the governor's veto. And we were right. In September, the Vermont House and Senate voted to make this landmark climate bill law, without the governor's blessing.

The story doesn't end there, however. In fact, the journey of the Global Warming Solutions Act

is continuing at this very minute.

In December, the Vermont Climate Council convened for the first time. This Council, composed of 23 members representing a wide array of sectors and backgrounds, is tasked with working together over the course of 2021 to create a Climate Action Plan for Vermont. This plan will not only chart a course for hitting essential goals in cutting Vermont's climate pollution, but it must also center equity and prioritize the needs of Vermonters who have historically been left behind in the face of progress: people with low-incomes, Black and indigenous peoples, and rural communities. The plan will also focus on building the resilience of our communities to face the unavoidable impacts of climate change.

We now have set the framework for the meaningful change necessary to create a cleaner, safer, healthier, and more sustainable future for generations of Vermonters to come.

Throughout this process, we will be pushing the Council to center justice, equity, and resilience – as required by the Solutions Act – and of course to put forward the actions necessary to hit the legally binding climate pollution targets embedded in that law. Expect to hear more from us on how you can be a part of that work!



REMAINING VIGILANT:

A Q&A with VPIRG Environmental Associate Marcie Gallagher on how VPIRG preserved critical environmental protections in the midst of a pandemic



▲ We didn't just defend against attacks in 2020, we were able to secure some important victories as well. In September, VPIRG took part in a successful nationwide campaign to push McDonald's to stop using food packaging containing toxic PFAS chemicals. Here's Marcie taking part in a photo petition effort as part of that campaign.

Q: 2020 was a tumultuous year, and VPIRG recognized early on that the COVID-19 pandemic could create opportunities for certain actors to undermine or weaken important environmental laws. Can you explain how VPIRG worked to defend these laws against attack and remain vigilant amid the uncertainty of the pandemic?

A: VPIRG has always seen part of our role as being a 'watchdog' for our state's institutions and laws. So, when the realities of the pandemic started to become clear, we knew it was likely that some would look to take advantage of the crisis to line their pockets and skirt important environmental regulations. We saw this early on at the federal level with sweeping rollbacks by the EPA. But it was also happening right here in Vermont. We saw the plastics industry fight to delay the implementation of our plastic bag ban - as well as others across the country - using baseless claims about the threats posed by reusable bags.

Soon after, Vermont-based hauler, Casella Waste Systems, led a charge to suspend Vermont's universal recycling law, which would have sent more recyclables directly to Vermont's Casella-owned landfill. Casella and others also pushed for the indefinite delay of the July 1st landfill ban on food scraps.

Q: How exactly did Casella attempt to undermine recycling?

A: When the pandemic began, Casella attempted to persuade the Legislature to suspend the landfill ban on recyclables, allowing these materials to be sent to its landfill in Coventry (the only active landfill in the State) instead. The initial justification was that they would have difficulty selling recyclables. Once this argument was disproven, Casella shifted course, suggesting that there would be an "increased risk [to workers] from handling recyclables." VPIRG was and remains concerned about the health and wellbeing of frontline workers. We suggested that



hazard pay and PPE would be a better response, since there was no evidence to suggest that handling recycling (or compost) is any more dangerous than a trash bag. We were successful in preserving Vermont's recycling program, helped in part by a petition signed by 1,587 of our members.

Q: You also mentioned the attempt by local and national actors to delay our plastic bag ban, which went into effect on July 1, 2020 – can you explain that further?

A: The plastics industry fought tooth and nail against Vermont's landmark ban on single-use plastics, including plastic carryout bags, before it ultimately passed in 2019. So it came as no surprise when the industry jumped at the chance to undermine our law. As the New York Times put it, "the plastic bag industry, battered by a wave of bans nationwide, is using the coronavirus crisis to try and block laws

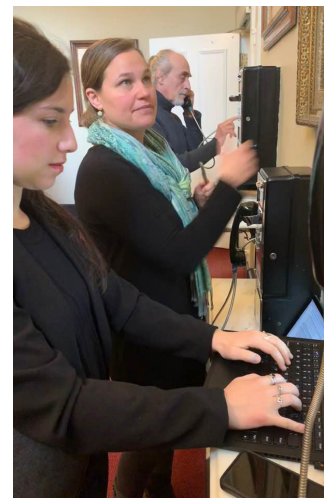
prohibiting single-use plastic."

Public health experts maintain that reusable bags pose no hazard during the pandemic and emphasize that washing reusable bags regularly and bagging one's own groceries are excellent ways to protect both consumers and grocery store workers. But industry fearmongering did lead to states like Maine and New York temporarily delaying planned plastic bag bans. Still, VPIRG was able to successfully defend Vermont's ban on plastic bags and other single-use products, which went into effect as planned on July 1, 2020 – and we're proud of that win!

Q: Beyond the scope of the pandemic, does VPIRG often play the role of watchdog over Vermont's environmental laws? If so, can you give an example?

A: It would be difficult to name a time that VPIRG wasn't

watch-dogging an environmental or consumer protection issue in the state. Most recently in the realm of solid waste, we held Chittenden Solid Waste District (CSWD) to account for its egregious violations of Vermont's environmental laws. It turns out CSWD had been illegally dumping 18,000 tons of glass over a five-year period that Vermont residents and haulers had paid them to recycle. This was done without public notice or approval from state or local environmental officials. We drafted a legal analysis of the environmental and consumer laws that we believed the District violated and urged the Attorney General to take action. Ultimately, Attorney General T.J. Donovan reached a settlement with CSWD in December 2020 that included payment of a \$400,000 fine by the District and a commitment to tell the truth about what they are doing with recyclable glass in the future.



▲ **VPIRG's Environmental Associate Marcie Gallagher (pictured left) hard at work in the State House in early March 2020. Just hours after this picture was taken, the State House closed down as the Vermont legislature moved remote for the rest of the year. The priorities for our environmental health team shifted too – as we had to defend against big money interests using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to attack our environmental laws.**

2020 Year In Review

January



Legislative Session Kicks Off: VPIRG advocates returned to the State House to advance a bold agenda of public interest priorities in the 2020 legislative session – protecting Vermonters from harmful PFAS chemicals, banning corporate campaign contributions, improving data privacy protections, curbing single-use plastics and so much more.

We entered the 2020 session with particularly strong momentum for bold climate action and worked to build on that by helping our allies organize climate ‘lobby days’ and media events for students, the faith community, business leaders, and healthcare experts, among many others.

VPIRG Votes Launches: We announced the formation of VPIRG Votes - a political campaign arm for our organization. In 2020, for the first time ever, we supported public interest champions running for the Vermont State House, Senate and statewide office.

VPIRG Votes was born from the recognition that despite VPIRG’s significant victories over the years, the threats to our environment and democracy have never been greater than they are right now. We believe this will allow us to expand on VPIRG’s current work by supporting and electing public interest champions.

February

Climate Action Ramps Up: As the year got going grassroots climate action took off around the state. Lobby days and actions at the State House were in full swing, VPIRG joined our friends at SunCommon, Youth Lobby, and VNRC to help them organize the first ever Climate Action Film Festival, traveling to cities and towns around the state – and the Global Warming Solutions Act passed the House. With a remarkable 105 yeas and just 37 nays, representatives from every corner of Vermont endorsed turning Vermont’s climate goals into legal requirements (read the full story on Pg. 7).

Data Privacy and Consumer Protection Bill Enacted: Governor Phil Scott signed into law wide-ranging legislation (Act 89) containing several VPIRG-backed provisions aimed at improving data privacy for Vermont students, better protecting all Vermonters’ personal information, informing them when their data has been compromised, and keeping them out of unwanted ‘zombie contacts.’ VPIRG had advocated for enactment of this law since it was introduced in 2019.



March

COVID-19 Pandemic Changes Everything: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused VPIRG to change how we operate and shift our priorities to ensure that Vermont's response to this crisis put the public interest first (read the full story on Pg. 8). We oriented our work around core tenets that we referred to as The 3 Vs: Voting, Vigilance and Values. This meant ensuring 1.) that Vermonters could safely participate in our elections in 2020, 2.) that big-money special interests did not use the crisis to roll back the hard-fought protections we've won over the years and 3.) that we would not lose sight of existing priorities like clean water and a livable climate and that the recovery effort would put our people, environment and local economy first.



April

Protecting Vermont's Recycling Laws: Our "vigilance" work faced an early test in the first month of the pandemic as we confronted waste giant Casella's attempts to subvert Vermont's recycling laws with a proposal that would have allowed them to send material that would normally be recycled (glass, metal, paper, and plastic) to the Casella-owned landfill in Coventry. VPIRG members stepped up and let our elected officials know this was unacceptable and successfully ensured that Vermont's recycling programs remained in place throughout the pandemic.

May

The First-Ever Virtual Canvass: Most Vermonters' first encounter with VPIRG comes when one of our summer canvassers bikes up their driveway or knocks on their door to talk about our work. But in 2020, we realized quickly that wouldn't be possible.

In May, we launched our first ever Virtual Canvass. Instead of knocking on doors, we reached out to VPIRG's thousands of members statewide using every method we could think of that didn't involve in-person contact: email, social media, text messaging, snail mail and, perhaps most notably, hitting the phones like we never have before.

PFAS Bill Passes Senate: In a huge win for the health of Vermont's people and environment, the Vermont Senate unanimously passed S.295, a bill banning PFAS in certain products including firefighting foam, carpets/rugs, and food packaging. Unfortunately, this bill was one of many that stalled as legislators turned the bulk of their attention to dealing with the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2020 Year In Review ctd.

June

A Reckoning with Systemic Racism: The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and subsequent protests demanding a national reckoning with systemic racism caused us at VPIRG, like so many other organizations and individuals, to re-examine our role in these systems and how we can and should be a part of dismantling the structures that contribute to ongoing injustice.

In June we issued a statement in solidarity with those protesting stating that a “system that marginalizes, discriminates, and commits violence against people based on the color of their skin is NOT in the public interest.” But we also recognized that solidarity isn’t about making a statement – it’s about taking action. To that end, we launched a Racial Justice program, joined a diverse coalition of Vermont organizations in supporting a 10-point plan for reimagining policing, and began taking steps to better collaborate with and support those in Vermont who are at the forefront of advancing anti-racist policies.

July

Single-Use Plastic Ban Goes into Effect: In 2019, VPIRG worked hard to advocate for the enactment of the nation’s most comprehensive law to deal with the scourge of single-use plastic pollution. Despite last minute attempts by the plastics industry to derail implementation of the law, it took effect on July 1, 2020 – banning the distribution of plastic bags, plastic drink stirrers, and expanded polystyrene (think Styrofoam) and creating a straws-upon-request policy in restaurants.

Vote-By-Mail for 2020 Becomes Law: At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, VPIRG led a diverse collection of groups urging legislators to pass a law empowering Gov. Phil Scott and Secretary of State Jim Condos to implement election changes that would help to keep voters and election officials safe. Secretary Condos and his staff developed a plan to mail every registered voter in Vermont a ballot for the general election, but the governor refused to sign off on the plan.

VPIRG advocates quickly returned to the legislature pressing for a new bill granting full authority to the Secretary of State to make universal vote-by-mail a reality during the pandemic. Legislators wasted no time in passing the bill and it became law without the governor’s signature in July. (See full story on pg. 4)

August

Vote Safe Vermont Campaign Launched: Ahead of the state primary election, VPIRG embarked on a multi-channel outreach campaign—called Vote Safe Vermont—educating Vermonters about how to vote safely and securely by mail in the primary election. Thanks in large part to these efforts, participation in the 2020 primary election was 39% higher than the previous record, with a majority of ballots – more than 120,000 of them – cast by mail.

September

Climate Champions Override Gov. Scott’s Veto of Global Warming Solutions Act: In the closing days of the 2020 legislative session, Vermont’s House and Senate mustered the two-thirds votes necessary to override Gov. Phil Scott’s veto of the Vermont Global Warming Solutions Act and pass that landmark climate legislation into law. (Read full story on pg.11)



October

Getting Out the (Early) Vote: Even though Election Day was technically November 3, with early voting more accessible than ever before, October effectively became Election Month. For VPIRG that meant running a Get Out The Vote effort like we've never done before.

With the help of our two talented Democracy & Youth Organizers we combined traditional grassroots organizing tactics with digital outreach to ensure that more Vermonters than ever before participated in the 2020 election.

November

Voter Turnout Records Smashed: Our organizing efforts paid off. A record-shattering 370,968 votes were cast in the 2020 Vermont general election, blowing past the previous general election record by more than 44,000 votes and representing a 73.27% turnout of registered voters.

Protecting the Results: VPIRG and our friends at Rights & Democracy (RAD) joined Protect the Results, a national coalition of over 100 organizations representing tens of millions of people around the country, to prepare for mass mobilization in all 50 states in the event Donald Trump followed through on his threat to deny a peaceful transfer of power.

In the days following the election, when it became clear former President Trump would, indeed, attempt to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election and stop the full counting of votes, VPIRG and our allies organized a series of 'Count Every Vote' actions across the state.

December

CSWD Settles with State for Illegal Glass Dumping: For more than a year, VPIRG had been watchdogging the investigation into Chittenden Solid Waste District's improper dumping of tons of processed glass between 2013 and 2018. CSWD violated environmental regulations and the public's trust by collecting material meant for recycling and then secretly dumping 18 thousand tons of processed glass in unapproved locations for years.

VPIRG successfully organized to prevent the Agency of Natural Resources from granting retroactive permits to CSWD for these activities. In December, Attorney General T.J. Donovan announced a settlement requiring CSWD to pay \$400,000 in penalties. CSWD must also tell the truth about what they do with materials collected for recycling in the future.

Moratorium on Power Shut-Offs Reinstated: VPIRG joined with Vermont Legal Aid in leading a successful effort to urge the Vermont Public Utilities commission to reinstate a moratorium on all involuntary disconnections due to nonpayment of electricity, natural gas, and landline phone utilities through March 31, 2021.

The PUC had allowed the original moratorium (motivated by the economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) to expire in October. VPIRG members stepped up and demanded the PUC reinstate the moratorium so that no Vermonter would have to go without heat or electricity because of an inability to pay bills during a pandemic winter.

Powered by You: Our 2020 Finances by the Numbers

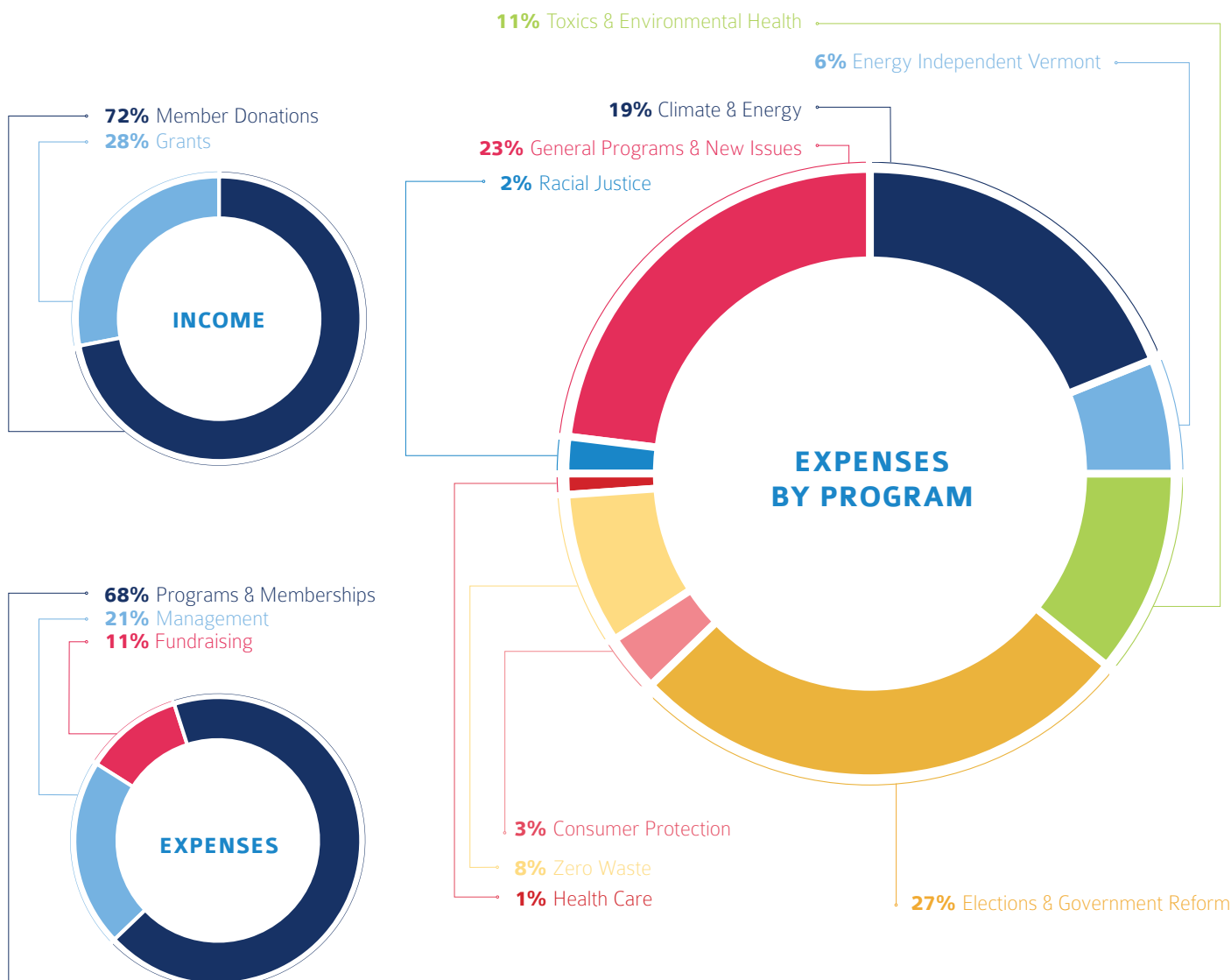
In 2020, despite unprecedented challenges and hardships, thousands of Vermonters continued to support VPIRG with grassroots contributions. The big-money special interests don't fund groups like ours, and we wouldn't take their money if they did. VPIRG is a people-powered organization and proud of it.

Your support allows VPIRG to continue to educate thousands of Vermonters every year about the critical issues we face and then

mobilize them in support of solutions that advance the public interest. So thank you.

VPIRG and VPIREF combined income totaled \$1,954,923.94, of which more than \$1,400,666.52 came from individual member donations, 53% of that coming from our monthly sustaining members. Combined expenses totaled \$1,489,878.23. Program expenses and member services account for 68% of our expenses.

	VPIRG	VPIREF	TOTAL
Income	\$1,087,350.21	\$867,573.73	\$1,954,923.94
Expenses	\$639,691.97	\$850,186.26	\$1,489,878.23



Trustee Profiles

In 2020, VPIRG was fortunate to welcome two new trustees to our board: Aiko Schaefer and Kanika Gandhi.



Aiko Schaefer, Stowe

Director, Just Solutions Collective & Strategic Consultant

Aiko directs the national Just Solutions Collective which identifies, analyzes and curates equitable and racially just clean energy policy and program models to foster replication, scaling and greater capacity for diverse communities to engage in the environmental movement.

Aiko has nearly 30 years of experience working on public policies on climate justice, anti-poverty, consumer protection and tax reform, as well as partisan campaigns. She has worked in a number of states and with diverse communities across the US. Most recently Aiko was a principal author and leader of Washington State's 2018 climate justice ballot measure. Prior to her work on climate and environmental policy, Aiko was a faculty member at the University of Washington in Seattle.

In addition to directing Just Solutions Collective, Aiko provides strategic consulting to political campaigns, non-profits, government and foundations on policy and program development. She lives in Stowe, Vermont with her husband and their two teenage children.



Kanika Gandhi, Montpelier

Agrichemical Section Chief, Vermont's Agency of Agriculture

Kanika is the Agrichemical Section Chief at Vermont's Agency of Agriculture. Prior to joining the Agency, Kanika was a standout advocate with VPIRG, focusing her efforts over 18 months on energy, environmental, and agricultural policy work. In particular, she was a leading voice on our campaigns dealing with plastics and pesticides. Before coming to VPIRG, Kanika worked as a policy specialist at the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and with the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, D.C. She also worked briefly as a consultant with the City of Providence Department of Economic Development.

Kanika fell in love with Vermont when she spent time farming on an organic vegetable operation in southern Vermont. While her interests are varied, she has always been drawn to agricultural issues and she has a love for politics. She is a graduate of the highly regarded Emerge Vermont program. Kanika earned her BA and MPA from Brown University and now makes her home in Montpelier.

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Note: While we wish we could thank every single member in this annual report it's impossible to list the thousands of VPIRG supporters statewide. The generosity of those listed in this report deserves special recognition.

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