



Annual Report **2023**

**MAKE GREEDY
BIG OIL
PAY TO CLEAN UP
THEIR MESS!**



**MAKE
BIG
OIL
PAY**

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Letter from the Director

In many ways, 2023 was a banner year for VPIRG and our collective work to advance the public interest in our state.

We successfully advocated for the enactment of a policy that has the ability to transform how we heat our homes and businesses—making clean heat affordable and accessible for every Vermonter.

We ran a successful campaign to bring Ranked Choice Voting back to all elections in Vermont's biggest city—demonstrating that we can make our democracy stronger and more responsive to voters at a time when the very foundation of our democracy is being threatened.

And we launched two of the most ambitious campaigns in VPIRG's history in the course of one summer.

You'll read about these achievements and others in this annual report. And I'm incredibly proud of everything VPIRG and our members were able to get done last year.

But when I reflect back on 2023, I will certainly remember one thing above all: last summer's catastrophic flooding—which science tells us was absolutely made worse by a warming planet.

Montpelier, as you probably know, is home to the VPIRG offices. It is also the place my family and I call home. Thankfully, we were spared the worst—but so many in our community (and others across the state) suffered so much because of this disaster.

As I joined in the clean-up in the days after the flooding, it was hard not to be overwhelmed by the ruin—homes completely washed away, infrastructure destroyed, local businesses wondering if they'd be able to return, offices (including VPIRG's own basement) completely under water.

Yet, as they always do, Vermonters stepped up for one another. Neighbors helped neighbors. People chipped in what they could, and slowly Vermont came back.

But the good will and selflessness of Vermonters—inspiring though it is—does not change the fact that these climate disasters come at an incredible cost, that they are likely to keep happening, and that those most responsible for them (the giant fossil fuel companies that have reaped record profits while doing all they can to stop meaningful climate action) have not been held accountable for their role in these disasters. Until now.

One of those aforementioned ambitious campaigns that VPIRG launched in 2023 was Make Big Oil Pay—our effort to make the largest fossil fuels companies—like ExxonMobil and Shell—pay for the damage that climate change has caused in our state.

And I'm happy to report that as of the writing of this letter, that effort has resulted in Vermont enacting a law requiring those companies to do just that—but that is a story for the 2024 Annual Report.

For now, please read how this campaign got its start and learn more about all the good work you helped make possible in 2023.

Onward,



Paul Burns



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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, runs grassroots campaigns and seeks legislative and policy solutions to some of the most pressing issues facing 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 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

MAKE BIG OIL PAY	4
PROTECT OUR POLLINATORS	8
RANKED CHOICE VOTING	10
YEAR IN REVIEW	12
2023 FINANCIALS	16
BOARD MEMBER PROFILE	17
SUPPORTERS	18
STAFF	20

MAKE BIG OIL PAY: THE RIGHT CAMPAIGN BECOMES RIGHTEOUS

In June of 2023, dozens of VPIRG summer canvassers joined staff, organizational allies, and environmental leaders in Burlington to announce a new campaign aimed at holding the biggest oil companies accountable for the damage they've done to our climate and our state.

And while all those gathered believed in the need and urgency of such an effort, it's fair to say nobody understood exactly how timely this campaign would become.

Gathered in front of a 22-foot long inflatable pig (representing the greed of the fossil fuel industry), VPIRG launched our Make Big Oil Pay campaign, calling for the creation of a Vermont Climate Superfund similar to the existing federal hazardous waste Superfund program.

The ultimate goal was straightforward: enact a law that would require the largest companies most responsible for the pollution harming our climate—in this case, the Big Oil companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron—to pay into the Superfund based on their historic emissions.

Those funds could then be used to mitigate and protect Vermonters from some of the financial costs of climate change, including state and municipal infrastructure, weatherization and air

conditioning of our public schools and buildings, health care costs associated with a warming climate, and future disaster clean-up.

At that campaign launch in June, VPIRG and our allies made the case that our changing climate would inevitably lead to, among other things, increased extreme weather events that would cause significant damage in Vermont at a great cost—a cost that, currently, is paid largely by flood victims and Vermont taxpayers.

In remarks that day, Executive Director of Vermont Conservation Voters and Montpelier City Councilor Lauren Hierl said, "As a city councilor, I've seen firsthand how Vermont communities are already experiencing the increasing costs of climate change—like when streets are flooded, more water mains break, and culverts need to be upgraded. Right now, local taxpayers are on the hook for these inevitable and rising costs—and guess who isn't currently paying? The Big Oil and Gas companies that knew about climate change decades ago but did nothing to stop it as they racked up massive profits."

Just weeks later, Montpelier, along with many other communities across the state, would experience historic flooding—worsened, no doubt, by our rapidly changing climate.

Continued on pg. 6

“As a city councilor, I’ve seen firsthand how Vermont communities are already experiencing the increasing costs of climate change — like when streets are flooded, more water mains break, and culverts need to be upgraded. Right now, local taxpayers are on the hook for these inevitable and rising costs — and guess who isn’t currently paying? The Big Oil and Gas companies that knew about climate change decades ago but did nothing to stop it as they racked up massive profits.”

Lauren Hierl, Executive Director of Vermont Conservation Voters and Montpelier City Councilor





Make Big Oil Pay

continued from pg. 4

VPIRG was impacted directly—suffering severe damage to our basement level office space in Montpelier, losing decades of paper records, organizing tools, and campaign materials. Further, our summer door-to-door canvass team (who were organizing on the Make Big Oil Pay campaign) had to adjust their outreach plans and were unable to visit some locations in the state.

But all things considered, we were extremely lucky. Many Vermonters lost nearly everything—from farmers with flooded fields to businesses with inventory wiped out. Some lost the entire contents of their homes, not to mention the devastation to our roads, waterways, and other infrastructure. At least two people lost their lives in the floods as well.

The flooding did, however, only serve to strengthen VPIRG's commitment to the newly launched Make Big Oil Pay campaign, demonstrating the need and urgency for such an effort. As Vermonters looked at the utter devastation around the state—with the unfortunate knowledge that such disasters are likely to happen again—many were naturally asking, “who will pay to clean this up, and who will pay to build back in a more resilient, sustainable manner?”

As our executive director Paul Burns would later observe, the Vermont floods took a campaign that was right and made it righteous.

Our canvass team saw this firsthand, going door-to-door in every corner of the state. Ultimately more than 12,000 Vermonters signed our petition in support of the campaign.





And our efforts were just beginning. As the calendar moved from summer to fall, VPIRG's grassroots engagement team hit the road for the Make Big Oil Pay Community Action Tour.

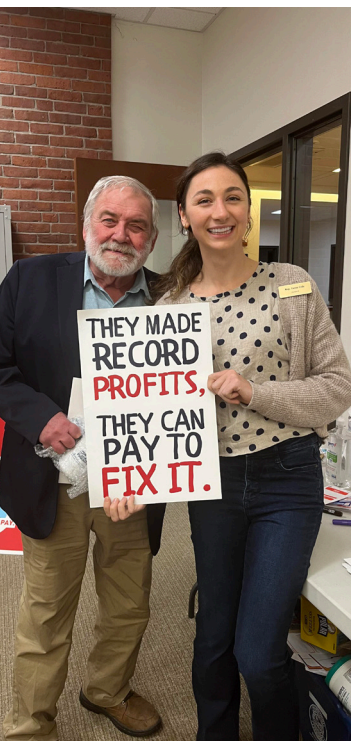
Organizers made stops in all 14 counties in Vermont, convening interested Vermonters and their local legislators for a series of interactive events that included a detailed presentation on how the Climate Superfund policy would work and opportunities for community members to provide input on the policy through two key questions:

What is climate change costing you?

What would you use a Vermont Climate Superfund for?

And while our organizing team built grassroots support for this idea throughout the summer and fall, our advocates put in hours and hours of work doing policy analysis and outreach to key legislative champions to ensure this bill would have serious support heading into the legislative session.

The end result—as we turned the page to 2024—was incredible momentum for arguably the most ambitious and consequential legislation VPIRG has ever advocated for in our 50+ year history.



Campaign update: As this annual report goes to print in 2024, we're proud to report that the Climate Superfund Act was passed by the legislature, and the governor allowed the bill to become law without his signature. But the work is not done. Stay tuned for future publications and/or visit our website for the latest updates on this landmark campaign.

VPIRG BRINGS TOGETHER COALITION TO PROTECT OUR POLLINATORS



In August, more than 150 Vermonters came together at the ECHO Leahy Center for Lake Champlain to hear about a critical issue: the preservation of Vermont's pollinators.

Bees, birds, and other pollinators are dying off at an alarming rate, threatening not only biodiversity but our agricultural economy.

The event marked the launch of a new coalition campaign: "Protect Our Pollinators VT."

VPIRG helped convene this diverse group that includes farmers, scientists, nonprofit organizations, and businesses working to address threats to pollinators starting with an effort to phaseout the use of toxic neonic pesticides in Vermont and help farmers transition to sustainable alternatives so we can better protect pollinators and public health.



Attendees at the August event heard from Samantha Alger of the UVM Bee Lab, who presented research about declining pollinator populations in our state and the threats they face, and Charlie Nardozzi, regional Emmy® award winning garden writer, speaker, radio, and television personality, and expert gardener, who shared many pollinator-friendly tips for home gardeners.

Twelve organizations tabled at the event including: Audubon Vermont, the UVM Vermont Bee Lab, Bee the Change, UVM Extension Master Gardeners, Vermont Center for Ecostudies, Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, Northeast Pollinator Plants, Pollinator Pathways, Vermont Pesticide and Poison Action Network, GrowwildVT, and the Vermont Beekeeper's Association.

The launch was a huge success—bringing those 150+ Vermonters into the fold via our Protect Our Pollinators petition and galvanizing the campaign.

VPIRG and our allies worked to build on that momentum throughout the rest of the year, holding

additional events and tabling all across the state—at fairs, farmers markets and anywhere else we could think of—to engage more Vermonters in the campaign.

Ultimately we went into 2024 with more than 1,000 Vermonters signed on to the campaign and tremendous momentum for our effort to phase out toxic neonics.

The effort received a major boost in the final days of 2023, when New York Gov. Kathy Hochul signed that state's pollinator protection legislation into law – providing a model for Vermont to follow.

Campaign update: We were ultimately successful in passing our own Pollinator Protection Act in Vermont, phasing out neonics on the same timeline as our neighbors in New York. Gov. Phil Scott did veto the bill, but lawmakers voted to override the veto. Visit the VPIRG website for the latest updates on this campaign.





Ranked Choice Voting is Huge Success in Queen City

Two years after Burlington voted to adopt ranked choice voting (RCV) for city council elections, 64.4% of voters gave approval to Question 6, expanding the reform to include elections for mayor, schoolboard commissioner, and ward election officers.

Town Meeting Day 2023 also marked the first-time voters across all Burlington wards had the opportunity to use ranked choice voting to elect their city councilors since the 2021 city charter change.

Sam McGinty, VPIRG's democracy advocate, observed, "Burlington voters sent a crystal-clear message. They liked ranked choice voting and they want more of it. It's no surprise that Burlingtonians prefer a method of voting that gives them more choices and stronger voices in elections."

VPIRG led the Yes on 6 effort in the city, reaching out to voters via the mail, on the phone and even door-to-door. We held a Yes on 6 rally with other RCV supporters in front of the Burlington Ben & Jerry's

days before the election to build support for the charter change.

Representatives of VPIRG also educated Burlingtonians about using ranked choice voting, so they would be prepared to use it in their city council races—phone banking, sending mailers, and promoting video explainers on social media and CCTV.

We also partnered with Ben and Jerry’s to run a mock RCV election with some of the ice-cream icon’s most famous flavors. The mock election provided voters a fun and informative opportunity to see RCV in action.

At polling locations on Town Meeting Day, VPIRG conducted exit interviews to gauge voter understanding and interest.



The interviews routinely found that voters had a lot of positive things to say about RCV, and that it was easy to use.

“We spoke with many voters as they exited the polls,” said Sinead Murray, VPIRG’s democracy associate. “They found the idea of ranking candidates to be simple and empowering. It’s easy to see why voters want to expand ranked choice voting.”

Burlington’s positive 2023 experience with RCV and its strong vote to expand the use of the voting method will provide important momentum in VPIRG’s campaign to bring RCV to more Vermont elections statewide starting with a policy that would put ranked choice voting in place for the 2028 Vermont presidential primary.



2023 Year in Review

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Fair Repair Legislation Introduced with Long List of Co-sponsors

VPIRG hailed the introduction of two bills, H.79 and H.81, that, if enacted would have established a right-to-repair in Vermont. Fair repair legislation, which VPIRG has long supported, requires the manufacturers of consumer products to make available—on fair and reasonable terms—the parts, tools, and information necessary to repair those products. H.79 applied to a wide range of consumer products, while H.81 dealt specifically with establishing a right-to-repair for agricultural and forestry equipment. Both bills were introduced with a long cross-partisan list of co-sponsors, and H.81 gained traction in the 2023 session eventually passing out of the House on a 137-2 vote.

MARCH

Ranked Choice Voting Wins on Town Meeting Day



Two years after Burlington voted to adopt ranked choice voting (RCV) for city council elections, 64.4% of voters favored expanding the reform to include elections for mayor, schoolboard commissioner, and ward election officers.

Additionally, Town Meeting Day 2023 marked the first-time voters across all wards had the opportunity to use ranked choice voting to elect their city councilors since the 2021 city charter change.

Read more about VPIRG's efforts to pass the 2023 charter change as well as our work to educate and prepare voters to use RCV on page 10.

FEBRUARY

REI Announces PFAS Ban in All Textiles

On February 21st, leading outdoor retailer REI announced it would ban PFAS “forever chemicals” (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) in all textile products and cookware from its suppliers.

REI's new policy commitment comes more than a year after the launch of the nationwide marketplace campaign led by the Mind the Store program of Toxic-Free Future in partnership with Safer States, VPIRG, and other organizations. During the national campaign, thousands of people and organizations (including VPIRG activists) urged Seattle-based REI to ban PFAS in products it sells, via letters, petitions, rallies, and social media.



APRIL

Young Vermonters Rally for the Planet

An annual tradition – the Vermont Youth Lobby, with support from Vermont’s environmental advocacy organizations including VPIRG, rallied at the State House calling on the Vermont legislature to enact bold, climate legislation in 2023.

Hundreds of students from all over the state marched from Montpelier High School to the State House lawn to urge lawmakers to support a suite of climate policies up for consideration in 2023.



MAY

Legislature Overrides Veto, Enacts Affordable Heat Act

Following a two-year effort, the Vermont legislature overrode Gov. Scott’s veto of the Affordable Heat Act (S.5) in the closing days of the legislative session, passing for the first time a comprehensive policy to address one of the most polluting sectors in Vermont’s economy: how we heat our homes and other buildings.

The Affordable Heat Act requires Vermont’s Public Utility Commission (PUC) to design a program requiring companies that import fossil fuels used for residential, commercial, or industrial heating to offer Vermonters (particularly low- and middle-income Vermonters) incentives and upfront assistance to switch to cleaner, cheaper heating options, sufficient to ensure climate pollution in Vermont’s thermal sector is reduced in line with the requirements of the Global Warming Solutions Act.

After Gov. Scott vetoed the bill, the Senate voted 20-10 to override the governor’s veto, and the House followed suit by a vote of 107-42.

In many ways, this victory was the culmination of years of organizing by VPIRG and our allies—designed to convince legislators of the urgent need for serious climate policy.

Similar legislation passed in the previous biennium, was vetoed by the governor and an override attempt fell one vote short in the House. The strong override votes on this legislation in 2023 are a testament to the organizing work done to convince lawmakers that Vermonters expect bold climate action.

Now, the state PUC has until January 2025 to fully design the program as laid out in S.5 and provide additional details on its costs and benefits, before the legislature will have an opportunity to authorize the program’s implementation by passing an additional bill in 2025, allowing it to go into effect in 2026.



2023 Year in Review

JUNE

VPIRG Launches 'Make Big Oil Pay' Campaign

Environmental leaders and dozens of VPIRG canvassers gathered to launch a new campaign to hold the largest corporate climate polluters accountable for the tremendous damage their product has caused in Vermont.

VPIRG led the effort – called “Make Big Oil Pay” – in a campaign kick-off event just outside City Hall in Burlington. The event featured dozens of VPIRG’s summer outreach staff, partnering organizations, and a 22-foot-long inflatable pink pig to represent the greed of the fossil fuel industry. Read all about the Make Big Oil Pay campaign on page 4.



JULY



Historic Floods Devastate Vermont

In mid-July communities all across the state, including the capital city of Montpelier, experienced catastrophic flooding.

VPIRG’s office in Montpelier saw flooding to the ceiling of our basement unit, wiping out paper records spanning the 50-year history of our organization, environmental reports, electronics, organizing tools, and thousands of dollars in merchandise. It took many days of sweat, tears, and the help of generous volunteers to dispose of years of waterlogged VPIRG history. Yet we were the lucky ones – in Montpelier, many residents and businesses suffered far worse, and in other parts of the state, many lost everything.

The floods were no doubt worsened by climate change—and the devastation bolstered the imperative for serious action to confront the climate crisis and, importantly, to hold those most responsible for it (the fossil fuel giants) accountable.

AUGUST

Protect Our Pollinators Campaign Goes Live

VPIRG joined with allied organizations at the ECHO Leahy Center for Lake Champlain to host an evening dedicated to ways Vermonters can help protect pollinators, with guest speakers Samantha Alger of the UVM Bee Lab, and Charlie Nardozi of Vermont Public’s All Things Gardening. The event served as something of a launch for the Protect Our Pollinators campaign. Read more about this event and the campaign on page 8.



SEPTEMBER

Green Jobs Summer Showcase Wraps

Throughout the summer, VPIRG's Keep Vermont Cool campaign partnered with Renewable Energy Vermont for the Green Jobs Summer Showcase – a roadshow of events highlighting some of the most innovative renewable energy projects taking place across the state. Stops included: Lawson's Finest Liquids, MHG Solar, Norwich Solar, Stowe Electric, Catamount Solar and Dynapower.



OCTOBER

Make Big Oil Pay Campaign Goes on Tour



Almost as soon as we wrapped the Green Jobs Summer Showcase, the VPIRG organizing team hit the road for another tour – this time to build support for and solicit community input on the Make Big Oil Pay campaign. Hundreds attended the Make Big Oil Pay Community Action Tour, which included stops in all 14 Vermont counties.

NOVEMBER



VPIRG Campaign Store Launches

For years, VPIRG members would come to events or ask our door-to-door canvassers if/how they could get some of the VPIRG campaign gear that our team sports when we're out organizing Vermonters. So we decided, in 2023, to make that gear available to the public by launching the VPIRG Campaign Store.

Now our members can show their love for VPIRG and our public interest campaigns while directly supporting that work.

Visit vpirg.store to see what we have available!

DECEMBER

VPIRG Organizes for Bottle Bill Veto Override

Earlier in the year, the legislature gave final approval to legislation that would modernize Vermont's Bottle Bill by expanding the scope of the program to include beverages like water, wine, and sports drinks, opening up more redemption centers, and reducing the burden on small retailers.

The governor vetoed the bill, and because the veto came after lawmakers had adjourned, that meant a veto override attempt would need to wait until they returned in January 2024. For VPIRG, that meant serious grassroots organizing and advocacy throughout the Fall and right up to the new year.

We ultimately succeeded in getting an overwhelming override vote in the House, but fell just short of overriding the governor in the Senate. Nevertheless, this is the closest we've ever come to fully modernizing the Bottle Bill, and we plan to be back to build on this momentum.



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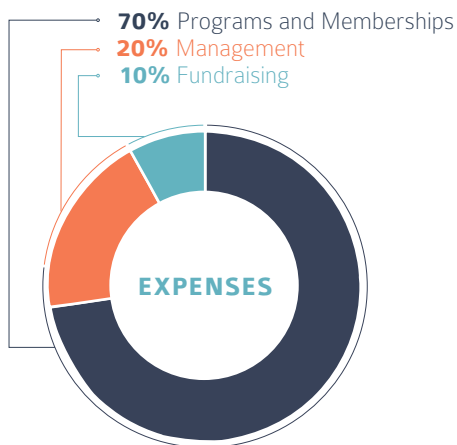
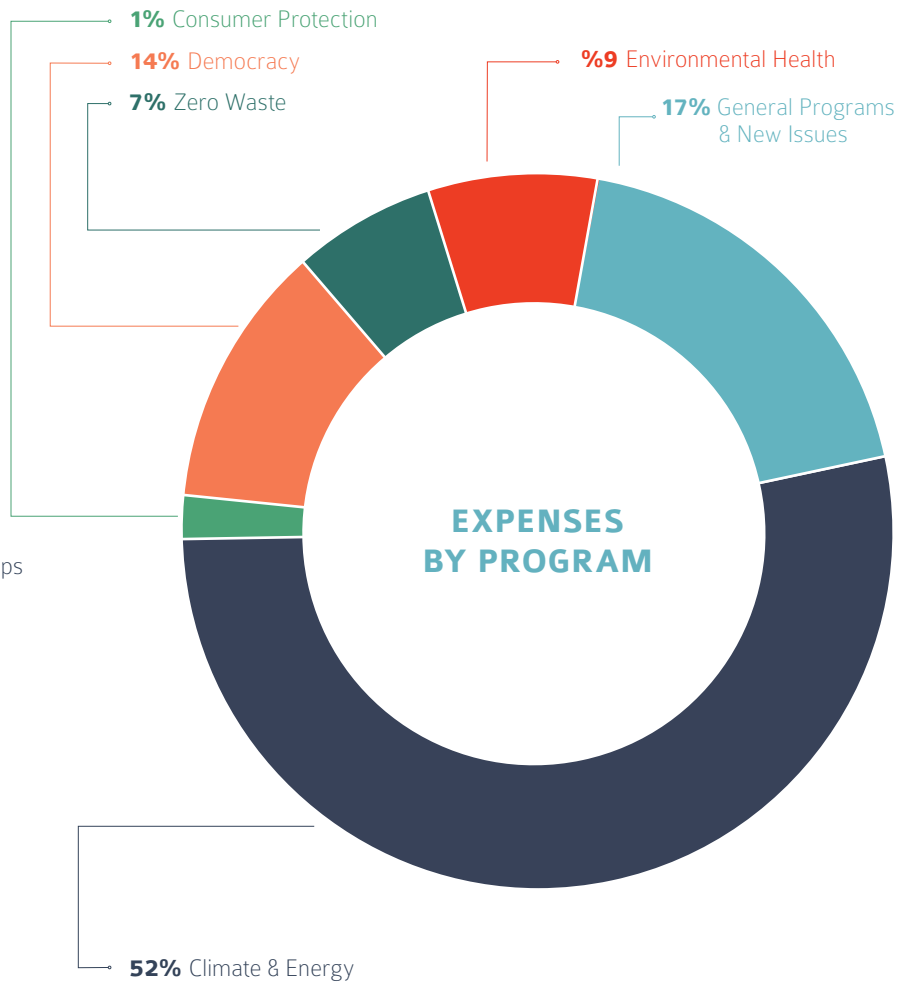
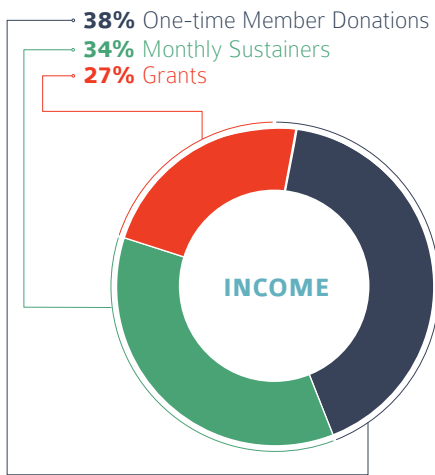
Our 2023 Finances by the Numbers

In 2023, thousands of Vermonters supported 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 \$2,294,516 of which more than \$1,642,527 came from individual member donations, 48% of that coming from our monthly sustaining members. Combined expenses totaled \$2,337,783. Program expenses and member services account for 70% of our expenses.

	VPIRG	VPIREF	TOTAL
Income	\$1,510,513	\$784,003	\$2,294,516
Expenses	\$1,555,354	\$782,507	\$2,337,861



BOARD MEMBER PROFILE

Megan Grove

In 2023, VPIRG welcomed a new, yet familiar face to our Board of Trustees: Megan Grove.

Megan lives in Waterbury and works as an associate attorney at SRH Law in Burlington supporting the firm's transactional practice and working on projects related to non-profit governance, affordable housing, and green marketing.

But her connections to Vermont and VPIRG stretch back over a decade.

Megan moved to the Green Mountain State in 2011 to attend the University of Vermont. She enjoyed her time here but wasn't sure if she'd ultimately stick around. That changed in 2013 when she took a job canvassing door-to-door with VPIRG as part of our GMO-Labeling campaign.

"Through my travels and conversations, I was introduced to the vibrant and tight-knit communities that make Vermont special," Megan says. "I continued to canvass on several other campaigns during my undergraduate summers and knew that I wanted to make Vermont my home."

After graduating, Megan joined VPIRG full-time as part of our fellowship program. Her advocacy work during her fellowship focused on voting rights and government ethics reform—including work on VPIRG's successful push for automatic voter registration.

Her time with VPIRG fostered an existing interest in policy and law. After her fellowship, Megan earned a law degree from Vermont Law School. During her time there she interned for Judge Peter Hall of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, served as managing editor of the Vermont Law Review, and worked with the Appellate Advocacy Project. Her independent research focused on medical monitoring for PFAS exposure, and she published a paper analyzing the cases stemming from PFAS contamination in Bennington, Vermont, and Hoosick Falls, New York.

Upon graduating from VLS, Megan clerked for two years for Chief Justice Reiber of the Vermont Supreme Court, before taking her current position with SRH Law.

Megan credits her time with VPIRG in helping to develop her leadership, advocacy, and communication skills—skills that have served her well in her career.

"VPIRG provides a unique opportunity for young people to gain meaningful experience in the political system and make real change for Vermont," Megan says. "It's an honor and a thrill to be involved with this organization again, as a member of the Board."



Supporters

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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