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H.159

Introduced by Representatives Coffey of Guilford, Burke of Brattleboro,
James of Manchester, Jerome of Brandon, Killacky of South
Burlington, Kimbell of Woodstock, Lefebvre of Newark, and
White of Bethel

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Commerce and trade; economic development

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create a Better
Places Program to support projects that create, activate, or revitalize
communities and public spaces.

An act relating to creating the Better Places Program

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. FINDINGS; INTENT AND PURPOSE

(a) The General Assembly finds:

(1) The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated our economy through
business closures and job losses, and physical distancing requirements have
exacerbated social isolation and impacted Vermonters' quality of life and sense
of community.

1 (2) Public spaces are essential for supporting economic activity and
2 health and well-being throughout the pandemic and for building engaged,
3 equitable, and resilient communities in the future.

4 (3) Vermont’s downtowns and villages increasingly depend on inviting
5 public spaces that are robustly programmed to restore our distinct sense of
6 place, strengthen community pride and identity, and attract businesses, jobs,
7 and talent.

8 (4) Placemaking projects intentionally leverage the power of the arts and
9 cultural assets to strengthen the economic and social fabric of communities and
10 allow for growth and transformation that builds upon local and regional
11 character, culture, and quality of place.

12 (5) Research shows that community-driven placemaking projects
13 increase economic and civic vitality, and create spaces where commerce
14 thrives, social connections flourish, civic participation increases, and residents
15 are empowered to take ownership of their future to build healthier and
16 equitable local economies.

17 (b) It is the intent of the General Assembly to:

18 (1) enhance the livability and unique sense of place in Vermont’s
19 downtowns and villages by providing funding, training, and resources to
20 support investments in public spaces and local placemaking projects that build
21 prosperous, equitable, healthy, and resilient communities;

1 (2) promote healthy, safe, equitable, and vibrant downtowns, villages,
2 and neighborhoods for people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and incomes
3 by increasing public space and placemaking investments in local communities;

4 (3) strategically coordinate and simplify the funding process from
5 multiple community development funders, streamline the grantmaking and
6 distribution process, democratize community access to grant funds, and
7 provide communities a nimble, flexible source to quickly fund and launch
8 community-driven placemaking projects to make positive and enduring change
9 locally; and

10 (4) help local leaders identify, develop, and implement placemaking
11 projects by creating the Better Places Program to advance local recovery
12 efforts, rebuild local economies, boost local capacity, and reconnect
13 Vermonters to one another – critical elements that help communities recover
14 quickly and build prosperous and resilient communities in the future.

15 Sec. 2. 24 V.S.A. § 2799 is added to read:

16 § 2799. BETTER PLACES PROGRAM; CROWD GRANTING

17 (a)(1) There is created a Better Places Program within the Department of
18 Housing and Community Development, and a Better Places Fund, which the
19 Department shall manage pursuant to 32 V.S.A. chapter 7, subchapter 5.

1 (2) The purpose of the Program is to utilize crowdfunding to spark
2 community revitalization through collaborative grantmaking for projects that
3 create, activate, or revitalize public spaces.

4 (3) The Department may administer the Program in coordination with
5 and support from other State agencies and nonprofit and philanthropic partners.

6 (b) The Fund is composed of the following:

7 (1) State or federal funds appropriated by the General Assembly;

8 (2) gifts, grants, or other contributions to the Fund;

9 (3) proceeds from the issuance of general obligation bonds; and

10 (4) any interest earned by the Fund.

11 (c) As used in this section, “public space” means an area or place that is
12 open and accessible to all people, generally with no charge for admission, and
13 includes village greens, squares, parks, community centers, town halls,
14 libraries, and other publicly accessible buildings and connecting spaces such as
15 sidewalks, streets, alleys, and trails.

16 (d)(1) The Department of Housing and Community Development shall
17 establish an application process, eligibility criteria, and criteria for prioritizing
18 assistance for awarding grants through the Program.

19 (2) The Department may award a grant to a municipality or nonprofit
20 organization for a project that is located in or serves a designated downtown,

1 village center, new town center, or neighborhood development area that will
2 create a new public space or revitalize or activate an existing public space.

3 (3) The Department may develop matching grant eligibility
4 requirements, such as requiring that to be eligible for a grant, a project shall
5 use matching funds raised through a crowdfunding approach that includes
6 multiple donors and other appropriate requirements to ensure a broad base of
7 community and financial support for the project.

8 (e) The Department of Housing and Community Development, with the
9 assistance of a fiscal agent, shall distribute funds under this section in a manner
10 that provides funding for projects of various sizes in as many geographical
11 areas of the State as possible.

12 (f) The Department of Housing and Community Development may use up
13 to 15 percent of any appropriation to the Fund from the General Fund to assist
14 with crowdfunding, administration, and technological needs of the Program.

15 (g) Beginning on January 15, 2022 and annually thereafter, the Department
16 of Housing and Community Development shall submit to the Senate
17 Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs and the
18 House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development an annual report
19 regarding the activities and progress of the Program. The report shall:

20 (1) summarize the Program activities in the preceding year and report on
21 the number of awarded grants and the total grant funds allocated;

- 1 (2) report on partner resources and contributions to the Program; and
2 (3) report on any measurable economic activity, which may include
3 number of jobs created, number of visitors, the approximate number of square
4 feet to be activated or redeveloped, and the number of volunteers engaged in
5 the project.

6 Sec. 3. EFFECTIVE DATE

- 7 This act shall take effect on July 1, 2021.