

## **The Vermont Town Meetings Campaign** *Global Community Initiative, USA*

### **Background**

Town, cities, and states all over the world are struggling to balance their budgets. Communities need strategies that are sustainable, strategies that will increase their capacity to continue to meet all their needs for economic security, social services, good governance, and environmental health. Sustainable development is no longer an academic exercise or a debate - it is a vision and process that needs to permeate the work of local communities.

In Vermont, the annual Town Meeting has become a democratic forum for the discussion and resolution of issues such as expenditures on roads, fire engines, schools, trash removal, water and sewer services, police, recreation, and social services. It is not uncommon for issues of state, national, or global significance to be considered along with the local concerns. It is only logical that the members of Global Community Initiative (GCI), the local coordinators of the

Earth Charter campaign, saw Town Meetings as a great forum for discussing the Earth Charter principles.

### **Aim**

The chief aim of the Vermont Town Meetings Campaign that took place from September 2001 to March 2002 was to request Vermont town governments to endorse the Earth Charter and recommend that the town, the State of Vermont, the United States of America, and the United Nations use the Earth Charter to guide decision-making on issues of local, state, national, and international importance.

### **Participants**

Town Meetings are very open and democratic events. All registered voters in each town are legally members of the municipal legislatures, which make town meetings truly participatory processes. The activists of GCI, members of the Vermont communities, local press, members of municipal legislature and local coordinators were the main participants in this campaign.

### **Timeframe**

The Town Meeting campaign began in the summer of 2001 when the City Council of Burlington endorsed the Earth Charter. As most Town Meetings are held on the first Tuesday in March, the actual vote in 32 towns with the Earth Charter on the ballots took place from March 5-23, 2002.



*Vermont official Seal - Freedom  
and Unity*

## Description

In order to include the Earth Charter in the agenda of the each Town Meeting in Vermont, it was necessary to collect the signatures of 5% of registered voters. The first phase of the campaign was therefore to identify volunteers in each community that were willing to ask people to sign petitions in order for the Earth Charter to be included in the agenda. Once an article is on the agenda, then the Town Meeting can discuss it and vote on it. The petitions were circulated over a four to five month period in 2001, and were successfully filed in late January 2002 in 34 towns. Two towns disallowed the article, and, in the end, it appeared on the ballots of 32 towns.

The next phase of the campaign was to assist the local coordinators in an educational process so that by the time the voters came to the Town Meeting, they would know what they were voting on to support and why. GCI produced flyers for the local campaign coordinators and provided Earth Charter brochures so that they could hold educational meetings and talk to the local press about the Earth Charter. The participation of local press contributed considerably to the campaign.



*Students played a key role in the Williston town meeting*

Finally, all the local coordinators attended their local Town Meeting and spoke on behalf of the endorsement of the Earth Charter when it came up on the agenda. In the town of Williston, third and fourth grade students spoke at the Town Meeting in favour of endorsing the Earth Charter.

## Funding

The Vermont Town Meetings campaign did not have external funding; GCI organized it on “a shoestring” budget along with the volunteer support in each community. The campaign did benefit from the Earth Charter brochures being made available for no charge from the Earth Charter Initiative.

## Results

As a result, the towns of Andover, Bethel, Bolton, Braintree, Brattleboro, Bristol, Brookfield, Charlotte, Cornwall, Hinesburg, Huntington, Isle La Motte, Lincoln, Londonderry, Marlboro, Marshfield, Middlebury, Monkton, New Haven, Norwich, Panton, Plainfield, Randolph, Ripton, Rochester, Starksboro, Stockbridge, Vershire, Waltham, Weybridge, Weston, and Williston collected all the signatures they needed in time, turned them into the Town Clerk, and voted on them. The endorsement failed in Brookfield, Panton, Londonderry, and, sadly, in Williston, where the students had played such an important role. The cities of Burlington and Montpelier also endorsed the Earth Charter at their City Council meetings.

Overall, despite a fairly organized opposition, 23 cities and towns of Vermont endorsed the Earth Charter! Many towns that participated in the campaign asked for assistance in implementing the principles of the Charter in their community, and several communities used the campaign as a springboard for other



Newspaper article featuring Earth Charter activist Marion

initiatives to get communities to consider energy saving measures and land use changes. This process generated significant awareness of the Earth Charter in the region.

The interest that communities had in implementing the principles of the Earth Charter was one of the key motivations behind a conference that was organized in 2004 in Burlington, called *Sustainable Communities 2004*. The conference featured the Earth Charter and offered communities a set of intensive focus areas that covered issues such as participatory governance, youth engagement, environmental issues, sustainable economic development, the role of higher education, and civic spirit.

## Conclusion

Although the endorsement of the Earth Charter in 23 cities and towns of Vermont was not unanimous – very few Town Meeting votes ever are - the majority of the voters in many cities and towns clearly demonstrated their will to choose its values and principles as the ethical background for the municipality. It is also worth mentioning that the project was initially inspired by the endorsement of the Earth Charter by Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), an international coalition of municipal organizations.

Sources: This case was directly drawn from:

- The Earth Charter USA webpage [www.earthcharterusa.org](http://www.earthcharterusa.org).
- Gwendolyn Hallsmith, "The updated Earth Charter article", Resources section, the Earth Charter Initiative webpage, 2002.
- Earth Charter Annual Report 2002-03