

Winooski SD w/Sens. Welch, Sanders, Rep. Balint – 4/4/23

\$57.8M CF loan

[Salutation]

Thank you, Senators Sanders and Welch, and Congresswoman Balint, and thank you to your teams, for your commitment to Winooski's learning community and your ongoing support of this project.

And to Superintendent McMannon and the school staff, teachers and students, Truex Collins, ReArch, and City leaders, I am truly honored to be here, and I thank you sincerely for making me a part of this special occasion.

In July of 2020, USDA Rural Development awarded the Winooski School District a \$57.8 million direct loan through our Community Facilities Direct Loan program. This is the largest investment the agency has ever made in Vermont.

Adhering to my title as State Director for Vermont *and* New Hampshire, I'm compelled to cross the Connecticut for a second and tell you about the Ledyard public Charter School in Lebanon, which received roughly \$1 million from the same program a month later, to purchase and renovate the outdated building it had been leasing for five years.

In both cases—whether it is the multicultural K-12 student population of over 850 kids in Winooski, or the roughly 50 enrollees at Ledyard in grades 9-12 who receive an innovative curriculum stressing vocational opportunity, community volunteerism and team-building—the message is clear: even in the midst of a pandemic, investing in quality education is a priority within our mission to improve the lives of rural residents.

Now, let's talk about the idea of 'Rural' because the kids are here, we're celebrating a new school and it's a good learning opportunity.

[TALKING TO KIDS]

I know, you're thinking '*Great, we get a nice little morning break and this lady wants to make it a lesson. Awesome.*'

But some of you may be wondering 'Why on Earth is the USDA '*Rural*' Development agency here? This is the 'City' of Winooski, after all! Not too many Guernseys grazing in old man Tucker's west pasture, am I right?

Federal funding operates according to several municipal restrictions and requirements, among them, population size. So, though not rural in appearance, Winooski is small enough to receive funding for the school—as well as its ongoing Downtown Revitalization Project.

In 2018, the City secured

- \$8.5 million in Community Facilities Water and Waste Disposal loans and grants, which is restoring and replacing segments of the aging water distribution infrastructure throughout the Gateway Corridor, and
- \$7.4 million for the resulting streetscaping work which will create in this unique community a brilliant walking campus within its 1-mile radius.

So *your* community, though not defined by big red barns and fields of crops and livestock, is one of the model communities, truly, that we talk about in our office, as wholly reflective of Rural Development doing its best work.

The most important element of USDA funding for any community is the will of its people. Our Agency is strategically positioned to help students, parents, teachers and administrators benefit from significant capital investments—we are literally ‘obligated’ to funnel millions of dollars from Washington, D.C. into Vermont communities—but we can’t do that without intensive cooperation and collaboration on the ground, and that includes the passing of crucial bond issues.

Senator Welch, you were here for the groundbreaking in November, 2020, though work actually began in the summer of that year, almost immediately after the funding landed. Here we are today at the official ribbon-cutting, though the project was essentially completed last winter.

This incredible facility was created in less than three years, and that is a direct reflection of purpose and passion from the residents, school administrators and municipal leaders who made it happen.

USDA Rural Development has over 50 different loan and grant programs, whether it’s to

- invest in essential community infrastructure,
- support small businesses that create jobs and attract tourism,
- provide safe and affordable housing to support our work force,
- expand connectivity and broadband,
- and implement climate-smart initiatives to improve environmental conditions and thus the health and well-being of rural residents.

So let’s conclude today’s lesson there, where your young minds are often occupied and doing their best work: climate change.

You may read and hear a lot about the water—bad algae, Act 250 and phospho-farm runoff. Then there’s the weather and tourism—snowfall and rainfall and fall, fall. And, of course the wilderness with its doomed ash and hungry bears and tick-ridden moose.

But it is *you*, not our rivers or timbers or critters, we Vermonters value most as our

prized natural resource.

If no one other than mom or dad or your favorite teacher expressed how incredibly special you really are, let me do so here and now, because you mean more than you know to those of us who don't know your name or worst fear or favorite movie:

You are premium packages of human potential with diverse abilities and ideas to help our communities become better places to live.

Today, we celebrate you, and we thank you for all you have left to teach us.

[Handoff]