

# The Great Re-Skilling

## *Inventing a Twenty-First Century Vermont*

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The future is not what it used to be.  
—Paul Valerie

Rob Hopkins, author of *The Transition Handbook* and cofounder of the international Transition Towns movement, uses a phrase to describe the collective processes required to move Vermont from a twentieth-century state powered by oil, natural gas, and other forms of cheap and abundant fossil-fuel energy, to a twenty-first-century state powered by a more diverse portfolio of energy sources—biomass, wind, solar, hydro, along with the deployment of energy conservation and efficiency measures. He calls this transition “The Great Re-Skilling.”

It is a phrase I have grown to like—suggesting a broad and inclusive process by which Vermonters relearn and remember (literally—to reattach) place and community by rediscovering older and more traditional ways of doing things, and combining them with the best of twenty-first-century wisdom—all in the name of powering our homes and businesses, growing our food, and moving ourselves across our beautiful and rugged Green Mountain landscapes.

The Great Re-Skilling is not some quaint, romantic, or naïve notion. It is a vital and hopeful phrase describing what must happen in our Vermont communities right now, as the world confronts the reality of peak oil, the impending collapse of the dollar, and the implosion of the United States as the richest and most powerful empire in world history. The twenty-first century, in other words, is shaping up to be very little like the twentieth, and far-sighted Vermonters from all walks of life, all political persuasions, are beginning to embrace the Great Re-Skilling as a necessary and promising path toward a more sustainable and healthy future for our once-and-future Green Mountain republic.

The signs of inventing Vermont’s future are all around us, and we’ve covered them in the pages of *Vermont Commons* for more than four years now. At the state level, grassroots organizations—the emerging Transition Towns movement, village energy committees, the Localvore effort, Rural Vermont, NOFA, Peak Oil Awareness, and dozens of other organizations—are providing Vermonters with the information and skills we’ll need for a successful Great Re-Skilling going forward. Our annual food and energy conferences, county fairs, and events like Earthwise Farm and Forest’s Northeast Animal Powered Field Days remind Vermonters of the importance of reconnecting with more traditional technologies (in NEAPFD’s case, draft animals as energy sources). Members of our school and select boards and the state legislature are stepping up, too, supporting initiatives that move Vermont toward greater energy and agricultural independence for this new century—the feed-in tariff passed in Montpelier last spring being a prime example of a big step in the right direction.

But perhaps our biggest asset in the Great Re-Skilling is longtime Vermonters themselves, who harbor a wealth of knowledge and skills we’ll all need moving forward. In my own four-town community in central Vermont’s Mad River Valley, which didn’t see the coming of electricity until the 1940s, I am surrounded by neighbors who can peen a scythe or sharpen a two-person lumber saw just as easily as they can reassemble the two-stroke engine on a Husqvarna Ranger or fix the intricacies of a New Holland baler belt. Having comanaged and worked on a yak farm for more than

one year now, I am nothing if not grateful for their wealth of knowledge, patience, and good humor. Their families have lived here for generations, they know how to make our land produce, and most of all, perhaps, they understand the importance of community; their generosity and goodwill on behalf of neighbors, much of which happens under the radar and with very little fanfare, is inspiring. “The best way to predict the future,” computer wizard Alan Kay suggested, “is to invent it.”