

# The Bridge

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## Sustainable Montpelier Asks Writers to Imagine What Comes Next

By [Mara Brooks](#) - April 22, 2020

*Courtesy of Sustainable Montpelier Coalition.*

The Sustainable Montpelier Coalition (SMC) is inviting writers and graphic artists of all ages to envision a thriving central Vermont set in the year 2047 for its What Comes Next contest, with winners in five storytelling categories to be awarded prizes of \$500 each. Submissions can be written in essay, short story, or graphic story format, and should contain plausible solutions to issues such as climate change, social discord, and post-COVID economic strife.

“We need help imagining a world that won’t be darkly dystopian,” said a statement by SMC announcing the contest, which is set to kick off on Earth Day. “We hope creative thinkers will help describe innovative solutions.”

What Comes Next is the brainchild of SMC Executive Director Dan Jones and longtime advisor Elizabeth Courtney. It originally focused solely on issues related to climate change, but in light of the current economic crisis prompted by COVID-19, the pair decided to widen the scope of the project.

“Things are going to change in the not-distant future, whether we want it to or not, just because of what we already know about global warming,” Jones said. “But because of the pandemic, the economy’s changing even faster.”

*Story continues below*

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Local Wood for Local Good

Courtney said the contest is meant to provide an “educational exercise” to raise awareness and encouraging innovative problem solving within the community. Even the imagined 2047 date is a nod to “thinking a little outside of the box,” Jones said, because “everyone tends to focus on 2050 as this big target date to turn things around.”

“2047 is close to 2050, but the odd, random year is more specific, and lends credibility,” Courtney said.

Jones is a believer in the power of community-based think tanks. In 2016, he and Deb Sachs, then co-directors of Net Zero Vermont, issued a request for proposals for architects to enter the Sustainable Montpelier 2030 design competition. The contest involved two rounds of public viewing and voting before a winner was chosen.

“We were nursing this idea well before the plague hit us,” Courtney said of What Comes Next. “In the Bible, the Psalms say that without a vision the people will perish, and certainly we’re witnessing that today. We need a plan, and a competition with a financial award seemed like the logical thing to do.”

Jones said rather than wait for elected officials to provide solutions, Vermont communities should try to address local issues through innovation and organization.

“We’re using Sustainable Montpelier as a mechanism for helping to identify where we should be putting our efforts, because it needs to derive from the people, not just a few political leaders,” Jones said. “We believe the people must be part of creating a future.”

– Ursula K. Le Guin

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*Courtesy of Sustainable Montpelier Coalition.*

What isn’t needed for the contest, Jones said, are fanciful notions of new technologies that magically resolve problems overnight.

“We have a religion of technology in this country, and a belief that somehow we’re going to put windmills and unicorns on the hillsides and everything is going to be wonderful,” Jones said. “And that’s not how things work. We have to start imagining how to organize ourselves to consume less and make more of local economics. We’ve got to start figuring out how to be supportive in ways that haven’t been used in the past.”

To help to better envision that future, Jones suggested participants try to reimagine existing technologies.

“For a long time, our focus has been on things like, ‘If everybody switched to electric cars things would be much better,’ rather than saying, ‘Maybe if we had on-demand microtransit we could reduce the number of vehicles on the road,’” Jones said. “We need to change the way we think about organizing our resources, rather than thinking we’re magically going to have new technologies that are going to save us.”

What Comes Next contest entries will be judged by a panel of 25 jurors who will pick three finalists for each of the five categories—youth and adult essay, youth and adult short story, and graphic story. Finalists will be presented to the public at [sustainablemontpelier.org](https://sustainablemontpelier.org) and through local media partners, and the public will vote to determine the winners.

Writers looking for extra guidance with their submission are told to visit the website [sustainablemontpelier.org/contest](https://sustainablemontpelier.org/contest), which, like the contest itself, is scheduled to be launched April 22.

“There are reference pages (on the website) to help provide background for contestants on a variety of issues,” Courtney said.

Despite the challenges that lay ahead both locally and worldwide, Jones and Courtney are optimistic that with a little creativity, Central Vermont will not only survive the predicted crises, but thrive.

“Look at how many people in Central Vermont are saying, ‘Okay, if I’m supposed to stay in and keep social distancing, I’m doing that,’” Jones said. “We’ve got so many people saying ‘This is what we’ve got to do, so we’re going to do it.’ That’s great social cohesion.”

Courtney agreed, predicting the contest will result in “an abundance of innovative ideas from Central Vermonters” whom she regards as “some of the most creative and talented people anywhere.”

“I know from my own experience that the more challenging the terrain, the more interesting the revolution,” Courtney said. “So I’m hopeful that we’ll get some very dynamic answers to these questions.”

Funding for the contest was provided by primary donors VSECU and Pomerleau Real Estate, with additional support from Ben & Jerrys, Don and Allison Hooper, and Green Mountain Power.

*For more information on the What Comes Next contest, visit [sustainablemontpelier.org/contest](https://sustainablemontpelier.org/contest). Those who wish to submit their entry via regular mail can do so at this address: What Comes Next Contest, 15 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05602.*

