



Cooperation Vermont's Fight to Reclaim Goddard Campus as Part of the Commons

We are proud of how community members mobilized in an attempt to save Goddard College from extractive market forces, and are humbled by the outpouring of support to create a Just Transition Campus. At this time Cooperation Vermont is moving forward with other strategic initiatives. Indeed, our work for a truly transformational and revolutionary Just Transition is just beginning.

Our objectives are clear and our resolve is unwavering. We will continue this work on new and expanding fronts and will be entering a phase of coalescing the support we've received and collectivizing a process to determine a strategy for moving forward. If you are interested in working in a collaborative and transparent way with us, please reach out.

Regardless of whose name is on the property deed, we encourage community members to continue to demand that:

- There is a clear, transparent and democratic process around what happens to the land and facilities.
- The facilities are used for projects that build climate resilience and economic democracy on a local level.

How We Arrived at This Moment

As part of Cooperation Vermont's program to develop ecologically regenerative forces of local production, including community-controlled digital production, in late 2023 we were in conversation with Goddard College campus based staff about the possibility of renting space for a community production center. The February announcement of the campus closing and the end to all residency programs was unexpected and signaled the campus was in danger of being lost to private interests on the speculative real estate market.

While it was clear the campus was suffering from decades of deferred maintenance, we also understood the intrinsic educational, historic, cultural, and social value it holds to both the local community and social movements. We also hold true the fundamental need for spaces of critical community value to be in community control. With this, we made a determination to do everything we could to bring the campus into the Cooperation Vermont Community Land Trust where it would be permanently decommodified and stewarded within a democratic framework.

We planned to create a Just Transition Campus where worker owned cooperatives, community based organizations including the ones currently on campus, movement organizing projects, and education groups - all focused on meeting the needs of the local community - could converge in one place to work collaboratively, create the foundation for a local solidarity economy, and to build community resilience. We envisioned this regional resilience hub as a thriving, living, learning and workplace where art and culture are centered and community is co-created.

On the campus, Cooperation Vermont planned to create our worker owned cooperative Community Production Center with a green fabrication lab, woodworking, metal working, and more, to re-localize production and build equitable housing. While the CVT CPC is intended to be multifaceted in its productive capacities and be capable of producing a wide array of things, our intention is to utilize its varied capacities to create net zero 900 square foot housing units that can and will readily fall under the state of Vermont's ADU program and be placed on properties with already developed electric, sewage and water, and roads.

When we first learned of the campus closure, we immediately reached out to the CFO of Goddard College, Inc. and shortly thereafter requested to enter into a period of exclusive negotiations - a request that was completely ignored. After the announcement that Goddard College, Inc. planned to dissolve entirely and the campus was for sale, we submitted an offer for \$3.4 Million based on the most recent appraisal. It was ignored.

We were then told by the CFO that the Goddard College Board of Trustees was in exclusive negotiations with another buyer and they expected the sale to close. It didn't. We were then asked to submit a renewed bid. We did again for \$3.4 Million and were yet again told they entered into a sales agreement with another buyer.

We learned the new buyer was a commercial real estate developer and alerted the broader community to the news. The local community had serious concerns about the fate of the campus and about Goddard's legacy left to the hands of a commercial real estate developer. An opposition from the community was organized and their efforts were ultimately successful.

Cooperation Vermont was then contacted by the newest CFO of Goddard College, Inc. to submit a new bid and this time they were asking for a less than three week closing deadline and a cash offer not contingent on financing. **At this point, Cooperation Vermont had raised \$1.4 Million in pledged donations with strong collaboration and solidarity from Resource Generation VT and we completed a loan application for \$2M with the Cooperative Fund of the Northeast.** The loan, however, could not be processed further, like any loan, without a sales agreement with Goddard College, Inc. This would still take 60 days for formal review and processing. As such, we submitted yet another offer for \$3.4 Million and with a 65 day closing deadline.

We did not hear a formal response to our offer and the first update we had came from a press release that an entity calling itself the Greatwood Project had entered into a sales agreement and expected to close in 90 days.

To be clear, Cooperation Vermont's efforts had been sidelined and even thwarted by the Goddard College administration and the Trustees from the very beginning. Despite numerous requests, we were not provided one single conversation with the Board of Trustees during one of their meetings which occur every Monday. Nor were we even provided the walk through of the property we repeatedly asked for.

This of course is in stark contrast to the experience we know that every other potential buyer had, even the ones the administration engaged with a full year prior to the announcement of the closure without anyone's knowledge at the time.

So why was Cooperation Vermont treated so differently than other potential buyers? We can only speculate because, again, the Board of Trustees has refused to engage with us directly for conversation over the course of six months and multiple offers submitted. We speculate that these social actions in the defense of the working people in our community played a part in their opposition to our overtures and offers.

For example, In 2023 the staff union at Goddard College went on strike after the administration and Board of Trustees refused to come to an agreement that met worker's needs. Cooperation Vermont stood in solidarity with the striking workers and was publicly vocal in our condemnation of extremely low wages in some cases and of the administration's move to cancel healthcare coverage.

We initiated open dialogue with both faculty and staff UAW union shops as well as Goddard alumni around democratizing the decision making and power structures of the institution. We organized with the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network to co-host a webinar entitled "Cooperative Models in Higher Education" and invited the Cooperative College Project in the U.K. and Mondragon University in Spain to participate and share their knowledge about how to create cooperative institutions of higher education.

Further, we continued to be in solidarity with organizing efforts by faculty, staff, students and alums, that evolved into the Remake Goddard project, in their attempts to combat the destruction of Goddard college, loss of the Goddard pedagogy, and mistreatment of students losing their academic programs jeopardizing their ability to graduate, and the loss of jobs for staff and faculty while simultaneously envisioning a Goddard revived into a democratically governed institution of higher education.

Another area we surmise was a point of contention was around the process for the sale itself. It was clear the Goddard administration and the Board of Trustees proceeded under a shroud of secrecy and unilateral decision making in unnoticed, executive session board meetings that even excluded the faculty and staff members of the Board of Trustees.

Cooperation Vermont insisted the process surrounding the sale of the Goddard College campus be transparent. We also demanded of them that in the effort to preserve the historical integrity of the institution that they support the effort to uphold the self-determination of its employees, students, alumni and the central Vermont community that the institution is embedded in, and give them the right of first refusal .

Further, had it not been for Cooperation Vermont and our regular communication with the press and community, little to no information about what was happening with the sale of Goddard College would have been known.

The need for transparency brings us back to the Greatwood Project and their latest sales agreement with the Goddard Board of Trustees. The fact that the project was organized specifically around the acquisition of the campus without any prior community involvement or communication of their intentions or plans is not particularly confidence inspiring.

We can see the apparent appeal of the Greatwood Project being in part because it is comprised of former Goddard affiliates, unlike the current Goddard Board of Trustees configuration. However, one such affiliate has been openly criticized for support of the most recent President Dan Hocoy and for their role in defining the current composition of the Goddard Board of Trustees which can be credited with the institution's demise. It is also noteworthy that the primary funding behind this latest offer comes from Brian Benninghoff, a Washington D.C. based commercial real estate developer.

The lack of transparency raises further questions and poses direct contradictions for the hopes of any liberatory or transformative outcomes. How can the campus remain part of the commons if it is once again in the control of a small number of individual power holders? How will this new entity be accountable to the community aside from the legislative provisions of Act 250? Without the commitment to the decommodification of the land, how can the community know that in a few years it won't just end up right back on the speculative market? Or become a private enclave?

Greatwood Project indicated they would be reaching out to community groups in the future after the closing in their press release, but these are just words that carry no weight with no commitments and were followed by an abject lack of community engagement. Cooperation Vermont has reached out to individuals at the Greatwood Project and have only received basically copied verbiage from their press release signaling an unwillingness to engage in dialogue let alone collective planning and processing.

From what little information was available in the press release, it might seem to the untrained eye that Greatwood Project's plans for a mixture of nonprofit and for profit uses is the same as what Cooperation Vermont was proposing. In fact, it is not. The Cooperation Vermont approach is rooted in transparency, collective planning and decision making, and the development of economic democracy through practices of the solidarity economy.

And for those trying to understand the “solidarity economy” and what it means, the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN) defines this as an alternative development framework grounded in principles of solidarity, social equity, sustainability, democracy, and pluralism with the aim to build an economy that serves people and planet as opposed to the mainstream capitalist paradigm that is built around individual self-interest, competition, blind growth, and profit-maximizing.

Where We Go From Here

What has happened to Goddard College is the latest in a series of fatalities with several college closures in Vermont in the last few years. It was recently widely reported that colleges nationally, particularly liberal arts colleges, are now closing at a rate of one per week. It is clear in the case of Goddard, the impact of the campus closure on the local community was felt starting when the college moved to a low residency model with students only on campus periodically throughout the year and in lower and lower numbers each year. However, in other places, a sudden closure has a profound and immediate impact on the local community socially, culturally and economically.

Preemptive challenges need to be formulated in collaboration between campus faculty, staff and students and local communities to fight for moving our institutions of higher education into cooperative and democratic governance structures.

Communities need to also learn to recognize the signs of decline and prepare for a response rooted in self determination when campuses do end up on the speculative market. What does the community envision for how the campus could be used to build a local solidarity economy? Where could funding come from? Could a loan fund or acquisition fund be built in preparation for when key community spaces end up on the market and there is an opportunity to bring them into community trusts?

More could and should be asked. But, we leave you with these questions as things to seriously consider, learn from and build upon. Moving forward, Cooperation Vermont is planning to build on our organizing efforts to acquire Goddard, and further the practice of building broad and deep consensus in our organizing efforts in Marshfield, Central Vermont and throughout the state and region. Our next immediate step is to initiate a strategy development process that will enable us to engage in some long-term strategic planning and development, both as an organization and in alliance with progressive forces throughout the state and region. We encourage all that are interested in joining us in this process to stay tuned to our further organizing endeavors. Please stay in contact by joining our mailing list.