This past summer I was fortunate enough to join the Transportation Efficiency team at the Vermont Energy Investment Corporation (VEIC). My main responsibility was to lead Drive Electric Vermont’s (DEV) community outreach. In this role I organized DEV’s summer events, engaged with the public, created fact-sheets, and conducted research on EV-adoption across the state of Vermont, and the country.

The Vermont Energy Investment Corporation is a mission-driven non-profit, working to lower the environmental and economic costs of energy use (as an environmental policy major, economics minor, interested in an energy sector career, this mission falls perfectly in line with my own professional ambitions). Luckily, my first day coincided with the second quarterly staff meeting, held in the center of the Burlington office. Around 200 Vermont employees attended in person, while the offices in Ohio and Washington DC joined through Skype. The company wide meeting was a show of force, and also gave me a real sense of VEIC’s relaxed, yet dead-set on stopping climate change, working culture.

This featured an inspiring and optimistic speech from CEO, Scott Johnstone, who reported on the organization’s 20-year goal and the exciting progress thus far. The goal was set in 2007: VEIC’s work will reduce 20 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) (carbon dioxide equivalent), by 2027, twice the amount Vermont produced that year. And with an eye on environmental justice, at least 10% of the fiscal and GHG savings will be from work that benefits low-income people. Amazingly, this mission carried through to the CFO’s presentation as well, who explained the fiscal quarter’s success not in how much profit VEIC had made, but rather in how much money it had been able to spend, and the respective energy/GHG savings. Encountering all of this right off the bat was a great introduction to the place I was about to spend ten-weeks.

Most of the energy savings that VEIC has brought to Vermont, have been through its operation of Efficiency Vermont, the world’s first energy efficiency utility, and a job contracted from the state since 1997. However, 47% of Vermont’s GHG emissions come
from transportation. In order to address these emissions they created a Transportation Efficiency team. One of the team’s latest undertakings has been the creation of Drive Electric Vermont.

Drive Electric Vermont is a public-private partnership. It is a statewide coalition of policy makers, industry leaders, and ordinary citizens dedicated to promoting the spread of electric transportation in the state. DEV’s efforts are focused on infrastructure, regulation, codes and standards; legislation, policy, finance, and incentives; technology and innovation; and education, marketing, and outreach. I was hired to ensure DEV’s continued public presence, and assist the team in any areas that lacked coverage.

With the marketing team I helped plan the advertising budget, which was primarily focused on Facebook, and Google sidebar ads. I also helped develop concepts for a summer video campaign. On my own, I organized and led DEV’s participation at multiple summer events.

During my second week, I collaborated with Sustainable Williston, a municipal sustainability board, to host an evening electric vehicle showcase, and a lecture on electric vehicle ownership. Later in the summer I arranged the same lecture for a chamber of commerce in the village of Stowe. All of the events relied on enthusiastic EV-owners to participate with their vehicles, and share their experiences with an EV-curious, or unfamiliar, public. I also arranged for a number of EV-owners to drive in 4th of July parades throughout the state. Tesla’s proved good at drawing a crowd’s attention, but more affordable EVs, like the Nissan Leaf or Chevy Volt, showed that many electric vehicles are more affordable.

My job was not to sell people on electric vehicles, but was rather to educate them on the benefits, and move their opinions from “I would never” to a place where they can imagine owning, or leasing one. EVs certainly aren’t for everyone, and don’t yet meet the transportation needs of many Vermonters, however there are still many misconceptions surrounding battery range, safety, comfort, convenience, and cost. I found that the most effective way to correct these was to 1) actually get them behind the wheel, and 2) have them talk to a fellow Vermonter who has been through a winter in their EV, to attest that they drive well in snow. However, by the end of the summer I had become well versed in the pros, cons, financing, and facts surrounding electric vehicles. I am comfortable answering any questions about owning an electric vehicle, despite not having one myself.
As part of the broader internship program, I was exposed to many other aspects of the VEIC operation. Every week different employees from throughout the company shared their work with the interns. I found these lectures to be one of the most valuable parts of my time at VEIC, as I learned how people from a range of educational, and professional, backgrounds, had been empowered to spark change in Vermont communities and beyond.

For example, one engineer shared the story of how he became “the” expert in snowmaking efficiency, spending four years working with every ski mountain in Vermont, to improve their snow making process. As a result he improved the energy efficiency of most ski mountain operations over 1000% (energy savings so unbelievable, the State had to verify them twice, claiming that they were impossible).

Another employee, with a background in finance, created a Public-purpose energy service company (PPESCO), to bring energy savings to affordable multifamily houses, hospitals, schools, and municipalities. Because these clients operate on a smaller scale, a traditional ESCO that is profit driven has little incentive to help finance their projects. However, Commons Energy, the VEIC-run PPESCO, makes long-term capital available to small-building owners for comprehensive efficiency, alternative fuels, and renewable energy services, using energy savings – not dollars – as their bottom line. Eventually, the building owners pay back the capital financing through the savings they obtain from the lower energy use and operating costs of their buildings, while becoming cash flow positive.

My experience at VEIC, and with Drive Electric Vermont was extremely positive. I am truly grateful to have had the chance to work with such knowledgeable, creative and passionate professionals in the environmental realm. Further, I got a sense of how it feels to work for a strongly mission-based corporation, and in an environment that fosters collaboration and celebrates creativity. Lastly, I loved being in an office where the predominant attitude towards climate change was optimistic and inspiring. The employees really seemed to keep a positive mental outlook, while persevering, and bringing about change. I can definitely see myself working for a company like VEIC in the future, and attribute much of this insight to Colby. The stipend I received helped cover my living and travel expenses, making my second summer as an Environmental Policy student all the more enjoyable and possible. Truly, thank you.