

To: Brian Pine, CEDO
From: Glenn McRae, resident (131 Mansfield Ave.)
Date: October 29, 2014
RE: Comments on the Draft Housing Action Plan

Brian,

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Housing Action Plan for the Burlington Downtown Core. While I write this as an interested community member my thinking is informed by thirty years of experience, including supporting the growth of Vermont's nonprofit sector including its many housing organizations, running state policy programs and citizen engagement processes, and currently as Associate Director of UVM's Transportation Research Center.

First, I would have hoped to see this document presented as a "reaction" document rather than a draft action plan that is being proposed to rapidly convert to formal city policy. Given the number of typos in the draft policy document, especially those around specific numbers used to make different cases brings into question the accuracy of the numbers, making it hard to comment on. Given the comments that point out that at least some of the data is dated and that more current data is available, it would seem advisable that the most current data is incorporated into the report provided for public input.

While there have been a number of expansive processes, as noted in the document, the summer consultant's study hardly seems robust or frankly Burlington-specific enough to be the launching point for an immediate action document. The comments on the report were made by key stakeholder groups, but those comments on the relatively few that are currently posted on the Action plan appear to indicate a lack of serious vetting by the public over a guidance document and process that will commit us to "using up" precious and irreplaceable community assets, in terms of the developable parcels in the downtown core. I would think that the downtown core represents an asset, held publicly and privately, of equal or greater value to the waterfront and Moran Plant, both of which went through much more rigorous public processes given that whatever decisions were to be made would represent decisions that generations ahead would have to live with. While the document frames the problem as a "crisis" (and I might dispute that as a generalization - though there are housing crises for specific populations) I am not sure that rushing to a final policy decision in the next few months serves the best interests of the city.

I recommend that a thorough process of engagement and thinking on this to generate the best thinking of the city's citizens as part of the process be focused on this effort in 2015. I am disappointed at the dearth of comments posted at this late date from what should have been a vigorous outreach effort to engage many voices.

Second, the premise of the report *"Why is There a Housing "Affordability Crisis" in Burlington? The simple answer is lack of housing supply"*, I believe, is simplistic in its framing of the issue. While the specific hurdles and issues cited are all important considerations I think other factors are equally important in consideration of Burlington's built environment. This includes consideration of broad demographic trends and failed policy in working with major institutions in the city. One could discern that Burlington actually has an enormous volume of built housing that is not being utilized to highest best use in support of the city's strategic goals. The plan essentially suggests that the way forward is to build our way out the the "crisis." What we learned in energy, and are trying to learn in transportation, and know in terms of material use, is

that efficiency is the key strategic underpinning of successful and forward looking policies, especially in terms of infrastructure.

The report and plan places a focus on the "need" to build new concentrated student housing in the downtown core in order to alleviate the pressure on housing in neighborhoods being occupied by students (though the numbers are in question, they are significant). The basis of this idea is that students in large numbers should not necessarily be spread out into neighborhoods between the university and the downtown. I agree with this. This housing stock is, from my limited experience, some of the most sub-standard in the city but has high value is properly renovated. If it is City policy that student housing should be concentrated and of high quality I could not agree more. However to propose that very limited and high value downtown core property should be turned into 900+ student housing units seems contrary to creating options to serve other key demographics from young professionals, to aging, to lower income working families, especially when there is ample open space on UVM's campus to accommodate new housing.

Working with UVM and the other higher education institutions in the city to better address building out their student community on campus would be a more beneficial policy to pursue than advancing a city policy that doesn't include and challenge them. Not adequately challenging UVM to build an adequate and dynamic on campus student environment that is attractive and beneficial for students all along the continuum of their study has seemingly transferred that responsibility to the City. This is a city-university challenge that should be met by an aggressive city-university partnership and goals that are more aggressively than the out-dated ones in the MOA.

In terms of the other key demographic that is addressed in the draft plan, the City's aging population, this is a very diverse group, not a homogenous group as it seems treated in the report. In work I conducted with AARP-VT while at the Snelling Center, leading to the Burlington Livable Community Project, some of the early focus groups addressed the diversity of this population and the various needs and aspirations for aging in the community. This is still a good data set to draw on. The report does focus on the situation of all too many aging residents of inadequate resources to either convert current housing to meet their changing needs or find new and appropriate house situations better suited to what they need and want. (I am currently in Maine addressing some of these issues for my 87 year old mother, otherwise I would have sent comments earlier). I would challenge the planners for housing in Burlington to consider that we who are aging have aspirations just as other populations and are looking to be in a position to both take advantage of all that Burlington has to offer as well as contribute to it. We are innovators, small business owners, workers and volunteers and not simply a population that has "needs" or should be considered a liability.

A hypothesis from the early BLCP work articulated by then Mayor Peter Clavelle, was that we should inventory and consider all of the single family housing currently occupied throughout the city by aging residents who happily worked and raised families in those houses but now might consider other residency more appropriate to one or two person households if they were available freeing up housing in neighborhood appropriate for young families. Interests, as well as needs change, and opportunities to remain in the city affordably and actively is a more dynamic form of aging in place, than simply thinking of it as how to adapt housing that served a good purpose 40 years ago.

All the populations referenced in the report are dynamic assets for the city, from students to the aging members of the community, and from those with little or no monetary resources to those who own or work at rapidly growing downtown industries. I hope that future versions will begin with and continue a more "asset based" approach to people as well as the infrastructure, which in the end serves people.

In closing, to reiterate several key take-aways that I hope are considered:

1. Do not rush to decisions that will make commitments for valuable community assets (the under-utilized large blocks open to development in the downtown core); open this engagement more fully to generate ideas and solutions that draw on a larger body of participants than are listed in the comments on both the report and the plan.
2. Create policies that challenge and create strategic and aggressive action on the part of our institutions of higher education to create more student housing and amenities within the defined campus areas that already exist.
3. Reframe how we thinking about housing an aging population as if that population has aspirations and value to the community just as we would look at other groups (e.g., young professionals).
4. Consider the prospect that we have a large quantity of existing built environment that should be considered first before we make decisions on new building as a more efficient, green and sustainable approach to meeting current and emerging needs. Promulgating policies that help shift populations to the most appropriate types of housing and repurposing old housing into new uses, types of units, or other uses first is a more progressive approach than simply focusing on building our way out of the problem we see.

Such an effort is more radical. It requires different tools just as making it possible to build new and better units, and it means engaging a broader portion of the population as active agents in the process rather than relying on market forces to respond and make new opportunities happen. Going in this direction is also a more "Burlingtonian" approach, since we like to (and this draft plan is not exception) harken back to a long good history of progressive work.

Thanks for your attention and the opportunity to have this input.

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