

September 28, 2012

Sandrine Thibault
City Hall, Planning and Zoning
149 Church Street
Burlington, Vermont 05401

Dear Sandrine:

I read with great interest about the “housing donut” struggles that the Downtown and Waterfront areas are faced with in Plan BTV. I do think that the City has done a tremendous job of helping to support the affordable housing stock in the City overall, and much of that is thanks to Burlington’s proactive many policies.

I did want to make a few comments about your recommendations concerning Enforcement & Permitting:

- If the City wants to make housing easier to develop in Downtown and Waterfront areas it should be a permitted use, not a conditional use.
- You mention updating the Inclusionary Housing requirement in zoning. If you want to incent moderate income residential housing in the City center, the focus should be there; not city wide where there are still many neighborhoods without much affordable housing. It could be worrisome that the City is going to back off of its longstanding commitment to housing affordability, but I have faith that the process for those changes will be focused on fixing what’s broken in order to increase housing equity, and not dismantling a model that is consistently replicated in housing policy textbooks.
- It is important to remember that part of the impact in Downtown Burlington are a group of young people who are alumni who live in downtown Burlington but are neither students nor employees of the educational institutions they just graduated from. Maybe there should be some focused work done to quantify the impact of recent alumni or postgraduates remaining in the Burlington area.

VHFA was the author housing analysis done as a part of Plan BTV, and we do see the need for more moderately priced housing, especially homeownership, in order to find balance within this area. However, what we don’t have is really good data on who is the real market for downtown housing. Who wants to live in the area and can’t, what do they want for housing type, and at what price point are they interested. We do know that the data is very clear that the lower a household’s income, the greater burden they have to afford their housing. Extremely low income households have a much harder time finding and affording housing in Downtown Burlington than moderate income residents, there is no question.

As the City looks to the solutions to these needs, it is important to remember that just because housing has been assisted with public resources and called “affordable”, it does not mean the all residents are very low income. In fact, I would argue that there is significant overlap between the needs of the “rapidly growing class of ‘creatives’ and young professionals” and the assisted housing stock that makes up the almost 30% of the area’s units. Many of these young professionals are early in their careers and it’s very likely that they would earn incomes that would qualify them for “affordable” housing units where a one-person household can earn up to \$43,000 and still qualify. Additionally, some “affordable” properties include a number of market rate units that have no income limitations.

Without a doubt, VHFA supports healthy communities that offer a range of housing options. No one wants to undermine the vitality of the City or its downtown core. The City will be served well if it maintains its commitment to its citizens that



are most in need of assistance – those who are very low income and not retreat on its leadership for this population. Also, it is important to remember that just because housing has public subsidy, its tenants are not necessarily limited to “seniors and disabled tenants,” but instead it already is a home to many of the young professionals who the City is trying so hard to attract. By increasing the stock of housing at this price point, the City will, in fact, be addressing its donut-shaped problem.

Sincerely,

Sarah Carpenter

Sarah Carpenter
Executive Director