



COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

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To: David E. White, Director of Planning & Zoning
Sandrine Thibault, Comprehensive Planner

From: CEDO
Date: October 2, 2012

RE: CEDO Comments – PlanBTV draft plan

First off, on a general note, the PlanBTV document is creatively designed, fun to read, and with interesting ideas and data. Overall, this was an excellent effort at public outreach and it has good production value. There are many good ideas contained in Plan BTV, however, it seems more like a visioning exercise than a plan.

When documents of this scope include drawings and terms like “master plan”, it suggests that all of the ideas are feasible, achievable, advisable and represent the consensus of the community. Since many of the suggestions are conceptual and will require more thorough analysis and community dialogue before reaching consensus, more attention must be drawn to the fact this document is intended to engage the community in planning our future. Inclusion in PlanBTV should not be considered an idea that necessarily enjoys broad consensus in the community.

The economic development aspects associated with many of the sections are not clearly articulated and there are no indicators identified that could measure outcomes and/or trends. CEDO’s role and capacity, in many of the sections that could actually be considered for further analysis, planning and implementation, has not been fully leveraged.

Here are some specific comments:

Economic Development

Though the plan states that the primary purpose of the exercise was to address economic vitality and competitiveness and that the underlying objective was to nurture and strengthen our economic base, CEDO’s recommended role and involvement in

implementation seems minimal. After each element is explained and the appropriate City Department is listed, CEDO is conspicuously absent, perhaps this was the intent. As the only City department charged with “developing and implementing a comprehensive community and economic development strategy”, CEDO needs to be front and center with broader participation in lot of what has been presented in this plan.

On page 6, it is stated *“While some plans include an economic development section, we see the economy as inextricably linked to everything else, and as such, don’t give it a separate section. Plan BTV reflects a comprehensive economic development strategy with a clear set of financial incentives and policy recommendations to drive public and private sector investment.”* This document does not really seem like a coherent economic development plan. Implied connections to economic development are not always easy to see in many of the sections. The lack of any mention of indicators that could be used to measure impacts of plan implementation weaken the overall credibility of the document. Maybe it should not be officially called a “plan”.

Page 14: *“While many other planning efforts involving the downtown or waterfront have taken place over the years, none were comprehensive in scope where land use, transportation, land development, urban design, and public infrastructure were all woven together.”* Once again, in this statement economic development is not explicitly stated as part of the comprehensive approach.

p. 51, first paragraph: Clearly there is a need for more housing in the City, CEDO strongly recommends that the zoning should require first floor commercial in the downtown core and other commercial districts such as North Street. When first floor residential is allowed in these areas, it kills the vibrancy of these districts by making large areas essentially useless for the majority of area residents. Think of it this way: when there is an apartment on the first floor, that prime space is usable to 1 or 2 people. If you instead put commercial on the first floor, it’s usable to everyone in the community and becomes a draw to the area.

For any redevelopment or new construction in a commercial neighborhood, first floor retail should be a requirement.

Page 55: Economic links to the adjoining commercial neighborhoods of the Old North End and the South End/Pine Street are not discussed. These adjoining areas are treated in a somewhat isolated manner.

Page 57, #4: Branding requires a much broader discussion beyond political boundaries. There could even be an AOC designation related to the entire bio-region. There are other ideas that need to be considered that make sense economically. Regional food systems need to be part of the conversation, including Quebec.

p. 47: An expanded BID would have pros and cons. The pros are already mentioned in the draft report, but cons would include increased commercial property taxes for businesses in the district. While that's good for the city, it may be difficult to get the support of all the businesses being assessed. There is already a feeling among many business owners that taxes in Burlington are high, and an expanded BID might add to these sentiments. Also, BIDs require a decent amount of staff support, which the city should be sure can be provided before embarking on expanding the BID.

p. 47: A Downtown Development Revolving Fund would also have pros and cons. In theory, revolving funds can spur development and are a great tool to help foster economic growth. However, there can often be problems in overseeing and managing these funds. In order to make sure that borrowers don't become delinquent with payments, it takes a high level of staffing and expertise. If there were some non-performing loans, it would make it difficult to maintain this resource as a viable and reliable tool for economic development.

p. 55, 2nd bullet point: Very vague. What would a "public commitment to economic development that actively enables creative enterprises and individual artists" look like exactly? Where would we get the funding for it?

p. 57, #3: A community kitchen or incubator would be a great benefit to Burlington residents and entrepreneurs. CEDO often works with small food-related businesses and knows how difficult it is for folks to find small or shared food preparation spaces.

Page 58 Maybe CEDO should consider a small Farm/Garden Loan Fund.

p.53: August First mentioned on page 53, but not included in diagram on page 54.

Page 54: In the effort to attract "creatives" to the City, we need to provide more support to home-based businesses. This includes business technical assistance from CEDO as well as support from P&Z.

Development Review Process

For any new development/redevelopment, aesthetic criteria need to be clearly articulated and added to technical review and the design/development review processes. This is especially important for any new development that could occur near the rail yard or Battery Street extension. It is important not to have things look like some recent developments that appear to be solely cost-driven design. You only have one chance to get it right.

Page 52: Simplifying the public approval process implies skirting the permitting process that the rest of the City would be subject to. This could lead to problems.

Transportation

p. 52: "Enforcement and Parking" – the term "student-ghetto" raises the ire of long-term residents who live in areas with a higher concentration of students. No one wants their neighborhood referred to as a ghetto -- Please don't use the phrase. The neighborhoods around UVM campus are composed of single family, owner-occupied homes, along with rental units occupied by students. "Student-ghetto" sends a message to prospective home owners that this is an undesirable area for families – and area over-run with students, with neighborhoods lacking charm and devoid of a high quality of life, etc. Ghetto is a pejorative term and should not be used.

p. 72: Why is CEDO listed as being responsible for installing smart parking meters? Seems it would be DPW's responsibility. What department actually has the authority or even capability to do that? Perhaps CEDO can play a role in helping DPW figure out funding options.

p. 65: I really think the bike section needs to emphasize bikability integrated into entire street network. Suffers from not enough emphasis on shared streets. I would change Bikeways (a specialized term) to Integrated Bike Network.

p. 66: Bike boulevards should be added as concept--hugely successful shared street model in Berkeley, Davis, Eugene, etc. Bike lanes are pretty well known and maybe not needed as graphic. And how about reverse angle parking for safety--again widely used on West Coast.

p. 76-77: Connectivity Map needs work. Agree with N-S need but missing great opportunity in Champlain--only corridor that actually has EXISTING safe low car volume N-S bike connection between Union and Lake Street. Great opportunity to continue thru ONE on Chaplain and Pine Street to Railyard path with S Champlain as bike boulevard (Mags to Aug 1). Future planning can get N-S connection thru phalanx of parking structures to reconnect urban renewal area. This should be a purple line... as should King up to it and Lower Church. Key is also a bit confusing.

Page 65 On a bike share program – we need to have some electric assist bikes for an aging population that can coast down to the waterfront but can't or won't peddle back up the hill to downtown.

p. 65: "There is currently not enough permanent bike storage in Burlington." Of the permanent bike storage we do have (in the downtown garage but where else?) how much is it used and how big is the demand? Should this analysis be done before

building more permanent bike storage? Do we need to have that multi-modal center in place before this becomes a priority?

p. 65: Bike share: While conceptually bike share is a good idea, over the years, various UVM classes and students have attempted bike share programs. All these start-ups eventually disappear over time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it's *not a lack of bikes that keep Burlington residents/students from biking*; it's other issues (weather, connectivity, etc.). Can Bike share be successful when scaled to Burlington's size?

p. 66: Bikeways – the report might want to include information about the need and importance of keeping bike lanes clear of ice and snow in the winter. It's easy to tout biking in the summer months (notice how the report has no winter pictures), but biking in winter has its own challenges. Burlington needs proper and adequate bike-lane maintenance all year.

p.65: It is very important to expand the entire bike network to increase bike use.

p. 74: The Alley Walk idea in the Lawson's Lane area is very appealing. Public art would be another great element to add there. Determining ownership of the alleys will impact implementation. The city may want to consider adding them to the Official Map.

p. 75: American Flatbread's use of the alley might be a nice addition to the pictures on page 74. Use Burlington-specific photos where possible.

Sustainability

Page 42: Sustainable Burlington – It states that Burlington takes a comprehensive approach to sustainability. That statement is not necessarily put into action. Legacy, like Plan BTV, is more of a visioning document. There is not an organized municipal plan for sustainability that crosses departmental lines during the real-world work day. There are specific efforts under way in different departments but communication is not always good and, more often than not, excess capacity available to undertake these efforts is not leveraged. There is room for discussion around this topic that could change the business as usual approach.

p. 42: Thank you for noting the Burlington Legacy Action Plan. Can you add something like "Burlington's vision for the future and sustainability planning document" or something to describes what the Action Plan is?

Farm to City

p. 57: Under "food self-reliance and food-security" – It's important to mention somewhere, that while our local food production is key to Burlington's food security, last

year's Intervale flood highlighted the potential fragility of this system and the importance of climate planning, resiliency and adaptation to help protect and secure it.

p. 57 and 59: "Community and Schoolyard Gardens" – remember that school is out of session during the height of the growing season. Too often, school gardens are planted in the spring, only to be neglected during the summer months. What about the use of school space for community gardens – gardens that can be tended by community members throughout the season, but still serve as important learning opportunities when students return to school in August?

p. 58: "Local Food Production..." notes that there are "nearly 40 acres of rooftop in the downtown area". What percentages of these are flat and could actually serve as potential rooftop garden space? Can these roof tops actually bear the increased loads with gardens? How can this be incentivized?

Waterfront

p. 48: Increasing the number of boating slips may not draw more people downtown. The fundamental problem is that the downtown and waterfront are two distinct areas with their own "culture." Thus, people who come to Burlington via boat tend to stay by the waterfront and frequent the restaurants there. There need to be more shopping and dining options or other points of interest on the way up the hill. Pages 63 and 74 of the report speak to this also...helping the pedestrian to enjoy the journey along the way to their destination

p. 49: Diagram: Maritime Uses read as water (overstated ;-). Also Open Space / Scenic Reserve suggests permanent open space for North 40. This is problematic to put in print. Maybe: Open Space / Reserve for Future Planning?

p. 49: One concern about expanding slip space is equity -- and the possible loss of water access and water views for those without boats. May want to note the importance of expanding boater access while still maintaining equal access for those without boats and money.

Attract more commercial development on the waterfront with year round appeal versus more housing.

This plan should not supplant or supersede the Waterfront Revitalization Plan which is a voter approved Urban Renewal Plan that allows the City to access various economic development and financial tools.

General comments on the Insights and What Works sections

p. 19: Table at bottom: put colors on "production" slots--calendar reads as sparse--you guys were busy!

p. 31: Figure/Ground: city hall park shows city hall as park. Also renegade park on Library block I think.

p. 23: "100, 000-200,000 square ft of new retail can be supported in Downtown Burlington." What is our current retail space and how does this compare? "273 retail businesses are located in Downtown Burlington" – How big/small are these spaces? What's the average and medium square footage of this current-use retail space?

p. 29: "61% of all renters in Burlington are paying at least 30% of their income for rent." Mention why 30% is an important threshold. What does this data tell us about poverty, housing and income levels in Burlington's downtown and waterfront?

p. 30: under "myth busting" – note the cost per space in Burlington – articulated later on page 51.

p. 32: Underutilized sites – please note why a healthy job-to- housing ratio is 3:1. What does this mean and why is it relevant to the study area?

p. 34 : Under "Destination" -- "Church Street acts as the center for both locals and visitors, with the waterfront, the universities..." There is only one university in Burlington. Change to "institutions of higher learning".

p. 35: Under "Connectivity" – could also include one-way streets, and ensuring that one-way streets are truly effective and necessary.

Stormwater

p. 81: Under "Rain Gardens" – I wouldn't use the term "man-made" – very last century! How about "constructed"?

p. 82: Would like illustration of Green Roof for food growing. Lots of great examples in Brooklyn.

p. 82: Green roofs are a good idea. How can this be supported and encouraged.

p.78: Comprehensive Stormwater – acknowledgement of the need for a truly system wide separated storm and sanitary sewers. The city should develop a plan for replacing much of this aging and inadequate infrastructure.

p.78: Use of pervious parking areas and areas for infiltration systems need to be individually assessed for technical feasibility in light of filled lands, high water table and known Brownfield's.

p. 80-83: Most of these concepts seem to be focused heavily on high cost complicated infrastructure. Where is the discussion of lower cost and easier maintained low impact development systems?

Housing

The housing section is the one with the least sense of connectivity to the rest of the document.

On page 51, the Plan says, "Current inclusionary housing requirements can make it difficult for developers to provide moderately-priced housing as the subsidy required to provide the affordable units pushes the cost of the market-rate units out of reach for many young professionals and empty-nesters." This is an anecdote that is not supported by any data in the Plan. Rather than assume that the comments of several for-profit developers is borne out by the data, it would make better public policy to identify this as a possible unintended outcome of the existing IZ policy and to suggest further research is needed to test this hypothesis. Further, the recommendations to address the perceived problem with the IZ ordinance found on page 52 presume that the hypothesis proffered by some for-profit developers is in fact accurate. The amendments suggested presume that consensus has been reached about the both the scope of the problems and the most appropriate remedies to address the problems. This planning process encouraged comments and anecdotes to be made without requiring any supporting documentation, so the solutions offered may not be the best ways to improve the ordinance. If the goal is to improve the Inclusionary Housing section of the zoning ordinance, it would be more appropriate to recommend a thorough review of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing ordinance and review the national landscape on this issue.

If a goal of the Plan to remove barriers to providing housing at all income levels, there are other areas that deserve focus beyond the narrow parameters of the IZ ordinance. First, in 1991 a committee of public officials and private citizens examined ways that the City impedes the development and increases the cost of market-rate housing. Fifty-six recommendations were made for changing departmental procedures and amending municipal ordinances to remove these barriers to more housing at all income levels. Many of these recommendations were acted upon but others remain to this day. Second, a thorough review is needed of DRB decisions that have resulted in a reduction of the number of residential units otherwise allowed by zoning. There are certainly examples where the number of units permitted by the DRB on a particular parcel is less than zoning would have otherwise allowed. A development that does not reach the maximum build-out allowed under zoning forces sales and rental prices up because there are fewer units over which to spread the development costs. This is not to suggest that the DRB made the wrong decision in every instance, but simply to note that the

impact of discretionary authority on housing availability and affordability is a significant factor worthy of further investigation.

Page 49 Based on recent appeals to development, there should be minimal residential development near the waterfront. We should be trying to increase residential development more toward the City center.

Students on Church Street are a potential disaster. The idea that noise will be contained, as mentioned on Page 52, and separated from single family residential areas is not realistic. Students will still be travel up and down the hill to and from on campus housing making plenty of noise.

Social Services

Burlington should shoulder less of the burden for social service provision. Neighboring towns should be forced to step up with more supervised living units and accompanying transportation options for those in need of services. This is difficult but it should remain a priority for the city. These issues are not really mentioned in Plan BTV.

Around the Burlington Plan -

p. 89, bullet point 4: The Superblock clearly needs to be rethought and redesigned. CEDO initiated a previous design study that had results similar to what is proposed in Plan BTV, but with more detail. These could be used as a catalyst for reenergizing and renewing this discussion. There is also a mix of public and private ownership of the land contained within the “super block” area. Part of the discussion might need to be is whether any redevelopment is a public-private partnership or should the City divest its interests to a private developer.

p. 93: “More Benches” – this bring up the challenging issue Burlington faced last year over panhandling and homelessness and the elimination of benches on Church Street. How do we reconcile the need for benches with the un-intended consequence of loitering?

p. 93: Awnings – the consistency, durability and quality of the current awnings may not be met with a wide variety of colors and quality of materials and maintenance of cloth awnings.

p. 93: Civic Art – there needs to be a funding mechanism for not only creation of public art but also to maintain existing public art.

p. 104: Battery Park is a State Historic Site that is also eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places for its archeological resources. A new building located here

for consolidation of fire services when there is a fire station less than a half-mile away on North Avenue doesn't seem to make sense.

p. 104: One of the stairway streets should be located on the existing Sherman Street right-of-way.

p. 105: Discussion of Waterfront Park with new building at the northern end of the park seems like an excessively costly and impractical response to a few complaints about noise from events. It also seems like there is very little understanding of how modern events and concerts are produced. A building both decreases the flexibility of the space and disconnects it from the future redevelopment of the Moran Plant and Urban Reserve.

p. 107: Waterfront Pavilion - Consider the millions of dollars recently spent on adding stormwater treatment, transit improvements and the new public restrooms that were just completed in 2011. Also further evaluation should be done to determine if this is a real need and if the community would actually support such a facility with regular repeat business.

p. 90: DO NOT call the Main and Winooski the Super Block (mid town is better). Super block are widely known as results of aggregated blocks by urban renewal. We have a super block but this is NOT IT. It is the mall/Radisson block.

p. 90: Show more dense development on Mid-Town block--this is a fantastic opportunity for density and better spatial definition of a spatially blown out corner. The rendering looks too timid given vast scale of Main Street. This should be our downtown gateway (both corners).

p. 96: Retitle section to be THE MALL: BANK & CHERRY . This is about making urban street frontage--miss key point when only talk about the Mall. I like the term "turn the mall inside out". We want to emphasis the new emphasis in street retailing not outdated failing underground malls.

p. 98: Retitle section to be THE MALL: PINE & ST PAUL . This is a visionary plan. We need to emphasize the vision here if anywhere. This is great stuff. With mall for sale already getting calls from developers to see if city is serious about supporting redevelopment. We can't be timid here. Renderings need a lot of work to read more clearly. Very hard to orient --needs some street label and maybe a wire diagram to show street volume and infill volumes in "before" rendering.

p. 99: Also renderings suffer in general in lack of street tree / greenery. Too grey and building only. Great, livable, dense cities have lots of urban forest & green space in the street ROW.

p. 101: Revise plan to reflect Railyard District plan and functioning rail yard. Also should show some kind of ped/bike park connections south along Barge Canal on S Champlain axis.

p. 104: Stairway Streets need rendering / plan detail or graphic. This is a winning idea and needs simple illustration of how it might look. Also what about some development along west side of Battery at top of bank? Remove berm and put active uses there. Keep relatively low but what wonderful terraces looking out over lake!! Historically this was lined with buildings. Could be great active street scape invitation to cross Battery and transition element connecting downtown. Create human scale and activity along a long dead and desolate stretch of Battery Street. Think Tuileries in terms of a garden street frontage with views over lake and waterfront.

p. 106: On Moran: would be a little more open with future uses (maybe delete strictly)-- uses should be fundamentally public in nature but ones that activate and bring year round people and activity. New construction should be mentioned as potential option.

p. 112: On rendering. Again looks overly grey and large lump blocks in core. Need to reflect finer grade of building scale and a greater emphasis on urban forest and gardens. Part of problem is rendered with sun in north (?) so all south facades in gray shadow. Streets like Battery, Main, College should be rendered with heavy street trees corridors to balance built density.