



Plan BTV Hearing on Downtown Housing Plan

June 12, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to comment tonight on the housing strategies outlined in plan BTV as well as throughout the process.

CHT is supportive of the main recommendations of the study:

1. Prioritize opportunities for infill housing sites. Infill sites are spaces, like surface parking lots, in existing neighborhoods that can be transformed into new housing.
2. Free up existing housing through the strategic development of new, well-managed downtown student housing
3. Create economic incentives to increase the production of multi-family housing
4. Adopt land-use policies that encourage diverse housing development, and in particular Form Based Code zoning reform—which was also recommended in Burlington’s award-winning PlanBTV
5. Engage regional and state partners around housing strategies to grow regional economy.

These are effective ways to increase the city’s housing stock and to encourage and manage growth in the city’s downtown. However, there are aspects of the report and its recommendations that concern us, and that we urge the Mayor and CEDO to take into consideration as you proceed to develop your housing strategy over the next few months.

As noted in the report Burlington is already a strong market and land values are high. The market rents cited in the Plan and supported by other market studies are not affordable even to households earning 100% of Burlington’s median income! If we are going to encourage the development of higher end housing in the city, it is more important than ever that the city target its scarce public resources to creating permanently affordable housing for those who cannot access the market.

A perfect example of this challenge is the proposed redevelopment of the Pine street corridor which makes a lot of sense from a land-use perspective, but without thoughtful planning and allocation of incentives, it will most assuredly result in the economic displacement of the very artists and artisans who have created that vitality. Room for them through lasting affordability should really be a priority of that plan. This is a reality that has been played out in city after city and one that we know how to avoid here- and should.

Please note also that the recent revival of rental housing production has only raised rents throughout the market, not lowered them, and as the example in Essex shows us, that is resulting in widespread displacement, and this is also occurring in properties in the Old North End. CHT receives between 150 and 200 applications a month for our rentals and we typically have less than 10 vacancies. If we want the city to continue to include its office workers, artists, baristas, teachers, artisans and inventors, then we need to plan for and preserve affordability. Plan BTV seems to suggest that Burlington has done enough for this part of the market and that other communities should be accommodating them. But the city will not be the vibrant place it is without them. Their contributions will follow them to the communities where they can settle. Assuring that Burlington is accessible and even welcoming to the entire diversity of its citizens is what the city can and should do

CHT is very committed to supporting the city in its goal to increase housing overall and to and make the most of the fact we are now able to draw a broad market of residents who are no longer attracted by car-centric suburban sprawl. This relatively recent trend is encouraging for all cities and an opportunity for Burlington to grow its population. The up-zoning proposed in PlanBTV coupled with Burlington's many attributes as a desirable city are sufficient incentives for the production of more market rate housing. Any further incentives such as public land or economic resources need to be directed to close the gap between market rents and what is affordable - and it is the only appropriate expenditure of public housing funds. We are most committed to working with the city to assure that the gentrification that is envisioned is one that adds housing options without displacing lower income renters and workers, but rather, adds more options for them as well.

CHT has developed a range of below-market rate housing that we preserve as such for the city's workforce as well as for people on fixed incomes. Our downtown developments at Waterfront, on St Paul Street and at 88 King also include households of a broad range of incomes. Our for-sale product is serving exactly the demographic identified in the report and we could serve many more. A good model for future development is Thayer Commons on North Avenue where State owned land was provided affordably to create a mixed income development with non-profit and for-profit housing.

As always I can't emphasize enough that the city has a small footprint, and while the land can be zoned more productively, the land is finite and that is what creates its value and the ever-increasing cost of housing in this desirable location. As Mark Twain famously said, "Buy land, they're not making it anymore." The city should deploy this valuable asset wisely and in a way that advances the public good. We look forward to working with you to improve the zoning in the downtown and to facilitate the development of more to housing, and especially to assure Burlington's vision of the 21st century city is one that remains open and welcoming to all.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B. Torpy', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Brenda M. Torpy, CEO