

June 12, 2014

Honorable Miro Weinberger, Mayor  
City Hall  
Burlington, Vermont 05401

Peter Owens, Director, CEDO  
City Hall  
Burlington, Vermont 05401

Dear Mayor Weinberger and Mr. Owens,

I understand that you are holding a public forum this evening on the Downtown Housing Development Strategy. I cannot be at the meeting, but did want to comment on certain aspects of the draft Strategy. I should note that while I am retired from the practice of law, I represented non-profit affordable housing organizations in Burlington for 25 years. In addition, while I speak only for myself, I am currently the Chair of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and was Chair of the Legislature's Commission on the Financing and Delivery of Affordable Housing and Conservation. I have been a resident of Ward 1 in Burlington since 1976.

What concerns me about the Strategy is its lack of balance. Certainly, there is much in the report that makes sense. The discussions about mixed use housing; the need for affordability, and the emphasis on placing housing in downtown Burlington are, in my view, sound policy. What is strikingly absent from the report is any reference to the housing needs of low-income persons and the associated need to expand the stock of perpetually affordable housing to all neighborhoods in Burlington, including the downtown and adjacent sectors, such as the Pine Street corridor.

Housing priorities for municipalities such as Burlington that receive federal CDBG and HOME funds are set forth in the 2010-2015 Vermont Consolidated Plan, which has been approved by HUD. The Plan states, in part, that: "The overarching principal that drives all Vermont's efforts in affordable housing is to continue to strive to achieve perpetual affordability through the use of mechanisms which produce housing resources that remain affordable over time." Consolidated Plan at pg. 34. The Plan emphasizes the need for additional housing in Vermont for low, very low and moderate-income persons.

Although the Strategy refers repeatedly to the term "affordable housing", there is no discussion about the need for perpetually affordable housing. Rather, the emphasis is on strategies to make housing affordable for those in high wage jobs. For example, the Strategy states that "Burlington is home to a large share of the region's high-wage jobs in Professional Services, Education and Healthcare, but very few of these

workers actually live in the City." [pg. 23]. The Strategy also suggests loosening the standards for Inclusionary Zoning.

The emphasis in the Strategy on attracting young, urban professionals must be balanced with the housing needs of lower income individuals. I am sure that you know that we are in the midst of a housing crisis for low-income individuals. To give but two examples: there has been a recent increase in homelessness in Vermont; in addition, the State has lost approximately 450 of its crucial section 8 housing vouchers. These events, as well as the on-going severe need for additional units of perpetually affordable housing requires creative planning and responses by municipalities.

A downtown housing policy that speaks only to the needs of a single segment of the population, namely young urban professionals, is incomplete and unresponsive to the needs of a significant part of Burlington's population. Low-income persons are attracted to Burlington for the same reason that others are, namely, the availability of jobs and services. If a downtown housing strategy fails to adequately plan for the housing needs of low income individuals, we will have failed in our obligation to society as a whole.

There is also a risk that when we strive to only attract young professionals, they, along with the wealthy, will change the economic environment so that low and moderate-income persons are priced out of both housing and services. National housing policy emphasizes the need for a mix of incomes in our housing stock. By focusing on attracting upper middle class families without paying attention to the needs of low and very low-income families, the Strategy is incomplete and needs considerable revision.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Mickenberg

cc. Brian Pine