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Dear Richmond Planning Commission Members,

Thank you for the time and effort you've put in to proposing changes to modify Richmond's zoning regulations to help alleviate the housing shortage in Vermont. As the father of an 11-year old child and life-long outdoors person, I share and appreciate your concern for the environment and combating climate change as well.

While I was not able to attend last night's meeting on the potential changes to Richmond's Village Residential Neighborhood(s) District, I'd like to offer the following general input as well as a few more specific suggestions for your consideration:

As background, my family moved to Richmond over twenty years ago, purchasing a duplex on Baker Street as our 'starter house' as we occupied one side and rented the other. One possibility was to move to a more rural setting after a few years. Instead, we enjoyed the Village life so much we bought a single family house two doors away and have lived there ever since.

Our story is not unique. I like to say that "When people move to Vermont, they want to live in Chittenden County along the lake. When they live in Burlington, they want to move to Richmond." There is a reason for this: Richmond is a special town with a special village, including terrific neighborhoods.

The Goodwin-Baker neighborhood, in particular, is a model of what residential life should be. Walking distance to stores, restaurants, the Town Center, churches, R.E.S./C.M.S. and recreation. We're bordered by two cemeteries, a church, and a commercial building. We have a mix of age groups living in rental and owned residences. We have a block party and neighborhood kids that have been friend for years playing flashlight tag on summer nights.

In my opinion, there are very few zoning changes that can improve our neighborhood or, frankly, Richmond as a whole.

That said, I respectfully request that you consider the following:

1. While the Town Plan has a goal of maintaining the rural character of open land surrounding a compact village, it also has the goal of maintaining our "small-town" character. As you know, a Town Plan was needed for Richmond to be eligible for various state grants. I don't believe it should be construed to be a mandate for any significant increase in density or the size of the Village;

2. Those of us that live in the Village chose to move here in large part because of the character of the Village. We did not choose Winooski or Essex and we often left the confines of Burlington. We've invested in our properties, paid taxes and water bills, and contributed to the well-being of our schools and community. Our standard of living should not be diluted in favor of non-residents;
3. If some development is desirable to add to the tax base and as part of an equitable solution to Vermont's housing needs, I believe it should be in measurable increments. For example:
 - Our zoning should include a stated goal of density, i.e. one family per x or y acres in certain districts; in this way, residents can clearly know and vote on the intent of any zoning provision;
 - I think most people would agree that our zoning might slightly reduce the lot size requirement; this type of zoning & development change allows us to map out and see exactly where new residential building would occur while ensuring proper set-backs, landscaping, road cuts, parking etc. As a note, if moving to square footage measurements (versus acreage) it should be an accurate reflection of that conversion (i.e. ¼ acre = 10,810 s.f. NOT 10,000 s.f.);
 - In 2017, the Planning Commission initiated a bold departure to the 'accessory dwelling unit' provision from the state's 30% minimum requirement. This change to 75% or 1000 s.f. of home size – whichever is smaller – is a huge loophole for unplanned development especially in a village where average home sizes are around 1500 – 2000 s.f.

If you think about it, homeowners can turn their garage into a secondary dwelling unit without adequate parking or other protections for neighbors. I can't imagine this provision being relaxed any further and, in fact, I believe it should be tightened back up again – at least in our Village districts - so that Richmond doesn't become like so many California beach communities where the 'garage apartment' towers over the bungalow and neighbors live right on top of each other;
 - To that point, set-backs in the Village are a critical element to maintaining the feel of a neighborhood and harmony amongst neighbors. As it is, 10' side and 15' rear setbacks are rather minimal – with noise; lights; and plantings being potential flash points – any reduction of these measurements would be a terrible idea in my opinion. Likewise, allowing a secondary structure on a 10,000 s.f. lot – as is proposed for the Village R/C & Gateway districts – should be a non-starter in the Village Residential Neighborhoods District.

In conclusion, as the Planning Commission considers zoning changes, please ask yourself: What do Richmond residents really need? Do the Village children deserve open space just as much as the country kids? Should Village residents enjoy their neighborhoods with a little breathing room and green space? Should rabbits, song birds, gardens, fox and even groundhog problems be a part of Village life? I know many of you live outside of the Village proper; I simply ask that you walk in our shoes and preserve our neighborhoods much as they are today.

Sincerely,

Dave Healy