

## Housing Strategies at the Planning Commission 2.5.24

As there has been a lot of discussion about the suitability of Browns Court Ballfield for affordable housing, we thought the Planning Commission should weigh in with a brief comment about our strategies around housing. I think we are all aware that we have a housing crisis – it’s in the news and on Front Porch Forum daily. Housing has been on the Planning Commission’s mind in a major way at least since the adoption of the Town Plan in 2018

After the formation of the Housing Committee in 2020, the Planning Commission began to focus primarily on the regulatory component of the problem. By this we mean: how do our regulations impair the creation of additional housing? In Vermont it has always been very important for us to preserve the natural environment and rural character that so many love, and of course these things are still important – perhaps even more so in this time of climate change. With a relatively low population density, this has been possible. Now we understand that, in order for everyone to be housed, let alone affordably housed, we will have to make some adjustments to the development rules we have put in place over time. The Planning Commission has been working on these municipal rules, just as the Vermont Legislature has been working on this at the state level.

Our strategies have taken us in several directions. We know it is efficient and desirable, for a number of reasons, to concentrate growth in central locations where there is shared infrastructure; where people can walk to nearby services and amenities; and community can thrive. As a result, we are allowing more of what we call “infill” development – smaller minimum lot sizes, accessory dwellings and duplexes, small (3-4) unit multifamily dwellings, in order to maximize the ability of our village center to take on some of this additional residential growth. We understand that these new rules are not universally popular, but for the most part these changes have been graciously accepted as a contribution to getting all income levels housed and helping to provide places to live for our kids and our seniors, our teachers and carpenters and police officers. To continue to provide quality of life in our village, however, we are also fiercely committed to protecting our open spaces, our floodplain, our public buildings and opportunities for gathering, including commercial establishments, which face their own challenges with the recent evolution of the online marketplace. Our infill strategy is pretty new; we have had some interest, and we are hoping to see more uptake as time goes on.

A second strategy is to be responsive to any interest shown by existing residents of any district to add housing on their property. How can we remove barriers to making this happen by adjusting our zoning regulations? We have several ongoing instances of this, including our current work with the Jolina Court Creamery developers to allow additional units there, and to tuck in some dwelling units in the Industrial/Commercial and Residential/Commercial Districts. We tend to look for the “goldilocks strategy” – not too little as to be useless, but not too much as to overwhelm what we love about Richmond.

A third strategy – when we get there- will be carefully removing some zoning barriers to housing in the outlying areas. This will be complex, as we know we do not want “sprawl” and that we need to protect our valuable natural resources. We have assured village residents that they will not be the only ones to make some sacrifices for additional housing. We also know that we can’t give up on our climate change goals, some of which are legally enshrined – as well as farm and forest land protection - as we work on our housing goals.

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Most of our strategies involve increasing housing that is “more affordable” than large, single-family homes on large lots, but housing which continues to function in a traditional for-profit real estate market. We are calling this “workforce housing.” Truly “affordable housing,” with rent or mortgage subsidized with external funds, principally created by non-profit organizations, is a whole different level of difficulty. Small projects, that a village setting can attract and sustain, mostly cannot achieve the economies of scale in this day and age that make these feasible. Individual Habitat for Humanity-like projects work here, so it’s not impossible, but they need champions and opportunities. I think it's good that we have a Housing Committee that can be vigilant for suitable opportunities, but the small number of members on that committee – now down to four - makes it difficult for them to fully investigate opportunities and do enough outreach to decide which ideas are even reasonable to consider.

In summary, the Planning Commission will continue to work on regulatory strategies to help solve the housing crisis, while continuing to balance our solutions with other important goals. We look forward to further collaboration with the Housing Committee as we work on this issue.