

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify about House Bill 68. I will try to be as concise as possible, and if you need additional information, please get in touch with me. I have served for over 20 years on the Town of Hartford Planning Commission.

Vermont has three interrelated housing crises. One crisis is affordability: at all but the highest income levels, housing costs—rent, purchase, or build—are too high. The second crisis is that there is not enough supply of all housing and not enough supply of a variety of housing types. The third crisis is that our collective housing stock is very old, and some are beyond the end of life. Some of that housing is not safe. The challenge is how to face all three crises simultaneously.

Zoning intends to prevent conflict between incompatible kinds of development. The phrase often invoked is "character of the area," although few seem to define what it means. Changing zoning rules should not be undertaken lightly. Vermont has a long tradition of local control, and taking away local control has broad ramifications for governance. What is the point of serving on a local planning commission or design review board if the essential decisions have already been made by default? The central feature of H68 is to increase the construction of multi-family units. Over the last several years, Hartford has broadened the areas where multi-family units could be built, and to date, we have not gained any new units. While changing zoning in VSA 4414 might be seen as a necessary condition for increasing housing, it is not in itself a sufficient condition to increase housing. To increase the building of new housing units, the Vermont system for designing and constructing new housing, like many other areas in the U.S. and indeed around the world, needs to be changed.

We need good designs. Many multi-family units are, to be blunt, ugly. At the same time, increasing across the northern hemisphere, we see a hominization of structures. So, not only are they unsightly, but they also all look the same. We need to find ways to incentivize good design. We had a sketch plan of a traditional multi-family house in Hartford with a wrap-around porch. That design proved to be too expensive to build. A more modern but cheaper design was approved. We also need housing with rooms large enough to hold queen-sized or even king-size beds. Rooms or apartments built without closets force people to rent a storage unit. Again, Vermont needs incentive good design.

To increase density in a neighborhood, we need to build up. While there is a collective resistance to building above 40 feet or four stories, there are places where we could build up to 90 feet without impacting views. Vermont needs to create state standards on tall buildings that talk about mass, materials, windows, and lighting. One concern is creating a structure that does not harm birds. Creating clear standards provides developers with guidelines to go forward. I think we could build beautiful Vermont buildings that are tall. Taller buildings are essential for increasing density. We need design standards before rather than after a design is complete.

One of Vermont's key policies is called "stay in place." Many communities in Vermont have housing stock that is 60 years or older. These housings require renovation and, in some instances, destruction.

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