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To: The Vermont Senate Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee

Re: The housing crisis and proposed changes to allowable zoning regulations

Honorable Committee Members,

The Town of Fairlee has spent considerable time and resources over the last 10 years trying to address this issue. Like many villages in the Upper Valley, Fairlee is a water system village, that is to say there is a municipal water system but residents and property owners are still reliant on onsite wastewater systems. We are currently in a scoping and feasibility study phase of a possible community wastewater system project to service the area currently on the public water system. Our working assumption is that supporting higher density with central services would lower the unit costs of housing, we have also made housing friendly changes to our Unified Development Bylaw that remarkably mirror those in the current proposed bill.

Our local economy has dealt with the same staffing shortages due to what amounts to a zero percent vacancy rate in our rental housing sector. The Town has excess service capacities that it would like to amortize through more users, lowering costs per resident while increasing taxpayer value and lowering property tax rates. Our overall approach over the last decade has been to both increase housing density and diversity of housing types. Our hope that the application of the shared principles both in our local approach and your proposed changes to the Act would have yielded great results. The last decade has seen the addition of only 13 multi-family housing units.

From this perspective we view that overcoming NIMBYism, whether by community consensus built the hardway through community engagement as we have done or by fiat through changes in the enabling language as you are proposing, while required are not a panacea. We have been consistently told by both the housing trusts and developers that projects under 32 units that would be of suitable scale for a village of this size do not "pencil out". The regulatory changes proposed need to be matched with financial support for smaller projects in the 12-24 unit range, otherwise funding and growth will concentrate in the largest of towns and squander an available opportunity to add housing where the barriers are low.

Thank you for your attention and work on this pressing issue.

Respectfully,

Peter Berger, Chair Fairlee Selectboard