

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED
TO
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CORRECTIONS AND INSTITUTIONS
BY
CONNIE SNOW
WINDHAM & WINDSOR HOUSING TRUST
FEBRUARY 24TH, 2016**

My name is Connie Snow, and I'm the Executive Director of the Windham & Windsor Housing Trust. Thank you so much for making time for us on Vermont Housing and Conservation Legislative Day. Our coalition represents over 50 organizations across the state; we are here today speaking in front of committees and talking to legislators about the success story of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, a program that has been an economic and community development engine in the state for close to thirty years.

A little bit about my own organization. Over a 28-year period, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust has created and preserved the affordability of 955 homes and apartments, serving close to 1,400 low and moderate income residents of southeastern Vermont. What began as a neighborhood effort to preserve the affordability of three apartment buildings on Canal Street in Brattleboro has grown to become one of the most successful housing trusts in New England.

I'd like to describe today a project that was made possible by the bond funding that you provided in last year's capital budget, and tell you why that project is so important.

Last November, the Windham & Windsor Housing Trust, partnering with Housing Vermont, closed on a 44-apartment complex in Springfield Vermont. Built in 1981 by a private developer, Evergreen Heights had been put on the market following the death of the original owner, making its future as affordable housing uncertain.

Evergreen's 44 apartments are a mix of one, two and three bedroom units located on an 8 acre parcel of land about 1.5 miles from downtown Springfield. The development has, for over 30 years, provided housing that is deeply subsidized through a Housing Assistance Contract with HUD. Close to 60% of Evergreen's residents have what HUD calls an "extremely low income", with annual earnings ranging from \$4,500 to \$14,000 per year. The development is home to working families, disabled individuals, as well as elderly households.

While Springfield's demographic and market conditions have been trending in a more positive direction over the past three years, it remains the case that two-thirds of Springfield's renters earn less than 60% of area median income, and therefore qualify for most subsidized housing. Springfield's poverty rate grew from 11.9% in 2010 to just under 14% in 2013.

For a number of reasons, it was critical to preserve Evergreen Heights.

First and foremost, we cannot afford to lose existing affordable housing, particularly affordable housing with federal rental assistance. Evergreen Heights is a type of project that we have a very

hard time replicating at this time —a project that is built and funded with attached Section 8 rental assistance. Those federal programs have all but disappeared, making it even more critical to preserve the resources that currently exist in Vermont. They are serving our lowest income and most vulnerable citizens.

Second, the purchase provided the opportunity for local ownership as well as better coordination overall with social service providers. While the property has been serving the community for over 30 years, the out-of-state owner and management company did not have much of an on-site presence, nor did they have strong connections with area social service agencies. Lacking these connections, they sometimes chose to leave units vacant rather than to give a family a chance in an affordable apartment. Nonprofit ownership will stabilize the operation of the housing, increase the overall utilization of the property, and greatly enhance quality of life for the residents through supportive services and programming.

In just a few weeks, we will pilot a project to replace the electric heat in one building at Evergreen Heights with air source heat pumps. We'll monitor the performance of the heat pumps for a winter, and then proceed with converting the remainder of the property. Achieving this kind of efficiency will further strengthen the financial performance of the property, as well as reduce its carbon footprint.

The bond funds are an excellent source of funds for this type of preservation project. The combination of bond funds and federal rental assistance in a project creates capacity for the project to carry debt. This, in turn, stretches scarce public resources further.

Our community development work in Vermont has been accomplished in partnership with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and made possible by the funding that you have approved. The bond funding is a critical resource for the preservation of the affordable apartments that so many Vermonters call home. At a time when demand for affordable housing far outpaces supply, preserving these existing housing resources in our communities is critical. We are grateful for this funding, as well as for your time and attention to this very important matter.