

Dear Members of the House Committees for Appropriations, General and Housing, and Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry:

My name is William (Trey) Martin, and I am a resident of Montpelier, Vermont. In my professional capacity, I am the Director of Conservation and Rural Community Development at the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB).

I write today to support the Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal presented to the House Appropriations Committee by the Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB), a total ask of \$1,970,000 which would support staffing and administration, outreach and community engagement, and grant programming. As Vermont policy makers, state agencies and our non-profit community tackle the critical issues of today – housing, climate, farmland affordability, health access, truth and reconciliation – it is more and more clear that the perspectives and leadership of leaders from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities must be included, funded and elevated.

Per Act 182 of 2022, VHCB provides administrative and fiscal agent support to the LAOB as it works towards the mutually shared goal (between VHCB and LAOB) of independent operations. Earlier this month, VHCB Executive Director Gus Seelig testified before the House Appropriations Committee, underscoring our support for the LAOB budget proposal and our belief that the LAOB is on course to meet the goal of independent operations on behalf of its vital mission. House Appropriations also got to hear from Ornella Matta-Figueroa and Jean Hamilton, the newly hired co-directors of LAOB, who shared the organizational vision, energy and excitement they will be bringing to the work of LAOB. Although their testimony was brief, Jean and Ornella also highlighted the critical need to fund the LAOB budget separately from the appropriation for VHCB, as the ask for LAOB was not included in VHCB's proposed budget.

It has been my privilege to work closely with the LAOB and its newly hired staff, and I can provide firsthand testimony regarding the hard work, thoughtfulness and inclusive approach this board has taken. Since July of 2022, the LAOB has met as a full board almost every other week, in addition to numerous work groups and committees. Starting with the foundation of a policy framework and statement of principles, as well as a “Sunrise Report” delivered to the General Assembly last year, the LAOB is now implementing programming across the span of powers and duties enumerated in its enabling statute, all with the focus and intention to take on and dismantle systems of oppression and institutional racism that continue to create unacceptable barriers to housing, land access and opportunity. And with Ornella and Jean supporting the Board as co-directors, the LAOB is now even more able to directly engage in developing policy solutions and funding recommendations on behalf of and including the views and needs of the broad constituencies it represents.

I hope you will please support the LAOB's FY'25 budget request. Vermont can only benefit from investing in a more diverse, equitable, inclusive and just future.

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