

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED
TO
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
BY
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68 BIRGE STREET
BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT
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My name is Connie Snow, and I am the Executive Director of Windham & Windsor Housing Trust. The Housing Trust is celebrating its 27th year this year. To date, Windham & Windsor Housing Trust has created and preserved the affordability 870 homes and apartments, serving over 1,300 low and moderate income residents in southeastern Vermont. What began 27 years ago as a neighborhood effort to preserve the affordability of three residential properties on Canal Street in Brattleboro has grown to become one of the most successful housing trusts in New England.

I wanted to describe today a project that has been great for downtown Brattleboro, which is the new Cooperative Building, a partnership of the Housing Trust, Housing Vermont, and the Brattleboro Food Coop, and funded by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

In 1988, the Brattleboro Food Coop—which at the time was really a buying club— moved into a vacant grocery store in a 1960's style strip mall development at the base of Main Street in Brattleboro. By 2008 the Coop realized that there existed the potential for their 16 million dollar business to be derailed by the off-the-chart energy and maintenance costs of an aging store, and made the decision to build a new building on the same site. Understanding the benefits of mixed used buildings, and seeing the mission fit, they invited the Housing Trust to join them and to build affordable apartments above the new retail store.

In the fall, 2010, ground was broken for the \$14 million dollar project. Funded by conventional financing and member loans on the Coop side, and tax credits and funding from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board on the housing side, the new retail store and 24 beautiful, energy efficient apartments opened in June 2012. This impressive building, designed by Gossens Bachman Architects, features Vermont slate siding, a high R-value building envelope, triple glazed windows, heat recovery ventilation, a green roof, and solar electrical generation. A sophisticated mechanical system recaptures waste heat produced by the store's refrigeration equipment to heat the apartments above and to provide hot water.

What has been the economic impact of this innovative mixed-used building?

For the Brattleboro Food Coop, the new building has been a game changer. The Coop was able, for the first time, to consolidate their operation in one building, with offices above the ground level store. Since the building opened, the Coop has attracted 600 new shareholders. In their former store, they were looking at the reality that astronomical energy costs could put them out of business within 10 years. Post construction, energy costs for a building 60% larger than the former store have grown by only 20%. Sales increased 15% in the first year, and the former 16 million dollar business is now closing in on 19 million. The Coop anticipates adding up to 8 employees in the next 20 months. Clearly, the new building has secured a sustainable future for this anchor downtown business.

As you well know, there are short and long term economic benefits to a project of this scale in a downtown. Short term, during construction, this collaborative project supported some 450 jobs in construction trades, supplies, design, legal and more. Long term, the Coop employs more than

160 employees, and industry estimates indicate that these 24 apartments support 8 permanent jobs—ranging from landscapers and commercial cleaners to maintenance personnel.

The economic and social impact of this project extends into the future, as the new residents— young working people, empty nesters, and senior citizens—shop, eat and work in our downtown district. And, the 160 Coop employees are downtown each day, spending a part of their weekly pay at area businesses.

When the Cooperative Building opened, three Coop employees moved into the housing above the store. This building, and other downtown developments like this one statewide, ensures that there is housing for Vermont's workforce in proximity to jobs. I just read the Vermont Digger coverage of this committee's work, describing the fastest growing occupations in Vermont being many of the lowest paying. There continues to be a huge miss-match between what housing costs in Vermont and what a typical worker earns. The availability of housing opportunities such as those in the Cooperative Building not only meets a critical need, but will be a factor in attracting and retaining employers in Vermont.

Like many regional centers, the last six years have been difficult for Brattleboro. Businesses have struggled to stay open in the face of a prolonged recession. In April 2011, a fire raged through the iconic Brooks House Block, displacing 57 residential apartments and 10 businesses. Four short months later, the downtown suffered even more destruction from Tropical Storm Irene. The construction and opening of the new Cooperative Building has represented a sign of optimism and hope for a battered downtown. This 14 million dollar investment on Brattleboro's Main Street is clearly a commitment to the community, and it has injected a sense of vibrancy and life into the downtown district.

Collaborative projects like the Cooperative Building don't come along every day, and the Housing Trust was thrilled to be a part of this. I believe this building is pure Vermont Brand, demonstrating a commitment to our local businesses and products, to smart growth and our downtowns, and to inclusive communities. The proverbial icing on the cake was receiving the 2012 EPA National Award for Smart Growth Achievement in the category of Main Street Revitalization. Wrote EPA, the seven 2012 winners "are taking innovative steps to realize a vision of American communities that are clean, healthy, environmentally responsible, and economically resilient."

The values represented by the Cooperative Building are those upon which the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board was founded; and this community development work is accomplished only because of that key partnership and because of the funding you approve each year. Thank you for your time today, for your efforts, and for your support.