

March 16, 2016

Vermont State House
Montpelier, Vermont

To the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs:

Today I am writing to you as a private citizen who has been steadfastly involved in the education, promotion and encouragement of responsible stewardship of Hartford, Vermont's historic buildings. For the past six years I have had the honor of serving as the President of the Hartford Historical Society. Additionally, I serve the Town of Hartford Municipal Government as a member of the Hartford Historic Preservation Commission and the recent Municipal Building Advisory Committee. In the latter project, the MBAC devoted much time in evaluating options to address its outdated municipal offices that were housed in an historic 19th century school. After lengthy deliberation, the Commission elected to engage a Middlebury, Vt. architectural firm for the design and construction of a complete renovation of the existing facility.

I would like to respectfully request that bill H.565 be rejected. The bill that passed the House did so without a fair representation of the facts at hand, but with one-sided witness bias. The full story needs to be heard. I have only just now gotten wind of this bill, and I am dismayed at the lack of due diligence by Rep. Gabrielle Lucke. The Valley News coverage of this whole affair was also woefully one-sided.

The White River Junction Methodist Church is in a National Trust Historic District and is the white-steeple church icon of the downtown area. Its graceful and historic lines balance the streetscape next to more modern structures.

A developer, Rio Blanco Corp, has done everything possible to sway a part of the Methodist Church congregation to achieve its goal, including now trying to change State law. Whereas they initially needed a small piece of the Methodist Church land, they have lobbied certain members of the congregation into believing their church is not worthwhile, and that all their problems would end if the church were torn down and a new smaller church be built two doors down. To preservationists, this is a great disappointment.

Rio Blanco's letter in part reads: *"Rio Blanco Corp is on the brink of starting construction on a large, state-of-the-art senior living and memory care project on an adjacent property to the Church."*

This is not fact. They are not "on the brink of starting construction" because they have not even started the permit process; taking down a downtown icon in great condition in a National Trust Historic District is very far from being a done deal.

As an alternative to succumbing to developer pressure, this church, as well as any churches struggling in Vermont, can seek help from the annual "Churches and Sacred Spaces" conference given by the Preservation Trust of Vermont that will be held this year on September 15-16, 2016. Their text reads: *"Churches and sacred places continue to play a critical role in the health and wellness of our communities. They often act as overflow shelters for our most vulnerable citizens or as community gathering places for musical performances or events. All the while, these buildings can be challenging to maintain. This retreat is offered in partnership with Partners for Sacred Places. Training and shared stories will explore potential partnerships for existing churches and new uses for under-utilized church buildings."*

Rio Blanco's plan would in essence destroy our perfectly lovely historic downtown district, destroying not just one, but THREE structures all at once including *"the only intact barn in White River Junction's historic district"*, in a downtown that has a dramatically reduced inventory of historic structures remaining. Quite unfortunately, Hartford has only a fraction of the beautiful historic buildings that once graced the town. Many historic buildings were lost through decimation by floods, fires, storms, the interstate highways, and "urban renewal" that occurred before the birth of the preservation movement, which has thankfully prevented more senseless destruction of irreplaceable historic structures.

The fact is that the rebirth of White River junction is finally underway, thanks to the creative economy of the Cartoon School, Northern Stage, excellent restaurants, the TipTop building and its artists, and a growing number of home design and decor shops, antique shops, clothing shops and even a microbrewery. We've been called the "Brooklyn of the Upper Valley". The developer's idea and false assumptions that a large assisted living facility—smack in the middle of an already small historic downtown footprint—will bring new life to our downtown, is completely off the mark. We need more housing for young people and families, not immobilized seniors. An assisted living facility belongs in a more natural setting, not in gritty downtown WRJ, and certainly not at the expense of destroying our historic district! As Representative Lucke wrote in the most recent 2016 Town Meeting Report under the heading "Prioritizing Economic Development":

"When it comes to attracting workers to Vermont, we continue to focus on people in the 28-35 year-old age range who have an affinity for Vermont and are ready to settle down. These young Vermonters and potential Vermonters want to put down their roots here, but say that they need better careers, career advancement, public transportation and broadband. We have the quality of life they want for themselves and their families; we need to continue to be all-in in matching their passion for our state with the economic opportunities they need to thrive."

The fact is that the WM Methodist Church, built in 1875, is not only iconic, but it's in beautiful condition for its age. Since it was built, parishioners have taken such good care of it that it's in unusually good condition. *No one takes down a historic budding /Vine shape!* The developer's idea to continue to lobby for its own purposes,

despite the church initially having voted not to sell, with the congregation having made great strides in keeping it going, is unfortunate. A third-party independent engineer gave the church a clean bill of health with minimal expense necessary—despite the developer wanting to influence the congregation and the community into thinking the church was unworthy and beyond repair. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If the Vermont House and Senate value the beauty of Vermont and the wishes of the majority of its residents, it would not change a provision that was put in place to protect some of the most vulnerable structures—our historic churches. A series of votes actually allowed the WRJ Methodist Church congregation to get the facts straight—with a third-party assessment to counteract the developer and the church's biased "building committee" assumptions—facts that, after the independent assessment, affirmed that there is nothing wrong with the church beyond normal maintenance for any older building.

Do not be swayed by pleas that say this statute is discriminatory. In actuality, it should be expanded to include ALL denominations. For a church to be sold, it should be by more than a simple majority. Ideally such a serious decision should be unanimous, but a two-thirds majority is logical. This thoughtful and forward-thinking statute served to protect the WRJ Methodist Church from being thrown away so that a developer could get its way. This statute serves the community because iconic historic structures actually *belong* to the community, the State, and all travelers who come to visit and seek the historic feeling that our small communities evoke—a nostalgic feeling that is consistently bringing tourists to our towns and allowing the revitalization of our downtowns.

Please reject bill H.565.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susanne Abetti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S'.

Susanne Abetti
Citizen of the Town of Hartford, Vermont
President, Hartford Historical Society
Hartford Historic Preservation Commission
Hartford Municipal Building Advisory Committee