



Testimony of Dan Cahill
Senate Natural Resources & Energy Committee
2/24/16

Chairman Bray, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of a historic conservation and housing project underway in Burlington. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell part of the story that has led us to this moment in time.

For over 15 years, a 30 acre parcel of land, known to many as the BC property, or the former Diocese land, has been part of a passionate public conversation on open space in Burlington. This conversation was most notably brought forward to the public in 2001, when Mayor Peter Clavelle convened a coalition to synthesize a vision for the future development of the property. Members of this coalition spanned a variety of interests; specifically, land conservation, housing experts, members of City Council, urban planners, and residents.

The main objectives developed by this 2001 task force were:

- That housing of all types should be incorporated into the development, including housing that will serve a range of income types.
- That there be generous amounts of open space, and that the open space should be accessible to the public;
- That the waterfront portions of the property be conserved for public use.
- That all development planning and construction is sensitive to and protective of significant natural features, especially the path and the tree-scape on the bluffs.
- That the public should have access to the beach area and to the bike path through property;
- That development of this property should enhance revitalization of Burlington's Old North End (specifically commerce along North Avenue);
- That the development should support alternative modes of transportation in order to minimize traffic impacts;

In the years that followed this project remained mostly dormant, yet its concept continued to be an integral piece of City Planning. On town meeting day in 2005, Burlington voters strongly supported a referendum item on the ballot to create the "Conservation Legacy Fund." This fund dedicates close to \$200,000 in local tax dollars annually to land stewardship, conservation education, and acquisition of conservation properties (City resolution advises that it only be used for up to 40% of a projects purchase price). At the time the fund was created, the conservation of the Diocese Property was the preeminent project in the mind of the City's Conservation Board. Some would argue it is even why the fund was created to begin with.

Fast forward to the fall of 2014 when Eric Farrell purchased the BC Property with intentions of developing. Suddenly, the public dialogue was reignited and Mayor Weinberger quickly pledged to work to uphold the objectives identified by the 2001 Clavelle task force. In the following months, a partnership between the Vermont Land Trust, City of Burlington, Champlain Housing Trust and BC Community Housing (the landowner) was formed to uniquely and publically explore options for this space that considered both developer's interests and the community's objectives to develop housing, balanced with publicly accessible open space.



The four partners collaboratively lead a public process through multiple community workshops. Through these discussions with the public the following objectives arose:

- Connect North Avenue to the Bike Path
- Texaco Beach should be publicly owned
- Expand space for community gardens
- Focus development closer to North Avenue
- Protect the bluff overlooking the lake
- Affordable, work force, market rate housing
- Large, flat play field
- Minimize surface parking
- Public meeting space

Now, in this historical moment, the City is in a position to realize many of the public priorities for this land. On February 18, the City and the Vermont Land Trust jointly acquired 12 acres of the property for \$2 million. Funds for this sale were made possible through a \$500,000 down payment from the City's Conservation Legacy Fund, and the remainder has been financed through a low interest conservation loan to VLT from a non-profit social enterprise lender, RSF Social Finance. This land deal will ensure public access to and through this vital waterfront property in perpetuity.

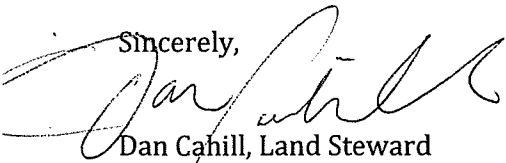
At the heart of this project is a social justice mission. The Old North End, which is encompassed by the US Census Tract 3, is the most diverse neighborhood in the entire State of Vermont, both in terms of culture and socioeconomics. This project not only supports the ONE with more park land and a primary connection to Burlington's waterfront recreation areas, but it will also provide more, much needed, housing.

Development plans for the property include, 146 affordable rental properties for families and seniors, to be developed by the Champlain Housing Trust and Cathedral Square Corporation. Additionally, there will be 80 work force sale properties, 124 market sale, 50 market rental, and 260 college rental units. These 640 units are a vital step toward Burlington addressing its housing short fall.

On all fronts, this project has just begun. The story is still unfolding. On the housing side, the permitting process for development has yet to commence. On the conservation side, Vermont Land Trust and the City of Burlington are undergoing a fundraising effort to raise the remaining 1.5 million needed to pay back the loan. In pursuit of these funds, there are active and ongoing discussions with private philanthropists, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Vermont Housing Conservation Board.

Of course, this is where you come in. It takes a diversity of funding sources for these projects to occur. One of the most vital sources for this project, and many like it, is the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. Please help Burlington realize this milestone Conservation/Housing project through the support of the VHCB 2017 appropriation.

Sincerely,


Dan Cahill, Land Steward
City of Burlington, Vermont