

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED
TO
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CORRECTIONS & INSTITUTIONS
BY
ELIZABETH BRIDGEWATER
WINDHAM & WINDSOR HOUSING TRUST
FEBRUARY 9TH, 2018**

My name is Elizabeth Bridgewater, 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.

The Windham & Windsor Housing Trust just concluded its 30 year anniversary and celebrated the numerous achievements of its founding and long term Director Connie Snow who retired in December. These include the creation and preservation of 1000 homes and apartments and serving over 1,500 low and moderate income residents in 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 trust in New England and the 2nd largest community land trust in the country.

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

In November of 2015. 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. Fifty percent of Evergreen's residents have what HUD calls an "extremely low income", with annual earnings ranging from \$3,000 to \$16,000 per year. The development is home to working families, disabled individuals, as well as elderly households and meets a critical need in Springfield as the poverty rate continues to climb every year.

For a number of reasons, it was critical to preserve Evergreen Heights. First and foremost, we can never 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 was 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 or to fill a 2 bedroom apartment with a single person rather than give a family a chance in an affordable apartment. Since purchasing the property and working with our third party management company - Stewart Property

Management - we've been able to provide greater opportunity to those most in need. Evergreen Heights now gives preference to homeless individuals for the one-bedroom units and has a Memorandum of Understanding with Springfield Supportive Service to provide at least 6 months of weekly supportive services to these individuals during their transition to permanent housing. Seven individuals have benefited from this arrangement since 2015 and all are still stably housed. In addition, the property management staff works closely with the Springfield Housing Authority and Springfield Supportive Services to help existing tenants avoid eviction by addressing any issues that arise as quickly as possible.

When we purchased Evergreen Heights, it was in fairly good condition so we did not upgrade the finishes and mechanicals at that time. However, we did pilot a project that replaced the electric heat in one building with air source heat pumps. By monitoring the efficiency of this new heat source we can make smart financial decisions about future upgrades based on real time data.

The bond funds are an excellent source of funds for this type of preservation project. The combination of bond funds and the 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.