



CITY OF RUTLAND
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RUTLAND, VERMONT

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Honorable Tom Stevens, Chair, and Honorable Joseph "Chip" Troiano, Vice Chair
Members, House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs

RE: Comments on S. 237

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for providing this opportunity to offer comments on S.237.

The purpose of the bill is to promote access to affordable housing. Small as Vermont is, the housing affordability “crisis” is not a state-wide problem. The Legislature and the media frequently attribute challenges found in and near Chittenden County to every Vermont region and community, and this is a classic example where that is simply not the case.

In Rutland County households with 80% of median household income can afford today a median-priced home.

The purpose of the minimum lot size mandates in the bill is to increase the density of housing in areas served by municipal water and sewer. Since 2014 the City of Rutland has pursued a program of de-densification in our northwest quadrant, which was deteriorating due to the proliferation of single family homes being converted into studio and one-bedroom apartments, and absentee ownership. The City, the Land Trust, Neighborworks, and Habitat for Humanity have been working to acquire blighted properties and either demolish them or renovate them into owner-occupied single and two family homes.

The program, which includes many other activities, has met with substantial success, reversing the downward trend and reestablishing the area as a desirable neighborhood in which to live and invest. Another goal was to reduce the oversupply of rental units to increase the value of the remaining units, thereby enabling private investment to improve the quality of rental housing in the city.

My point in telling you this is to illustrate that state-wide mandates designed to address affordability or encourage greater density will work to undermine efforts at the local level where challenges lie elsewhere. Decisions such as promoting owner-occupancy or addressing affordability through zoning must be left to local governments. One-size-fits-all state mandates can only result in unintended negative consequences in some communities.

On the matter of mandated water and sewer utility mapping in municipal plans, I have two concerns. Following September 11, 2001, US EPA and the Department of Homeland Security have advised utilities to remove site-specific information about these facilities from the public

domain. Rutland had previously published a good deal of this information on our web site but took it down in conformance with this advice.

In my written comments I have provided a link to an EPA publication – “Baseline Information on Malevolent Acts for Community Water Systems.” The mandate to provide this type of information to the public is contrary to EPA’s guidance.

https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-07/documents/baseline_information_malevolent_acts_508_072519.pdf

Rutland has no objection to publishing service area maps, as opposed to pipes and facilities, but for smaller communities even this could represent a significant cost. Most Vermont water and sewer utilities serve very small populations and lack the GIS mapping and digital data capabilities possessed by larger systems like ours. I urge the committee to heed the advice of Vermont Rural Water, GMWEA and the League regarding the impact of these mandates on smaller systems.

As someone who has had the honor of sitting in seats similar to those you occupy, I do not want to leave you with only a list of “don’ts”. Here are a few “dos”:

- A large reason housing costs more than many can afford in Vermont is existing state regulation which discourages the construction of new housing by the private sector. Purchase prices and rents necessary to support new housing exclude low and moderate income buyers, reducing competition and constraining the supply of housing in this high-demand market. Section 17 in the bill calling for a statewide housing study for the aged could be expanded to require a study of state environmental and other requirements that add cost to housing development with limited environmental or other benefits.
- Some good examples of this can be found in H.926, which contains the provision to eliminate duplicate and costly state permits for water and sewer utility connections and exempts designated downtowns from Act 250 jurisdiction.

So my basic advice is for the Legislature to avoid layering new mandates on municipalities and instead look to reduce affordability-defeating state requirements as your first step in addressing this issue.

Thank you,



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Rutland City Department of Public Works

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