



vermont affordable housing coalition

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Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition Comments to Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee, and the Senate Finance Committee

Re: **S.237**

June 10, 2020

The Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition (VAHC) is a membership organization representing most of the state's non-profit affordable housing developers, community land trusts, homeless shelters and service providers, public housing authorities, funding agencies, residents' associations, community action agencies, regional planners, and housing, disability and tenants' rights advocates. Our mission is to ensure that all Vermonters, particularly low and moderate income persons and those in protected classes have safe, adequate, physically accessible, and affordable housing.

VAHC supports S.237 as approved by the Senate Economic Development Committee and hopes it will advance through the legislative process with no changes to any provisions that promote the preservation and creation of inclusive, affordable housing. There are many elements of S.237 that can preserve and create affordability and direct housing development to appropriate locations.

As you review and contemplate proposing any changes to S.237, it is important to know that the affordable housing community and the Administration worked out a compromise in February of this year. VAHC (representing the affordable housing community) supported the exemption of Designated Downtowns (DDs) and Neighborhood Development Areas (NDAs) from Act 250 if the process of renewing or getting a new such designation includes providing affordable housing in the community. Since Priority Housing Projects were eliminated as an incentive for developers to include affordable housing, the compromise to include affordable housing language at renewal or new designation of a DD or NDA was a critical, and carefully constructed piece of our negotiation. If there are any changes considered to the affordable housing requirements of the designations, we will want to provide comment/testimony.

We understand there are discussions underway regarding zoning changes contemplated in S.237. The affordable housing community strongly supports the need for more housing in Vermont for diverse income levels and would not take any stance that would inhibit its development. We also strongly support Vermont's long-standing policy of developing housing in established downtown and village centers – served by water and wastewater infrastructure and with access to employment, transportation, and essential services – and we support strategies promoting that

focus. Anything that increases housing that is accessible to a wide range of incomes and backgrounds, and don't contribute to exclusivity, in places where it makes sense, we fully support.

We are concerned about rising real estate prices and a documented trend of out-of-staters buying Vermont real estate on line ("*Realtors say out-of-staters buying up Vermont homes online*", VT Digger 5/26/2020). These conditions are significant and threaten affordability for Vermont's renters and homeowners alike.

We encourage the committees to consider the impacts of changes to Act 250 regulations, within S.237, on housing affordability in the context of economic vitality, impact on housing supply, and inclusivity. Focusing on housing supply alone does not ensure that those most challenged by cost and availability have realistic opportunities to live in downtown and village centers and access the related economic opportunity and services. This can have a disparate impact on people in protected classes who have low income by limiting their housing options. Any incentives to increase housing in and around our downtowns and village centers must include assurances that at least some of the homes will be accessible to a wide range of incomes and backgrounds.

The pandemic has revealed deficiencies in our housing infrastructure. In your review of S.237, we encourage any actions be taken through the lens of preserving and creating affordable housing opportunities, to strengthen our communities and protect the most vulnerable.

On behalf of the VAHC Steering Committee,



Cindy Reid, Chair