

From: Brian Cina
Sent: Thursday, April 28, 2022 6:17 AM
To: HOUSE GENERAL
Subject: TESTIMONY on amendment to Section 22 of S.226

House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs,

I know that every decision that we make cannot be unanimous, and I accept that we may not always agree on the best way to get to our common goals. But I still respect and value every member of the Body. Because your support matters to me, I figured I would present my perspective to you, hopeful that you might decide to vote yes to amend Section 22 of S.226 with the language before you that grew out of the seed of H.273.

For the past six years, I watched the House General, Housing, and Military Affairs Committee take testimony on many bills involving racial, social, and economic justice. The work of this biennium builds on that record. Last year, the committee heard a wide range of testimony on housing, which included testimony for both H.232 and H.273 on current disparities in housing and wealth. The Committee also heard testimony on how these disparities are rooted in the history of discrimination in our state.

In 2021, the General Assembly acknowledged some of the harm of the past and committed to further action:

- After apologizing for "State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices," J.R.H.2 commits the state to "work to eradicate the lasting legacy of its prior actions by listening to and working with the affected individuals and communities" and "recognizes that further legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and related practices of disenfranchisement, ethnocide, and genocide."
- After presenting extensive data on the public health impact of racism, J.R.H.6 "commits to the sustained and deep work of eradicating systemic racism throughout the State, actively fighting racist practices, and participating in the creation of more just and equitable systems." This resolution includes the impact on public health of racial disparities in Vermont in home ownership, median income, housing conditions, housing affordability, and homelessness.

In 2022, our House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs took further testimony on H.96 and H.273. Although both of these bills take action to address the harm of the past, they do so in very different ways:

- Truth and Reconciliation is the long journey, the means for our society to get to the ends of reducing harm caused by the state as we nurse the many deep intergenerational wounds caused by systemic discrimination so that we can more deeply heal ourselves and our relationships to each other. It involves extensive additional research, public education, and civic engagement. It charts the long and broad path ahead of us towards greater equity and justice in Vermont through a nuanced process of reconciliation, after making space for a richer tapestry of truths to be heard and recorded. It does not provide an immediate response to the housing crisis and public health emergency in Vermont.

- H.273 takes immediate action to address current, clearly established inequities as we recover from public health crises by creating a new Land Access and Opportunity Board in our housing system to empower those most impacted by discrimination to immediately address disparities in land access and opportunity for property and home ownership.

The amendment to Section 22 of S.226 that emerged from the seed of H.273 enhances the role of the Board in shaping policy and spending decisions as a more integrated piece of the housing continuum, embedded in the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. By transplanting this amendment into the garden of S.226, we add an important organism to the housing ecosystem. Like ladybugs eating aphids off of the plants in a garden, the new Board can help the VHCB and other parts of the housing continuum to eradicate the infestation of systemic racism over time. The Vermont Land Access and Opportunity Board would provide support and guidance so that the massive investments in housing in S.226 are seeded more equitably as we recover from the public health emergency. If we mitigate the impact of racism as we grow home ownership, improve housing conditions and safety, increase housing affordability, and end homelessness, we amplify the return on our investment because we are improving multiple social determinants of health with the same amount of dollars. Some of these impacted social determinants of health include housing, basic amenities, the environment, income protection, early childhood development, and inclusion/discrimination. Furthermore, we reduce the negative impact of the social determinant of health of structural conflict when we not only include the voices of the people who have been impacted by discrimination, but also cede power to the people who have been disempowered in our society.

The new Land Access and Opportunity Board, like all of the State's work on racial and social equity, may eventually be affected by the processes and products of Truth and Reconciliation. The work of many Boards and Commissions may intersect with Truth and Reconciliation, including the Health Equity Advisory Commission that is currently working on reducing disparities and promoting equity in the health care system, and not waiting for the results of Truth and Reconciliation.

Is it fair to ask for people to wait any longer for relief from systemic discrimination when it comes to the housing crisis?

As we engage in deep digging at discrimination rooted in the history of our state, we can learn from our mistakes, consider specific remedies for those impacted by the past, and cultivate new systemic solutions for the future. Perhaps someday we can build a resilient, just permaculture in these mountains deeply rooted in truth and reconciliation?

But right now, in the present, we are poised to plant many different seeds in our existing housing ecosystem through S.226. As these historic investments in housing grow and blossom, we can make sure that everyone has better access to the fruits of this harvest and to have greater opportunity for social and economic recovery from the pandemic through the immediate work of the Land Access and Opportunity Board over the next few years.

Due to the many benefits of the Land Access and Opportunity Amendment, please consider voting YES. And then let's pass S.226 and take another step forward in improving access to safe and affordable housing for all people.

One final comment- if you adopt the Stevens amendment to Section 4 of S.226, please consider adding the Vermont Land Access and Opportunity Board to the list of members of the Vermont Equity Council (although one might say that they are already included under the VHCB). I am excited to see the Community Partnership for Neighborhood Development bringing so many organizations and stakeholders together to plan and implement pilot projects. But I did not see any specific guidelines regarding racial and social equity, besides the criteria regarding affordability. By including the Land Access and Opportunity Board on the Vermont Equity Council, the perspectives of people who have faced discrimination in housing, land access, and opportunity for property ownership could help the Council to better embed racial and social equity into the planning and design of the neighborhood pilot projects, improving more social determinants of health (for example, expanded application of theories such as Universal Design).

Thanks for reading my testimony. Thank you for giving so much time and energy to the important work of promoting equity and justice for all people.

---Brian



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House Health Care Committee
House Ethics Panel