



House General, Housing & Military Affairs
Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Good Afternoon. My name is Patrick Shattuck, and I am the Executive Director of RuralEdge, the primary affordable housing developer in the Northeast Kingdom. First, I want to thank you all for your focus and funding of affordable housing development in Vermont. As we can all agree, housing is fundamental to the stability and health of our communities, and the funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board is imperative to the successful implementation of our work. While we doggedly pursue new units and our next developments, it is so important to reflect on the transformative impact of our work – in this case – the renovation that was recently completed in partnership with Evernorth of New Avenue in St. Johnsbury.

In previous years, members of our development team have shared with you our journey – the plans and struggles, as well as the story of the residents who lived in Depot Square previously and the conditions they experienced, cementing the need for this renovation. Today, after eighteen months, after all the challenges of keeping a project moving during a pandemic, we are so pleased to celebrate the project; the end result is aptly summed up by to the declaration from our first new resident who likened his apartment in New Avenue to “being in heaven”.

That conclusion, while a resounding endorsement from a resident – does not stop with those living in the building. Gillian Sewake, Executive Director of the St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce recently spoke to the impact of the project, stating “The reopening of the New Avenue Apartments has brought a sense of vibrancy to our downtown. In 2021, despite the ongoing pandemic, we saw more new businesses open in St. Johnsbury than at any time in recent memory. Many business owners specifically cited optimism about the renovation of this historic property as the reason they chose to invest in St. Johnsbury at this time.”

In fact, New Avenue itself hosts many new businesses in the multiple first floor spaces in the commercial condominium owned and renovated by New Depot Square Commercial Properties LLC, making this a great public private partnership.

While retail spaces were previously vacant for a decade, the building now hosts a home furnishings store, a gallery, the continuing education department of the St. Johnsbury Academy and a local coffee shop is finishing its renovations of their expanded space and will open in the next month. The storefront windows, which formerly showcased empty, dusty spaces and discarded furnishings, instead highlight activity and commerce. The change is simply huge and from the exterior, the once dank building – that had a mildew odor detectable even from the sidewalk – is now a vibrant community hub and proud downtown anchor.

The changes inside the building are also dramatic – and life changing for the people who call it home. Units that had previously been updated in the mid-1980s, with limitations due to the asbestos filled plaster, were dismal and suffered from awkward configurations. A studio apartment that was supposed to be fully accessible only had one potential location for the bed, due to the addition of a fully accessible bathroom, in the center of the unit. The bed had to be placed with its headboard in the closet so that an appropriate clearance existed to open the oven door.

Ceilings throughout the spaces had been dropped to accommodate wiring and plumbing, and ceiling tiles were stained from years of leaks. The hallways were dismal, with worn carpets and tenants, if able, chose to use the stairways instead of the tiny elevator that wasn't always reliable. Too, it was so small that, if there were emergencies that required a stretcher, the patient had to be straightened to vertical to fit.

Now, the apartments are spacious and bright – the ceilings having been returned to their original heights and the original window openings – many with arched transoms above – flood the spaces with light. The spaces include well laid out kitchens with ample cabinet and counter space. The units are well insulated – including sound insulation between units. Tenant comfort is provided by air source heat pumps and includes central air conditioning. In all, the building contains 40 residential units: 3 two-bedroom units, 8 efficiencies and 29 one-bedroom units. Two are fully accessible.

The hallways, which were considered an important element of the original design and were required to be maintained at their original wide width – are spacious and clean. The second floor hosts a community room in the round turret space as well as a community kitchen. The third floor includes a community living room, providing extra space for tenants to gather and build community. A new, enlarged elevator shaft was constructed maintaining the original elevator opening in the lobby. Now, a spacious and reliable elevator serves the building.

RuralEdge provides onsite SASH services helping to keep our residents healthy and active, and Northeast Kingdom Community Action serves as an important partner by providing support to the ten households who have moved in from homelessness. All residents are settling into their new homes and singing the praises of the beautiful spaces and convenient location.

Looking out the windows from the fourth floor at New Avenue, one gets an amazing view of St. Johnsbury – steeples pierce the horizon, proud heavily bracketed cornices of prominent Lambert Packard designed commercial buildings with repeating arches echo across the street. Traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, is steady throughout the day. The sidewalks are filled with people – going to the bank, restaurants, the bookstore, pharmacy, and bakery. This is a vibrant, attractive community – a picturesque Vermont community.

We frequently hear worries about affordable housing – its impact on a community. In St. Johnsbury, the conclusion is very clear, there is a fantastic positive impact on the community. In this block alone – this busy, productive, and vibrant block, there are nearly 100 units of perpetually affordable housing in five separate developments – all supported with funding through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. These are buildings old and new, of all sizes and styles and scales that blend seamlessly, simply because these units and their residents are integral to the community.

As we continue to strive to create more housing units, acknowledging our successes and celebrating the impact of our work is so important. Thank you all for your support of New Avenue and of the important task of developing and operating quality affordable housing.