



Kathy Beyer of Evernorth will speak more in detail about the New Avenue project and its impact, but I would like to focus on the larger community and those blocks of downtown St. Johnsbury that surround New Avenue.

When standing from the fourth floor fire escape 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 complemented by the surrounding neighborhoods of attractive historic homes – and upon closer inspection, one realizes the vast investment of VHCB in this vibrant, attractive community.

Within sight is the 20 year-old Passumpsic View Apartments with 25 elderly units, an infill building built in response to a terrible downtown fire. Next door to that is the 1867 Building, another building that was damaged by fire and restored to house street level commercial space, general occupancy apartments and FIRST (Families in Recovery Staying Together) House, supportive housing for young mothers leaving rehabilitation and uniting with their children under 3. We have a sober house, family and general occupancy housing and new units designated for those moving from homelessness. These units are intricately woven into the existing built environment, housing some of our most vulnerable residents while preserving and responding to some of the most complicated properties – and all of these – 178 units - have been supported with funding from VHCB over the last 30 years.

These properties blend seamlessly with the community and if they stand out, it is because of the exceptional design quality. And in the same block, even with COVID-19, new successful restaurants, a distillery and an art supply shop have opened in the last year and all indications are there are more to come. Just this last week, an article in the Caledonian Record focused on the purchase of a long-vacant building and the plans of its owner. When asked why he was making the investment, he replied

*“When I went to look at the building the first things I noticed were the distillery across the road and the work on the corner (New Avenue rehabilitation),” he said. “It told me that there are people here who think there’s something going on in St. Johnsbury.” He was also charmed by the Farmers’ Market located in the municipal parking area near his building and the breakfast he had at the Central Cafe.*

It is clear that there is something going on in St. Johnsbury. That fact has led to an incredibly tight rental housing market. While we are very excited that New Avenue will bring 40 units back to the St. Johnsbury rental housing market, one where there is almost no rental housing currently available in the community, we know that continued investment in affordable housing is necessary if we are to continue the positive development underway in St. Johnsbury. Even with 40 new units, the numbers are daunting:



## Rental Housing in the Northeast Kingdom - by the numbers:

- Updated in December 2020, RuralEdge’s waiting lists, unique for each of our 40+ projects, run between 40-60 households per project looking for one-bedroom subsidized rental units. Those nearing the top of each list have been on the waiting list since 2017.
- As of January 2021, there are still 100+ individuals living in motels across the Northeast Kingdom. RuralEdge rehabilitated seven family sized units in St. Johnsbury with funding through VHCB that were placed in service in late December 2020 to provide permanent rental housing for people in the motels. The seven units are taken by families – some with as many as four children with some experiencing homelessness for as long as two years.
- RuralEdge’s residential vacancy rate – across our almost 700 unit portfolio is less than 2% and units are filled as quickly as they can be turned over. This compares to a residential vacancy rate that averaged 10% as recently as early 2018.

## These are the people in our families and in our neighborhoods. Here are some stories:

***In one building, we frequently find the two young sons of a “caregiver” napping on the sofas in the community room (currently closed due to COVID-19). The “caregiver” assures staff that they wouldn’t be sleeping there if they had an apartment of their own and then enquires about their place on project waiting lists.***

The number of “personal caregivers” added to households in buildings has dramatically increased over recent years. In many instances, these “caregivers” are family members and can include young children. Too frequently, the real need is for their housing and their care giving is secondary.

***In one development, neighbors complained about a small tent community behind one of our buildings. The tents were the result of a visiting family of eight exceeding the maximum guest stay of 14 days that is standard in our leases and their host wanting to make sure they complied with their lease.***

We hear regularly of households with guests exceeding the fourteen day limit for overnight visitors. We frequently make referrals for emergency housing or add the “guests” to our waiting lists, but in many cases, there simply is no place for them to go.

***A market rate unit in the recently completed Olivia Place Housing in Lyndonville was leased to a household of two brothers, each with long-term employment and steady income. Previously unable to find suitable housing, they moved from a property that lacked heat, reliable water or even a lock on the door.***

The twenty new units at Olivia Place in Lyndonville were completely occupied almost as soon as the building was ready. Demand was great and this property is a true mixed income development with some residents having moved from motels, to retired couples and working families. Residents were drawn to the quality construction in a downtown location, combined with community gardens, greenspace and strong social service coordination, including onsite SASH (Support and Services at Home).



## An Investment in People:

- RuralEdge has a very active SASH Program, with over 500 participants across the Northeast Kingdom. St. Johnsbury has multiple panels including an on-site Coordinator at Passumpsic View Apartments.



*Above – SASH Coordinators and Nurses with produce for distribution*



*Above – A newly vaccinated SASH Participant*

- Through SASH, RuralEdge hosted seven COVID-19 Vaccine clinics at our elderly buildings providing the vaccine to over 150 people and assisted with an additional clinic in Orange County.



*Above - Food Distribution at Mountain View Apartments in St. Johnsbury*

*At Right – residents plant vegetables at the start of the 2020 growing season*

- RuralEdge has an active Community Building and Engagement Team, focusing on the provision of additional services to residents, especially in family housing. Even before COVID-19, food security was a huge issue. Along with a resident –led food shelf at our Mountain View Development that serves 50+ families each week, we worked with residents to develop over a dozen community gardens at our various developments.



- RuralEdge was an early partner in the Everyone Eats program. To date our SASH and CBE team have delivered nearly 5,000 meals and worked in partnership with local restaurants in Caledonia, Essex and Orleans Counties – and even one in our own building, Central Café.