

To members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs:

I would like to express my support for the omnibus housing bill currently under consideration, but I would further urge that such a bill does not go far enough to enable missing middle housing development in this state.

To state the stakes of housing reform plainly, Vermont is in a crisis. We have the fourth highest individual tax burden in the nation, an aging population, and the highest rate of “brain drain” among college graduates in the country. Our tax base is dwindling while the needs of Vermonters only increase, as many of you are aware, given recent conversations about the astronomical costs of child care. If the state seeks to provide robust public services to its citizens, it must increase its working population to fund such improvements.

As things stand now, this is not happening. The rate of homelessness per capita in Vermont is second only to California. As I write this, there are fewer than 500 homes listed for sale in the entire state for less than \$400,000, a price already beyond reach for many Vermonters given interest rate hikes. There are exactly 4 homes for sale in Burlington, our largest city, for less than that price. This economic environment will choke the life out of us unless action is taken.

The bill under consideration is a necessary first step. I understand that many Vermonters may chafe against the idea of zoning regulations being set by the legislature as opposed to localities, but Vermont towns have proven over decades that they will make few, if any, concessions to assist in solving the crisis we now face. The state of California, facing similar prospects, opted to take even more decisive action last year. Senate Bill 9 enabled up to four units on any previously single-family lot, a considerably denser design than the proposed 5 units per acre in our bill. Despite a fierce political fight to get that bill passed, California has not seen an explosion of development (due to a number of other factors). The process of unwinding the Gordian knot we’ve tied ourselves up in will take years, even if legislation is passed tomorrow. We have no time to waste.

I would also like to respond directly to testimony given before this committee by South Burlington Land Trust. They have urged you to remove the specification that lots with water and sewer hookups be subject to additional development, on the grounds that they are trying to preserve rural lands. This would be a mistake. The bill loses much of its utility without this provision – simply permitting duplexes by right and reducing parking will not enable the kind of housing construction needed to address this crisis. South Burlington is part of our state’s largest metro area. Frankly, land conservation should be a secondary concern here. Furthermore, without additional density along existing sewer and water lines, South Burlington taxpayers will continue to subsidize these single family properties. The existing utilities are more expensive per capita than if houses were redeveloped into multiplexes. Furthermore, this bill only affects land in which development is already permitted. Conserved green spaces not subject to development would not be opened up by this bill.

Currently, around 20,000 people who work in Chittenden county commute more than 25 miles. Disallowing density in places like South Burlington will force additional sprawl in towns like Hinesburg, Milton, Jericho and Ferrisburgh where utilities are not as widespread. We would be worsening sprawl and environmental impacts elsewhere by removing this bill provision.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to pass this bill in its current form (or possibly a more aggressive version) to the legislature. Beyond this, I would urge the committee to begin looking at procedural overhauls to speed housing development and reduce costs. Our state is burdened by bureaucratic duplication, particularly with Act 250, that will minimize any benefits that even this housing bill will bring. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Colin Larsen
Resident of Burlington, VT