

Written Testimony Submitted to the Vermont House and Senate Committees on Appropriations
on the SFY 2025-2026 Executive Budget
Public Budget Hearings
February 13, 2025 & February 20, 2025

My name is Arleigh Young and I am the Manager of St. Albans downtown organization, St. Albans Downtown. Our role is to support our downtown business community through promotion, events, and support for revitalization efforts by the City and private investments. When I took this position I felt excited to continue and enhance the upward momentum that had been gained over years of work. But the impacts of petty crime and substance use disorder on our downtown are severe. Despite years of effort to revitalize our community, including the purchase and enhancement of blighted properties in our downtown with the aid of state tax incentives, and creating unique events with the aid of Vibrancy Grant funding these issues are driving away visitors, unsettling residents, and worst of all, forcing businesses to close or relocate. Local businesses already struggle to compete with online retailers, adding daily disruptions like theft and aggressive panhandling is pushing them to a breaking point.

A salon owner on a stretch of Lake Street that has become a hotspot for criminal activity had come to me with concerns many times. When visiting her location I experienced the issues myself. The overview of the incident; A woman entered her shop, visibly shaken after being kicked out of her apartment by "bad men." The owner, knowing her by name, offered help, but the woman refused police intervention, admitting she was on house arrest. A salon client, who works in social services, offered her a ride, but the woman declined, fearing retaliation. She repeatedly asked for money, but the owner and client only offered safe alternatives. When the police were called, the woman fled. The owner later broke down in tears. "This happens every day," she told me. These encounters disrupted her business, frightened clients, and ultimately drove her to relocate—losing a \$20,000 investment and her place in our downtown. Her new location? Outside city limits.

This isn't just one business's struggle—it's happening across our city and state. Local governments and business owners can't bear this burden alone. To revitalize our downtowns, we need urgent state intervention: funding, resources, and policy changes that both support people in crisis and address crime. Downtowns are the heart of our communities and should not be places where the state abandons those in need or tolerates unsafe conditions.

To address these challenges we respectfully request:

An increase of dollars for public safety and more pathways to drug treatment, sober living facilities, more mental health beds and services, and detox facilities.

We need to continue to invest in our downtowns and applaud Governor Scott's recognition of the importance of Downtown and Village Center tax credit program by extending the tax credit to a \$5 million cap. This investment has been instrumental in revitalizing community centers while preserving their historic character and improving building safety.

While we understand that the Better Places program was not included in the Governor's proposed budget, we respectfully request your support for its inclusion of \$500,000 in the final budget. This program provides matching grants from \$5,000 to \$40,000 for placemaking projects that enhance the vitality of our downtowns and village centers. These crucial investments create vibrant public spaces, support community events, and attract visitors, all of which are essential for the continued success of our downtowns.

Lastly, we urge the committee to support the modernization of the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program to serve downtown revitalization projects better. This includes exploring options to streamline the application process, expand eligible uses, and increase program accessibility for smaller communities. A modernized TIF program will facilitate transformative projects, address critical infrastructure needs, and stimulate economic growth in our downtowns, offering the state a significant return on investment.

Thank you for your time. I hope you consider my testimony.

Sincerely,
Arleigh Young
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