



TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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MEMORANDUM

TO: House General and Housing Committee
FROM: Chad Whitehead, Town Manager,
CC: Kresten Sterling, Code Compliance Officer
Date: February 20, 2026
RE: Landlord Tenant Hearings

The Town of St. Johnsbury has been working for 10 years to support improving the quality and quantity of our housing stock here in St. Johnsbury. As we developed our Code Compliance program, we met with several Landlords and Housing organizations. From our perspective, most of our Landlords are working to improve their properties. We have received several reports of significant revenue losses and unit availability due to poor tenants and illegal activity, which not only affects the unit where the activity occurs but also neighboring properties.

251 Portland Street is just one example of a property purchased as an investment that the property owner had to board up and has ultimately lost their entire investment, which was supposed to support their retirement.

This property is a two-unit apartment building purchased by a couple from Bradford in 2007. In September of 2023 our Code Compliance Officer inspected the building with the owners as they planned to completely renovate both apartments. In October of 2023, renovations were complete on the second-floor unit, and the landlord rented it to a tenant to generate income so they could begin renovating the first-floor unit. The tenant immediately failed to pay rent, and our Police Department began to receive complaints of drug activity. From January through December of 2024, our Police Department responded to 28 calls for service at this location.

The property owner was unable to complete renovations on the first-floor unit, and even though it was not compliant with building codes, squatters began occupying the space. The property owner began working with their attorney at the beginning of 2024 to get the upstairs tenants and the squatters removed from the building.

On December 13, 2024, Captain Jason Gray was shot twice by Scott Mason when responding to a call next door. Scott had been reported as being one of several squatters occupying the first floor of 251 Portland Street, and on December 15, 2024, he was captured in 251 Portland Street by Vermont State Police. Due to the drug activity and violence, Town officials notified First Responders that it was unsafe to enter this building without law enforcement.

On May 6, 2025, the property owner met with our Code Compliance Officer and me. She indicated that she was doing everything she could to remove the tenants and squatters. She reported that on multiple occasions, she was threatened with violence when she told people occupying the first floor that they had no right to be there.

July 25, 2025 The Town issued Emergency Health and Safety Orders, finding that multiple violations were caused by the tenants. The tenants were notified of the order and voluntarily vacated the building. Once the tenants and squatters vacated the building, the property owner hired a contractor to clean it out and board up all windows and doors, at a cost of \$7,000. The tenants and squatters had done significant damage to the building, including removing all wiring and plumbing, which was likely sold for scrap metal. The property is currently uninhabitable and remains vacant and blighted.

We respectfully request that the House Committee consider legislation that provides property owners with tools to address this type of situation, protecting their investments and helping communities like St. Johnsbury retain valuable housing stock.



Figure 1 251 Portland Street Front Door



Figure 2 251 Portland Street Unit 1



Figure 3 251 Portland Street unit 1



Figure 4 251 Portland Street unit 1