

Prospect Heights Memo

Josh Jerome

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Good morning, my name is Josh Jerome and I'm the Executive Director of Barre Area Development, Inc. We are a nonprofit economic development organization focused on promoting and supporting the economic development, attractiveness, and vitality of the Greater Barre area.

Over the last 15 years, I have worked for a number of organizations and municipalities in central Vermont in service to residents and business owners as a Loan Officer, Designated Downtown Director, Zoning Administrator, and Community and Economic Development Specialist.

No matter what community I was in, I have always approached my work with one goal in mind, do whatever I can to support the small businesses and residents working and living in and around our Downtowns and Village Centers as expressed in Vermont's development goals codified in 24 VSA 4302 – Vermont's Planning and Development Goals, and 24 VSA 2790 – Historic Downtown Development.

The proposed Prospect Heights housing project in Barre is in alignment with the State's development goals and represents a generational opportunity to increase the community's resilience. The proposed project is located on a 34-acre parcel nestled in between existing neighborhoods and mostly within the ½ mile planning buffer that surrounds the Designated Downtown Area. There is access to municipal water, wastewater and stormwater utilities and is within walking distance to downtown.

The original site plan created in 1991 called for the development of 128-units with a combination of 78 multi-family and 50 single-family lots. It represented the 3rd phase of a multi-phase project and received local approval in 1991. This project represents the largest housing project proposed in Barre City in over 35~ years.

Barre Area Development, the City of Barre and Prospect Heights Development, Inc., a separate stand-alone non-profit created for this project, revived this development plan in 2023 and has since worked to secure funding from Northern Borders Regional Commission, last year's Capital Bill and most recently, Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery funds from the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. Additional due diligence of the project has been undertaken, most importantly, wetland field survey.

As you can see from the slide, this parcel has two wetland areas mapped in the Vermont Significant Wetland Inventory layer with significant presence on the western side of the

parcel and a much smaller area to the northeast corner of the open meadow. Total wetland coverage is approximately 7 acres and under the proposed Wetland Rules Amendment, it is estimated that it would allow the development of 120 homes or quite possibly, the entire original planned development with minor alterations.

Last year the parcel was field surveyed for wetlands at the end of May. Class II wetlands were delineated at the proposed ingress/egress to the parcel and a significant portion of the open meadow. Our consultants who conducted the due diligence advised our project team that under the existing wetland rules (July 2025), a major redesign of the site would need to be advanced. Their best-case scenario was that we may be able to get 90 homes developed, but that was ambitious.

Why is it important to maximize development of this parcel?

There are several reasons. For starters, we've all heard about Vermont Housing Finance Agency's Housing Needs Assessment that indicated the need for 30,000-40,000 homes by 2030 or the Vermont Futures Project Economic Action Plan's goal of having 350,000 non-seasonal homes by 2035, an increase of 71,000 from the 2023 baseline. The only way we're going to achieve this level of growth is an all hands-on deck approach which includes regulatory streamlining.

Barre City has approximately 325 homes located in the floodplain which represent 8% of all homes in the City and during the 23' and 24' floods, approximately 300-400 homes experienced flooding. In the aftermath of the floods, 67 property owners asked the City for FEMA buyouts, but only 27 were approved. Why not all of them? The loss of grand list would put financial pressure on the remaining property owners and tenants who are already cost burdened with 29% of all households paying 30% or more of their income on housing. Maximizing development on this infill housing project could increase the grand list by \$20-\$30 million generating a significant amount of tax revenue to increase municipal services and lessen the financial burden on many households.

The American Planning Association supports a flexible approach to accomplishing Smart Growth because its principles can be applied to communities of all sizes, situations, and locations, and one approach does not fit all. Allowing housing development under the proposed Wetlands Rule Amendment is considered Smart Growth because it provides an incentivized level of predictability for developers in and around our Village and Urban Centers. This is where we want people to live as expressed by the General Assembly in 10 VSA 2790.

More housing in and around our downtowns and village centers means more people (more consumers) closer to our centers of commerce and our local businesses. And this is important because 56% of Designated Downtown communities saw decreases in retail sales between January 25' to January 26.' Maximizing housing development in and around

our Village and Urban Centers is supportive of our local businesses who are all competing against the likes of Amazon and big box stores.

For communities like Barre City where a significant amount of housing stock resides in the floodplain and over 50% of housing was built prior to 1940, maximizing development opportunities outside of the floodplain and within designated growth areas, increases community resiliency, and projects like Prospect Heights represent the type of infill housing that is identified in our Municipal Plan, Regional Plan and West Central Vermont CEDS. I urge you to concur with the proposed Wetland Rules Amendment to help strengthen our small businesses located in our Designated Areas and provide more affordable housing for those who are cost burdened.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Josh Jerome