

Testimony of

Gwen Bailey-Rowe, North Country Career Center, Director

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Rick Ufford- Chase, Newport City Downtown Development, Executive Director

Senate Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs Committee

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Senator Clarkson and Members of the Senate Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs; we would like to thank you for asking us to testify regarding the Revolving Loan Fund, Act 183, Sec 16. My name is Chris Damato, and I will be testifying on behalf of North Country Career Center in Newport, Vermont and this is Rick Ufford-Chase, Executive Director of Newport City Downtown Development, who will be part of this testimony. Please review the project made possible by the Vermont Community Loan Fund at North Country Career Center in Newport Vermont.

Project Background - North Country Career Center's story

In Spring of 2022, Representative Mike Marcotte, Chair of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development worked with stakeholders and legislators to creatively address two challenges that have been surfacing in Vermont: one, the lack of affordable housing, and two, supporting young Vermonters to enter a career in the trades.

Representative Marcotte consulted with Gwen Bailey-Rowe, the Director of North Country Career Center (NCCC) to learn whether the CTE center in his district and those around the state would be interested in accessing these funds to create live work for their students. CTE directors worked with Representative Marcotte and a committee to finalize language in Act 183, which passed through the House and the Senate, and was signed by Governor Scott on June 8, 2022.

In Act 183 Sec. 16 Representative Marcotte proposed funding for the "CTE Construction and Rehabilitation Experiential Learning Program and Revolving Loan Fund," the purposes of which are to:

- (1) expand the experiential and educational opportunities for high school and adult CTE students to work directly on construction projects;
- (2) build community partnerships among CTE centers, housing organizations, government, and private businesses;
- (3) beautify communities and rehabilitate buildings that are underperforming assets;
- (4) expand housing access to Vermonters in communities throughout the State; and
- (5) improve property values while teaching high school and adult students trade skills

With the passing of Act 183, Sec 16 North Country Career Center was eager to access the CTE Revolving Loan Fund, since our Building Trades students needed the opportunity to work on a real world construction project. There is no money in our local budget to purchase a property to renovate or land to build, so we knew our best option would be to partner with a non-profit entity to access this fund.

In March 2023 NCCC found a willing development partner in Rick Ufford-Chase, Executive Director of Newport City Downtown Development(NCDD). Rick reviewed the legislation, and agreed on a property that matched the original intent; close to the school, blighted property, good amount of land to renovate one home and build additional units of housing. This property had been abandoned for over 10 years and sits on the corner of a bustling intersection in downtown Newport.

NCDD and NCCC worked with Will Begonia of the Vermont Community Loan Fund (VCLF) to secure a loan of \$514,000 to purchase the property at 23 East Main St in Newport and plan for phase one of renovations and site preparation for phase two. Will and his team were very supportive during the process, recognizing how the results of this project will ultimately benefit CTE students and cities and towns like Newport, “We recognize the broader challenges Vermont faces. They’re often interconnected. Great jobs, access to housing, younger Vermonters’ ability to make a life here: we can identify the outcomes we want, but the challenge is in how we adapt, evolve and best apply our resources to get there. The new Career Technical Education program, promoting both workforce development and affordable housing, is an innovative approach leading to positive outcomes in both areas. The Loan Fund is glad to help make it happen!”

Since our closing on the property in August 2023, we have designed a plan that will create 3 - 4 units of housing on the one acre property. Students have been steadily working on the existing single family home, which we have taken as far as we can before it will be lifted by crane onto a permanent foundation that will be set back farther away from the main road towards the back of the property.. We are at the point in the project where we are finishing the work outlined in phase one, and are ready to return to VCLF to apply for funding for phase two, so we can complete 3 - 4 units of housing in the next three years.

At this time over 30 students have been involved in the renovation and building project at 23 East Main Street, including a cohort from Vermont Works for Women. We also employed four students, two high school and two adults, and their teacher to work on the property last summer for six weeks. We opened this employment opportunity up to the Vermont Works for Women cohort who were looking for more job experience and had one join us.

We are thrilled with the positive impact that this project has had on our school community and the community of Newport. This fund has been essentially in helping our students connect skills learned in the classroom with real world application. It has helped us increase interest and applicants to our Building Trades program and should result in more students being ready to enter the Vermont workforce in construction related trades.