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FEB 10 2017
TOWN MANAGER'S OFFICE

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February 7, 2015

Select Board for the Town of Norwich, Vermont
300 Main Street
Norwich, VT 05055

RE: Norwich Rezoning
AFFORDABLE HOUSING-A CLASS ISSUE

The following is an open letter to the Select Board and Planning Commission of Norwich, Norwich residents, Regional officials, and anyone else who is concerned.

A significant part of the problem with the proposed changes of its land planning regulations in Norwich is that the changes are based on class.

When word "work force" is used, one must understand it to refer to the working class. One should remember that the working class embraces not only so-called blue collar people, but also white collar professionals whose personal efforts earn them their incomes. The Working class very clearly includes the middle class which has been so effectively hollowed out by events of the last 15 or so years. In fact, the middle class should be considered synonymous with working class because, until the 1980's, the middle class was made up of the mix of predominantly blue collar workers, who, like machinists and auto workers, earned closed to the same levels of income as professionals. Most professionals do not earn much more that blue collar workers even today. What people may view as professional class today are actually people whose incomes are derived from dividends, interest, and rents, or capital gains - in other words, from the mere fact that they own property - and are more properly referred to as the rentier class or, in simpler vernacular, the investor class.

The proposed planning changes in Norwich are based on that distinction between the two classes of people. The changes are condescending, and treat the working class as people needing handouts, special treatment, and pity, which in some places is called charity, others, noblesse oblige.

In any case, such classist sentiments are invidious, and likely to lead to serious conflict, that could in the least bad case bring the Town to a standstill. Moreover, they serve to maintain the inequality of incomes that is status quo, and the cause of the lack of affordability in the first place.

Diversity and equality are, or should be, the basis for the decisions related to what Norwich characterizes as affordable housing. Diversity and equality are morally, ethically, philosophically, or religiously desirable in any healthy society. The reason Norwich should want to make housing available

to people and families with more restricted means than the majority presently living in the Town possess is because it is the right and good and healthy thing to do, not because of tax problems that the Town brought down upon itself, or because of dictates of political appointees that few if any of the townsfolk know or even heard of.

The people of Norwich should keep in mind that their tax problems are the product of their own decisions in the past. Everything from the expanded Marion Cross School in the late 1980's and Hanover High School's luxury appointments in the 2000's and its burgeoning administration, to the expensive per capita cost of education, to the expensive town government form (Town Manager, "professionalized" fire department, and unnecessary other sub-managers), unnecessary or overbuilt facilities, plans for privatization of the services, and numerous other examples that have increased the need for rising taxes, are all the responsibilities of those who supported them without concern for what those decisions would cost the Town's people in the future. Or perhaps, it should be said not without concern for what those decisions would cost in the future, but rather, because those decisions would increase the value of their makers homes for when they moved out of Norwich, leaving those remaining holding the bag. Affordable housing is a social, political, and philosophical issue. It is not a tax issue, and using it to resolve tax problems will undoubtedly lead to unnecessarily complex regulations with ambiguities, flaws, loopholes, and unintended consequences.

Sustainability and affordability can go hand in hand. Affordable farm and forestry land regulated in a manner that precludes sprawl and overdevelopment would provide sustainable small business opportunities to the purchasers of affordable land, in a manner that building so-called affordable housing would actually deter.

Sustainability is a catchword used as a reason for the proposed planning changes. But sustainability is a global concept. It can be applied to smallish regions, and that is how it tends to be implemented, but it requires its practitioners to be looking outward, toward the larger society. Sustainability, for instance in Vermont requires looking at environmental concerns, which entails looking at things like farming, forestry, and conservation for future generations. The State has more than enough people in it (the over-privileged investor class) who bring nothing to the State except a relatively small amounts of money relative to the benefits they demand of the State. Seldom do they keep and maintain large tracts of land, which are more manageable and environmentally sound and sustainable than small, subdivided parcels, for farming, forestry and conservation purposes.

People in the Upper Valley region must not lose sight of the difficulty of bringing business to the region, which is NOT due to lack of labor, but rather, to the lack of resources. The area is most appropriate for farming and forestry. Officials should get over the idea that more glamorous and remunerative businesses are going to move in and stay here. The very reason that some businesses come here at all at this point in time is that their principals enjoy the beauty of the region, and both the officials and principals of the businesses ignore the fact that as more of those businesses move in, the less beautiful the region becomes - not to mention, the more crowded, less livable it becomes.

In fact, if the officials in Norwich, and the other towns and region mean what they say about affordability and sustainability, they would understand and acknowledge that the proper and most environmentally sound places for businesses that would require a significant amount of permanent working class employees are in and around Windsor and Springfield, with their so-called brown field sites: sites of former businesses that have already been too disturbed by the former businesses to be used for farming or homes. It then follows that affordable housing for the working class would be near - that is, within walking or short commuting distance - such places of employment. The official faith that businesses should be located in places like Norwich or other towns with no brown fields puts the lie to statements that they want the land use regulations to foster sustainable and environmentally sound development. Rather, that official faith is in the development and permanent spoliation of untouched or regenerated land more suitable for farming, forestry, or conservation.

Which brings us to the rural nature of the region. The rural nature of the region is, from a human perspective, its reason for being. The rural nature of the region requires a level of attention to the relationship of population to land area, environmental and social conditions, use of the land, and so on. These are concerns that people drawn into a rural region from an urban or suburban region are generally not acclimated to, and sometimes do not even care about. In fact, it is the Land that is the very distinction between a rural region and an urban/suburban region.

Affordability is a complex problem, and incorporates much more than simplistic land regulations to solve. The reason housing, and numerous other things, like food, healthcare, and education, among others, are not affordable has everything to do with politics, cultural and religious beliefs, resources, race, employer attitudes, jobs themselves, markets, capitalism, inequality, taxes, and myriad other issues. Anyone who wants to deal with affordability must be at least conversant with some of the other issues that feed into the affordability or the un-affordability of any particular item or service. Keep in mind for instance, that food in the Upper Valley is also expensive for the working class, and the state provides food assistance only to those most impoverished. The working class generally do not qualify for much state assistance, and as a general rule, do not want it because they are working and are proud to make their own way.

Reports show that, nationally, 30% of all jobs are held by the self-employed and the workers they hire. (See: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/10/22/three-in-ten-u-s-jobs-are-held-by-the-self-employed-and-the-workers-they-hire/>), and since Vermont has one of the highest rates of self-employment, it is easy to see that Vermont has at least an equal, if not greater, rate of self-employment. Since family farming is generally thought of as a form of self-employment or small business, and tends to require at least a small number of employees for each farm, it stands to reason that since land is something Norwich has in reasonable abundance, that it has some control over the land, that it desires to encourage affordable housing, and that it could contribute to the increase in meaningful and remunerative self-employment and small business, Norwich, through its land planning, should do everything it can to induce or entice the establishment of family farms. Some measures the Town could take would be to provide tax breaks to those who promise to sell land in sufficient size parcels for farming, forestry, (50+ acres, not counting land that cannot be developed currently, such as wetlands

and steep slopes) at affordable prices to purchasers who promise to farm the land and not to subdivide the land or sell it to someone who would subdivide it.

Addressing affordability and sustainability in a different, and somewhat more complex manner, similar tax incentives could be provided to property owners who include an affordable rental dwelling or two on their residential property, with covenants in their deeds that would ensure the long term continuance of affordable rental units. It is possible that current state laws might stand in the way of implementing this and the above solutions to affordability, but because they more comprehensively deal with the affordability issue, tax issues, employment and wage issues, environmental and sustainability issues, among others, it would be worth working with the Legislature to obtain authority to implement these and/or other comprehensive solutions.

What various and sundry officials and powers that be would have us believe is that growth is inevitable so that we must bow before it, and that they can work out all the problems so that nothing goes wrong. That is utterly contrary and in conflict with a couple of simple truths we all learn at a young age: that nothing is perfect, and, that nothing lasts forever

Thank you considering this writing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ernie Ciccotelli', written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Ernie Ciccotelli