

**Pam Mullen**

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**From:** Phil Dechert  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 21, 2017 8:03 AM  
**To:** Pam Mullen  
**Subject:** FW: Valley News Letters, Editorial and Op ED  
**Attachments:** Valley News Seibert 6-10-17.pdf; Valley News Not in Norwich 5-28-17.pdf; Valley News Manasek 6-16-17.pdf

ITEM #5

Pam,  
Include with correspondence for Thursday PC Mtg  
Phil

Phil Dechert  
Director of Planning & Zoning  
Town of Norwich  
PO Box 376  
Norwich VT 05055  
802 649-1419 Ext. 4

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**From:** Stuart Richards [<mailto:srichards@globalrescue.com>]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, June 20, 2017 4:35 PM  
**To:** Phil Dechert; Herb Durfee  
**Subject:** Valley News Letters, Editorial and Op ED

Gentlemen:

Please make the attached part of the permanent Planning Commission and Selectboard files under correspondence and give the members of the Selectboard and Planning Commission copies of the attached.

Thank you,

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Stuart L. Richards, Senior Vice President  
Global Rescue LLC  
Ph: Direct 617-459-4199, Main 617-459-4200  
Fax: 858-712-1295  
<http://www.globalrescue.com>--

## FORUM

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN NORWICH

To The Editor:

Regarding the May 28 editorial "Not in Norwich":

The editorial noted that the Norwich Planning Commission has shelved the proposal to change the designation of zoning districts near the I-91 Hanover/Norwich exits to accommodate affordable housing, commercial development and high-density housing. Shelving, however, does not mean discarding and if such changes were in fact made the consequences would be predictable.

There is no disagreement about the need for affordable housing, but the editorial missed several important points. The question is how to address the problem without making the situation even worse for low- and middle-income families.

■ There are currently an estimated 50 rental apartments on the land under consideration to be changed from Rural/Residential to Mixed Use, which means Commercial/Residential. The affordable rental units would be the first to be displaced by more profitable enterprises.

■ Commercial development on the eastern edge of town would undermine the Norwich business district. Past planning commissions have worked hard to ensure that the core of our town is economically vibrant and merchants have responded to those efforts. Elsewhere, vacant village storefronts as a consequence of peripheral sprawl are a sad commentary on poor planning. The controversies surrounding proposed developments adjacent to I-89 in Randolph and Quechee have resulted in protracted and expensive legal battles. We do not need to repeat those scenarios.

■ The ongoing infrastructure costs for water, sewer and public services required to support development on a large scale would almost certainly result in higher property taxes, making the availability of affordable housing even more problematic. "Enfield Awaits Solutions as Planned Sewer Projects Stall" (*Valley News*, front page May 8), is a cautionary tale concerning pri-

vate development and the public burden.

To go forward, our community should explore a wide spectrum of creative approaches to affordable housing. Large tracts of consolidated units are not the answer for Norwich. In public hearings and forums, the overwhelming preponderance of testimony has been in opposition to that idea. The Norwich Planning Commission should abandon the concept of commercial development in Rural Residential zones. Their reluctance to do so has become a barrier to the adoption of an overdue, updated town plan and further delays begin to compromise our future.

DEAN SEIBERT  
Norwich

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# NOT IN NORWICH

5/28/17

## Affordable Housing Conundrum

IT'S HARDLY SURPRISING that the Norwich Planning Commission has, in the face of stiff opposition, shelved a proposal to promote affordable housing by creating a high-density zoning district along Route 5 South and River Road. Even in — perhaps especially in — affluent liberal strongholds such as Norwich, affordable housing is always popular until there is an actual threat that some might get built. In this case, advocates of the zoning change contended, among other things, that building affordable housing would promote economic diversity in Vermont's wealthiest community, where median family income is \$136,500 and the median value of owner-occupied homes is \$423,500. Besides that, they pointed out that affordable housing might well help repopulate the Marion Cross

School, where K-6 enrollment has declined over 20 years from 478 to 302. That in turn could drive down per-pupil spending and therefore the school tax rate. Opponents rounded up all the usual suspect arguments: that higher density development would ruin the rural character of the town and overburden town services, while driving up taxes; and that while affordable housing was desirable, the proposed zoning district was the wrong place for it.

For now, the Planning Commission is choosing to focus on

updating the town plan, which lapsed last year and now needs immediate attention. What is in many communities an exercise in tedium promises to be much livelier in Norwich, especially given the backdrop of the affordable housing/zoning debate. Town plans are intended to articulate the community's vision for land use and reaching consensus in this case would require reconciliation of some diametrically opposed views.

At a forum on the zoning amendment attended by about 70 residents back in February, Irv Thomae, a resident of Norwich for 25 years, said, "If we are losing people in the middle-income range because they can no longer afford the taxes in this town, this is diminishing all of us. I don't want to live in a museum where all I can see is beautiful houses." While we agreed with Thomae's sentiments, the bit about the museum seemed a little hyperbolic.

Many, if not most, people subscribe to the notion that change is in fact inevitable and that when something is not growing, it is withering away.

Until last week, that is, when staff writer Rob Wolfe reported the emailed comments of Ernie Ciccotelli, a critic of the zoning proposal who suggested that the new town plan should regard growth as "inherently incompatible with sustainability." In fact, he wrote, "Growth should not be assumed to be inevitable, and should be dealt with much more carefully than it is at the present time by the Town of Norwich, not only the boards and commissions, but also by the town's people."

This is remarkable in a couple of respects. We suspect that the idea of freezing in place the status quo is one that has surprisingly broad public appeal beneath the surface (and not only in Norwich), but is rarely articulated for fear of being branded reactionary. The practical effect in this case would be to make the town into the equivalent of a wealthy gated community. Enshrining such a view in an official town plan strikes us as a sharp departure from the norm, if not unique.

The second, and perhaps more interesting, aspect is the idea that growth is not something that happens organically but is rather a choice a community can make or refuse. Many, if not most, people subscribe to the notion that change is in fact inevitable and that when something is not growing, it is withering away. This view was expressed late last year in an interview with Wolfe by Anne Duncan Cooley, executive director of the Upper Valley Housing Coalition: "Change is coming, whether or not we do anything to shape it. . . . The status quo, although it's what we're used to, isn't necessarily the best for the future."

As is often the case in Norwich, this working out of the community will in a very public setting has implications for the entire Upper Valley.

### ABOUT THESE PAGES

The Opinion Pages of the *Valley News* are the sections of the paper devoted to editorials, commentary, letters and political cartoons. The editorials in the left-hand column express the opinions of the *Valley News*; all other features, including the cartoons, are chosen to present a broad range of views and express only the author's opinion.

We encourage our readers to write to the Forum to comment on matters of general public interest. We publish letters regardless of their politics, providing they are in good taste and address a subject of broad concern. To keep the Forum open to all, we request that you keep letters to about 350 words, and that you write no more often than once every two weeks. All letters are subject to editing.

# DON'T BLAME NORWICH FOR SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

FRANCIS J. MANASEK  
For the Valley News

6/16/17

THE *Valley News* editorial of May 28, "Not in Norwich," repeated, yet again, the old canard that affluent Norwich is selfish and disingenuous when it comes to "affordable" housing. However, there were several stunning omissions that change the entire story.

The editorial did not report that the Norwich Planning Commission, in public sessions, has said it wants to "significantly impact" a putative 5,000 housing unit deficit in the Upper Valley. The Planning Commission has decided that Norwich, a town of some 3,400, has an obligation to reduce this deficit to a significant degree. Furthermore, the commission said in its February presentation to the public that small, incremental, integrated "affordable" housing projects were not a good alternative to the massive developments that they were proposing because these didn't provide a significant impact on the 5,000-unit deficit.

The commission has ignored several constructive plans and suggestions in favor of its megadevelopment zoning proposal. Is it any wonder that residents are angry? The May 28 editorial ignored these facts and made light of the opposition, ignoring the true reasons for opposing this development.

Instead of developing a new Town Plan (the current one expired in December 2016), the commission worked for more than a year developing the enormous rezoning plan that would create a high-density mixed-use commercial corridor along Route 5, changing the zoning of some 350 acres, many of which already have private homes on them. This plan, permitting eight units per acre, could poten-

tially add hundreds of new houses to the town, 25 percent of which would be "affordable." At an average of 2.5 people per house, that could mean a population increase of 1,000 or more in a town whose current population is about 3,400! This isn't responsible incremental growth, and this is what people are objecting to. And the plan has an obligatory commercial development component. Even if one subtracts areas that are unbuildable, we would still be left with an overwhelming number of new houses and a huge population increase that would change the town of Norwich irrevocably. It would not restore some golden age of 40 years ago. Reason dictates that adding this number of houses in a high-density commercial mixed-use strip exceeds acceptable change anywhere, not just in Norwich. Suggest adding this many houses, people and commercial space to Thetford or Lyme or as a satellite community to Hanover or Lebanon and you would get the same response.

This isn't Norwich vs. "affordable" housing. This discussion should be about the appropriateness of size and scale, not about the desirability of "affordable" housing and diversity. Norwich has always supported this as evidenced by the Star Lake project, the 24 units of senior housing in town, and the change of zoning to facilitate about 28 affordable housing units at the former ABC Dairy.

Environmental concerns are perfectly valid and

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must be considered. Under certain circumstances, it is quite possible that the proposed development would be exempt from Vermont's land-transfer tax and that Act 250 might not apply. This would permit serious environmental damage while generating large profits for land speculators and builders.

The siren's song of growth has caused miserable sprawl throughout much of New England, including parts of Vermont. Do we really want to sacrifice Norwich's (or any other town's) greenbelt and replace it with a development like so many others that have irrevocably damaged other small towns? It would be such a shame to lose Norwich's core downtown and core village center and its very essence of small-town Vermont to mega commercial and residential development outside

the core center.

Many studies show that residential development in rural communities around the country costs municipalities more in services than it pays in taxes, while working lands and open space pay more than they require in services. One such study, using the methodology developed by the American Farmland Trust, was completed for Norwich based on the town's 2007 grand list and actual Fiscal Year 2007 budget. Another study was done by the Vermont Land Trust showing much the same. In addition, the negative effects of the commercial development that the planning

commission wants to promote are also highlighted in a Vermont Trust study and the Norwich Town Plan.

Those who call for change the loudest should realize that Norwich and every other town in the region has been changing over the decades and continues to change. They cannot stop demographic reality, turn the clock back 20 or 30 years and recreate a long-gone social environment. Even extreme proposals that have the potential to double a town's size won't restore yesterday. Trying to resurrect a changed demographic is not positive change, it's regressive (and impossible). It is also wrong to equate a changing town with a gated town. Find a community anywhere that doesn't have some sort of "gate" in place. Not everyone is envious of Norwich and most live elsewhere by choice.

It is time to stop name-calling and finger-pointing at Norwich whenever the question of "affordable" housing or income inequality arises. Norwich is not responsible for any housing shortage, real or imagined. Housing in Norwich is not cheap, but it isn't cheap in Hanover, Lyme, Thetford or many other communities. Norwich is not located conveniently to where the jobs are, such as Dartmouth, Centerra or the medical campus. Traffic in and out of Norwich must cross the Ledyard Bridge. One must question the wisdom and environmental impact of adding another several hundred cars to that corridor.

The world, including the Upper Valley, has changed and blaming Norwich or trying to reverse social change with large developments will not reverse progress or bring back yesterday.

*Francis J. Manasek lives in Norwich.*