

## **Housing Committee Meeting Minutes: 12:30 pm June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 via Zoom**

**Attendees:** Joe K., PJ, Alice, Alicia, Patrick, Irene, Al Dunn,

*Committee Mission: "To support economic growth by improving the overall quality of residential and commercial properties in St. Johnsbury."*

### **Northern Forest Center Meeting Update RE: Workforce Housing (Joe & Irene)**

The Northern Forest Center (NFC) Board of Directors meeting was held in St. Johnsbury on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Joe K. joined the meeting to provide town history and report on economic development initiatives. Joe K. led a tour of priority properties within the Main St./Eastern Ave./Railroad St. corridors. The NFC is considering a workforce housing project in downtown St. Johnsbury. The NFC recently hired Evan Oleson to coordinate NEK efforts on behalf of the NFC.

### **RHIGP Update: (Joe & PJ)**

The RHIGP Review committee is reviewing the final applications and will present their recommendations for funding to the Select Board at the June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021 meeting. Joe reported that there was more activity for this round than previous rounds and the connection to Universal Design is still confusing applicants. Ideas to improve the program include standardized budget templates and the possibility of expanding the funding criteria beyond Universal Design.

Joe notified the group that the 2020 RHIGP has been closed out.

### **Vermont Draft Recovery Housing Program Action Plan (RHP)- (All)**

Susan Cherry took the lead on drafting comments for the state's Recovery Housing program Action Plan. Susan solicited feedback from committee members. (thank you, Susan!). These comments were submitted on behalf of the St. Johnsbury Housing Committee see attached).

### **Other Business:**

- **Happy 84<sup>th</sup> Birthday Al Dunn!**

**Meeting adjourned at 1:30pm. Minutes submitted by JK.**

**The next meeting is scheduled for July 09<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at 12:30 pm via Zoom**

The St. Johnsbury Housing Committee was formed following a 2015 Council on Rural Development set of Community Visits in St. Johnsbury. One of the five priorities was to look at housing as a force of economic development. Many people participated in the initial conversations around housing and interested residents looked at various models in other Vermont communities. As a result, we commissioned a housing needs assessment in December of 2016. This needs assessment studied market conditions, projected changes and influencers to future housing needs. The goals were to better understand the Town's evolving housing market, modify or expand Town housing policies, and enhance and/or expand the Town's housing market to meet current and future housing needs. (Bowen National Research, 2016). In particular, and related to the Recovery Housing Program's goals, this statement of need comes from their research:

**“Special Needs Housing (II-8)** – While many special needs groups were evaluated in the market and each, to some degree, had insufficient housing to meet the needs of these groups, it was determined that the greatest need appears to be for persons with disabilities, adults with mental illness, victims of domestic violence and persons experiencing substance abuse issues. Housing policies and priorities should consider some level of implementation of the development of housing that serves these special needs populations, as well as others.”

The Housing committee has the following comments which connect with our purpose and reflect the issues pertinent to St. Johnsbury. Concerning the goals of Vermont's Recovery Housing Program:

1. Levels 1, 2, & 3 Recovery Residences certified by VTARR.
  - a. The Committee understands that this is a fairly recent certification and support the work of VTARR in the benchmarks and standards that have been developed.
2. Individualized Units that meet AHS-DOC standards.
  - a. The DOC standards are geared toward more individualized needs and specify consideration of the “Theory of Change” in all housing models. The Community Restorative Justice Center Director is a member of this committee and recently received the grant to work with DOC in the implementation of these standards.
  - b. Page ix of the needs assessment (3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph) notes the financial risk associated with a substantial renovation of a single-family home to convert it to a recovery residence. The strategy of modifying the RR model to allow separate apartments within existing multi-family buildings is noted in bullet 6 on this page. This strategy would also address the need for improved rental housing in town across the board, and if the units no longer functioned as RRs, they would be open to any tenant without the need for modification. This committee would like to voice support for individualized units that meet individualized needs rather than a formula for congregate facilities and suggest the scoring criteria on page 16 of the Action Plan reflect this.
  - c. It is very difficult to convert these properties to a new use if program funding is discontinued. The need is great and the recommendation to move away from congregate facilities to more individual units is easier for a developer to adapt.
3. Creation of Recovery Residences in service HUB areas where none exist.
  - a. This is agreeable to the committee as long as public transportation is also available.
  - b. The Housing Committee would like to suggest that the placement of any new RRs take into consideration the context of the neighborhood to avoid exacerbating concentrations of poverty, and have this policy reflected in the scoring criteria. Although page 29 of the needs assessment highlights the financial benefit of developing new RRs in depressed areas based on the cost savings of acquiring or leasing housing in low-income districts, this practice may further concentrate poverty in downtown neighborhoods and may be at odds with the St. Johnsbury Housing Committee's objective to raise the value of rental properties to increase developer confidence in building additional high-quality market rate units in the downtown.
4. Recovery Residences with priority given to parents with children.
  - a. Many families are housed in local motels when housing options are not available.

- b. The table on page 25 of Development Cycles needs assessment (Appendix A of the Action Plan) lists only 6 recovery residence beds for men in St. Johnsbury and none for women. In addition to the Recovery Residence on Elm Street, the Covered Bridge provides recovery services (Christian centered) and the newly opened FIRST House (Families in recovery staying together) on Railroad Street is currently seeking applicants. This house provides four rooms and services for women who have completed rehabilitation and are expecting or reuniting with their children is not currently listed. It has project-based rental assistance for all four units so that when someone moves from the program after spending at least a year there (occupancy is anticipated to run 18 months to two years), they will be able to take with them a rental subsidy voucher.
5. Recovery Residences that include programs that have wrap around services for long-term recovery that are onsite or in the vicinity of the home.
  - a. St. Johnsbury's VFOR house does work closely with the Kingdom Recovery Center.
6. Individuals will transition to permanent independent housing within two years of entry to the Recovery Residences.
  - a. Although we recognize that people need self-motivation in order to accomplish this, the housing committee acknowledges that we have identified the need for more diversity in our housing stock. Providing options in the community is achieved through collaboration of many agencies and the town.
  - b. Page 24 of the needs assessment notes that affordability of housing for residents in recovery was a more significant problem than the gap in housing services. The payment of lease, rent and utilities to LMI residents in recovery is an eligible activity for grant funding listed on page 14, provided it doesn't exceed two years, after which the resident is expected to find permanent housing. Based on this information the housing committee would like to suggest the scoring criteria give greater weight to increased payment assistance to residents of existing recovery residences.
  - c. The creation of additional high-quality rental units, accompanied by increased access to housing choice vouchers for income-eligible tenants, would serve both the St. Johnsbury Housing Committee's objective to increase the quantity and quality of rental units and the need expressed in the study for affordable and appropriate housing options for those transitioning to permanent housing. While the criteria on page 15 states that the project must serve Low- and Moderate- Income Limited Clientele, it is unclear how long the units created/renovated must be income-restricted. The Housing Committee recommends against the placement of permanent easements on new or renovated RR housing units that restrict the income of tenants in perpetuity, and support better access to Housing Choice vouchers which should be able to be used in any market-rate rental unit in accordance with Vermont's fair housing provisions (9 V.S.A. § 4503).