

There have been several posts in recent days about the planning project related to the 1705 VT Route 128 property. This post is meant to clear up several incorrect statements made about the project and to address concerns raised about the redevelopment of the site.

- **Planning Project** – The current project to plan the redevelopment of the 1705 VT Route 128 property (Pigeon Property) is funded by the Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP). This project is focused on developing a preferred redevelopment site plan in cooperation with the Town of Westford and our project partners (Vermont River Conservancy, Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity, and Champlain Housing Trust).

The planning project began in the summer of 2021. SE Group has been hired as our project consultant. SE Group has spent the early fall developing “alternatives” for site redevelopment. This is a process of developing different concepts for redevelopment to frame a community discussion and build consensus towards a “preferred alternative.”

SE Group will be unveiling “alternatives” at a public meeting on Tuesday, November 9<sup>th</sup>. Our hope is that the meeting will provide a time to hear constructive community feedback that our project team can incorporate into our future planning and development of a “preferred alternative.”

- **Property Acquisition** – It is anticipated that the Vermont River Conservancy will be the entity that completes the future purchase the property. Acquisition costs will be funded through a combination of grant funding and money fundraised by the Vermont River Conservancy. The Town of Westford does not anticipate contributing any funding to the acquisition of the property.

Once the property is acquired, the property will be subdivided and sold to other project partners. The details of how subdivision will occur and what parties are interested in obtaining lots is still to be determined. Decisions about subdivision and how the land will be developed will be made as a part of our current VCDP Planning Grant Project.

While the details are not finalized, it is anticipated that part of the property would be sold by the Vermont River Conservancy to the other project partners (Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity, Champlain Housing Trust, and/or the Town of Westford). It is anticipated that these property sales to project partners will be completed for \$1. The Vermont River Conservancy will retain an easement adjacent to the Browns River for a publicly accessible river access.

It is also possible that some of the property is sold to a private entity. It is anticipated that any sale of property to a private citizen would not be subsidized.

- **Affordable Housing** – Two project partners (Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity and Champlain Housing Trust) were invited to participate in our project because of their expertise developing affordable housing in northern Vermont. Both organizations are community-oriented and combined have over 60 years of expertise developing housing for low- and moderate-income households. Champlain Housing Trust is the largest community housing trust

in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Our partners are experts regarding the viability of developing affordable housing in communities both urban and rural.

In our initial conversations with these organizations, we asked specifically about the viability of an affordable housing project in Westford. Both organizations confirmed that affordable housing in Westford is viable and committed to help our Town explore what type of affordable housing model would best fit in Westford. Through conversations this past summer and fall, our project partners have determined that a homeownership model for affordable housing is likely the best fit for Westford.

There are two possible ways that a homeownership model for affordable housing could work within our current project. The exact method will be determined at a later date. The decision will be based on continued interest of our partners in the project and their ability to access funding to pay for design and construction. Here are the two affordable ownership methods under consideration:

1. Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity ( <https://vermonthabitat.org/about/> ) could construct the housing and sell the housing directly to qualifying families. Future homeowners build the housing alongside volunteers and “pay an affordable mortgage and other expenses that come with owning a home.”
2. Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity could construct the housing and sell the housing to Champlain Housing Trust. Champlain Housing Trust would then enroll the housing into their Shared Equity Program ( <https://www.getahome.org/homes/> ). Under this program, qualifying low- and moderate-income homeowners can purchase a home from Champlain Housing Trust and have their closing costs completed covered. When the homeowner decides to sell the property in the future, they are required to sell the home back to Champlain Housing Trust. The homeowner gains any equity they’ve put into home (through a mortgage) plus a percentage of the additional equity gained through real estate appreciation. Champlain Housing Trust also keep a percentage of the equity gained through appreciation which is then used to cover the closing costs of the next homeowner. Champlain Housing Trust then sells the home to a new qualified low- and moderate-income buyer under the same conditions. This enables the housing to remain perpetually affordable.

Development of housing in Westford for all income levels is a long-held goal of the Westford Town Plan. New housing will generate new property tax revenue and can benefit existing residents of Westford by providing the opportunity to buy an affordable home in Westford.

- **Design** – Any structures built on the 1705 VT Route 128 property will be required to comply with the Westford Form-Based Code. The Form-Based Code was developed over the course of several years with substantial public input. The rules within the code have been specifically

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-29/alternative-homeownership-land-trusts-and-co-ops>

written to ensure that new development in Westford's village center conforms to existing character of the area. This will ensure that new structures will be appropriately scaled and designed to fit in the village. The current planning project will not determine the specific design of any future structure on the 1705 VT Route 128 property due to the limited project funding. Future design of structures will be completed by future housing developers. If those developers are Champlain Housing Trust and/or Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity, the Town has confidence that future design will comply with form-based code.

- **Thank You** – It is important to thank the Pigeon Family Trust, especially George Pigeon, for their patience, perseverance, and civic-minded decisions. The Pigeon Family Trust willingness to partner on this project has been integral and will enable the development of a cornerstone property that meets the community's vision established in the Town Plan.