

## 1705 RTE 128 PROJECT UPDATES – PROJECT PARTNERS

The Planning Commission would like to comment on several recent front porch forum posts regarding the 1705 VT Route 128 property and the avenues the Planning Commission is exploring to leverage that property for the benefit of the Town. Over the course of the next several weeks and months the Planning Commission will provide additional information to the community about the process and progress of our efforts. There will be ample opportunity for public comments and critique as the process slowly moves forward. To be clear, the project is only in its concept phase at this time. Refinements and changes based on public input will occur before any particular plan moves forward.

At this time, it may be helpful to take a step back from the misunderstanding a few people in the community have about this project and identify and describe the other organizations the Town is working with and how they can help create a space that benefits the Town and the Common, and is something the community has a say in helping to create.

The Town is currently working with three organizations whose work is focused on helping communities find and build community spaces and housing. The three organizations are the Vermont River Conservancy (VRC); Champlain Housing Trust (CHT); and Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity (GMHfH). We are working with these particular organizations because they can help secure funding for housing, recreational, and civic uses without the Town having to use taxpayer money.

The Vermont River Conservancy was founded in 1995 with the initial goal of protecting public access to Vermont swimming holes. Over the past 25 years the scope of VRC's work has expanded to address climate change impacts by conserving and restoring critical floodplains and conserving "river corridors" through conservation easements with willing landowners to allow rivers to freely meander and reduce sedimentation. VRC also works closely with partnering organizations to remove "deadbeat" dams that no longer serve an economic function but impede fish passage and fragment aquatic habitat. VRC works closely with members of the communities where its conservation projects are located to best restore the connections between ourselves and our rivers.

The Vermont River Conservancy has been fully supportive of the Town's community effort to enhance the Westford Common by considering options for public access to the Browns River and appropriately scaled affordable housing. This project fits well with VRC's mission to conserve important lands along Vermont's rivers.

VRC is in discussions with the landowner to purchase the property. Those discussions have not yet resulted in a purchase agreement. If those discussions result in a sale of the property, VRC will establish permanent public river access to the Brown's River and then deed a parcel of the property to Champlain Housing Trust (CHT) for \$1.00 and a parcel to the Town for \$1.00. The Town can use its parcel for civic purposes such as a new Town Office. CHT will use its parcel to create affordable housing units that will be sold to individuals and families. VRC obtains its funding for such projects from a number of organizations, including the Vermont Housing & Conservation District.

Champlain Housing Trust is a community land trust that supports the people of Northwest Vermont and strengthens their communities through the development and stewardship of permanently affordable homes. Founded in 1984, it is the largest community land trust in the country. CHT owns and manages approximately 2,500 permanently affordable apartments, stewards 640 shared equity homes (which have served over 1,100 families), operates a revolving loan fund that provides affordable home repair loans and project management to low-income Vermonters, and runs a statewide manufactured home replacement program.

CHT also offers homebuyer education, pre-home purchase counseling, financial literacy education and mentoring, foreclosure and delinquency intervention services, and an eviction prevention program. Its 130 staff members serve the communities of Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle counties in Vermont.

Champlain Housing Trust is looking forward to partnering with the Town of Westford, Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity, The Vermont River Conservancy and others in the Town on the proposed project to provide public access to the Browns River and to create size appropriate affordable housing in Westford.

Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity (GMHfH) has been building safe and perpetually affordable homes for local working families in Chittenden County since 1984. The homes they build, made possible by financial donors and volunteers, are purchased by families for the cost to build the homes.

There has been a lot of discussion about the need for “affordable housing”, but people may wonder what that means. Affordable housing is generally defined as housing for which the occupant is paying no more than 30 percent of gross income for housing costs. GMHfH builds homes for ownership, where the family buys the home and begins to build equity. Currently, GMHfH built homes cost about \$160,000 to build but appraise for \$225,000 to \$300,000, and typically have a \$900 monthly payment for mortgage, homeowners’ insurance and property taxes.

Homes built by GMHfH are guaranteed to be permanently affordable through its partnership with the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. The requirement for permanent affordability is written in the deed and remains with each home each time it is sold.

More information about Vermont River Conservancy can be found at:

[www.vermontriverconservancy.org](http://www.vermontriverconservancy.org)

More information about Champlain Housing Trust can be found at:

[www.getahome.org](http://www.getahome.org)

More information about Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity can be found at:

[www.vermonthabitat.org](http://www.vermonthabitat.org)