

1st Quarter Newsletter

Better(not bigger)Vermont



What We've Been Up To

Both an article and a "Celebrate Lower Birthrates and Less Consumption" ad were published in Green Energy Times (p. 27 in

www.greenenergytimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GET_Jan-2021_pp.1-40_v4.pdf). The author, Wolfger Schneider, is our Board President.

You may also have seen this VTDigger commentary by George Plumb, BnbVT's founder and current Treasurer...

<https://vtdigger.org/2021/01/29/plumb-population-growth-is-driving-some-of-the-worlds-most-serious-problems/>.

Speaking of VTDigger, we were thrilled to see this commentary by Will Patten...

<https://vtdigger.org/2021/01/04/will-patten-we-must-subscribe-to-no-growth-capitalism/>. We have connected with Will and are exploring ways in which BnbVT and Will can collaborate.

VTDigger tells us that they will publish another BnbVT commentary this week, but we want to share it with you now (see below). This commentary concerns legislation introduced in the Vermont General Assembly that would allow cities and towns throughout Vermont to subsidize real estate development projects – in other words, corporate welfare for developers. The Senate Committee on

Economic Development is already working on bill S.33 (<https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2022/S.33>). So if your Senator sits on this Committee, now is the time to contact him or her and voice your opinion about S.33. Senators on the Senate Committee on Economic Development are...

Michael Sirotkin (Chittenden), msirotkin@leg.state.vt.us
Alison Clarkson (Windsor), AClarkson@leg.state.vt.us
Becca Balint (Windham), bbalint@leg.state.vt.us
Randy Brock (Franklin), rbrock@leg.state.vt.us
Kesha Ram (Chittenden), kram@leg.state.vt.us

H.129 is the House's companion bill for S.33. The House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development will consider H.129 (<https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2022/H.129>), so if your Representative sits on this Committee, now is the time to contact him or her and voice your opinion about H.129. Representatives on the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development are...

Michael Marcotte (Orleans), mmarcotte@leg.state.vt.us
Charles Kimbell (Windsor), CKimbell@leg.state.vt.us
Stephanie Jerome (Rutland), sjerome@leg.state.vt.us
Eileen Dickinson (Franklin), edickinson@leg.state.vt.us
Warren Kitzmiller (Washington), wkitzmiller@leg.state.vt.us
Paul Martin (Franklin), pmartin@leg.state.vt.us
Emma Mulvaney-Stanak (Chittenden), emulvaneystanak@leg.state.vt.us
Logan Nicoll (Rutland-Windsor), lnicoll@leg.state.vt.us
Michael Nigro (Bennington), mnigro@leg.state.vt.us
Patrick Seymour (Caledonia), pseymour@leg.state.vt.us
Kirk White (Windsor-Rutland), kwhite@leg.state.vt.us

Here is our VTDigger commentary about these bills...

Two companion bills introduced in the General Assembly, H.129 and S.33, "An act relating to project-based tax increment financing districts," deserve close scrutiny by the public.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) may be an effective tool for the development of brownfield properties within urban communities. A brownfield is a "blighted" lot

which has been contaminated by hazardous substances thereby making it a financially risky location for new construction. Unfortunately, characterizing an area as “blighted” may be a pro forma exercise, since specialized consultants can be hired to create the needed evidence in most cases; however, this problem may be overcome by limiting the determination of whether a property is “blighted” (or not) up to government entities which are qualified to perform such assessments. An example of such entities might be the Act 250 District Commissions.

Vermont already has statutory processes for creating TIF districts in urban centers, and a number of cities already use them (Barre City, Bennington, Burlington, Hartford, Milton Town Core, Montpelier, South Burlington, St. Albans City, Winooski). A Vermont TIF is paid back by extra tax revenues that the real estate investment would HOPEFULLY generate without cannibalizing commercial or residential tax revenues from properties outside the TIF district. In addition, any development, irrespective of whether it is subsidized by a TIF, will likely increase the demand for taxpayer-funded infrastructure, personnel and public services – roads, sidewalks, water, sewer, transportation, snow removal, schools, teachers, recreation, public safety, fire protection, etc. The additional tax revenues from a TIF rarely cover all of these increased costs and the owners/residents/businesses outside a TIF district are forced to pay more to make up the difference. A good investigation into the problems with TIFs was done for this report...

<https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/articles/tax-increment-financing>.

H.129 and S.33 define 'brownfields' as "... an area in which a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant is or may be present..." [emphasis is mine]. The way H.129 is currently written, a developer could claim that just about anything is a brownfield.

H.129 and S.33 specify three other situations for which TIFs might be used...

- The development includes new or rehabilitated affordable housing, as defined in 24 V.S.A. §4303.
- The development will include at least one entirely new business or business operation or expansion of an existing business within the project, and this business will provide new, quality, full-time jobs that meet or exceed the prevailing wage for the region as reported by the Department of Labor.

- The development will enhance transportation by creating improved traffic patterns and flow or creating or improving public transportation systems.

These are all legitimate goals for public investment. But would it not be greatly preferred to target public investment towards just these important objectives, rather than use scarce public resources to subsidize large developments within which one of these objectives is just a small piece? Better yet, require that these objectives be a part of any and all development projects whether they enjoy TIF subsidization or not.

In summary, except for reclamation of brownfields, using TIFs for other purposes is nothing but taxpayer-funded corporate welfare for developers. Currently, many Vermont residents are in urgent need of effective social services. Does the government really want to be a Robin Hood in reverse - i.e., take from the poor and give to the rich?

I have seen the injurious misuse of TIFs in other states. We don't need legislation to expand the use of TIFs throughout Vermont.

Hopefully, Vermont will protect itself and eschew widespread use of TIFs, except in cases where taxpayers in urban centers can cost-effectively extract value out of true brownfields.

From Our Executive Director

I resonate strongly with Native American beliefs concerning the connection between humans and the rest of life on our planet. The expression “mitakuye oyasin” declares that “we are all related”, which is indeed true. Native Americans take it further and believe that we are also related to the waters, the stones, etc. In essence, everything in our world is alive and related to us.

I want to share an excerpt from Sherri Mitchell's book *Sacred Instructions*. Sherri is a Penobscot (Maine) and has done incredible work (<https://sacredinstructions.life/about/>).

“There is a character in Wabanaki mythology named Kiwawk, the Cannibal Giant. He is also known to other Native cultures, though they call him by different names. To several of the plains tribes he is known as Wetiko. The Ojibwe call him Wendigo. He is a cannibalistic

spirit that feeds on greed, excess, and unchecked consumption. Kiwawk resides deep in the forest, insulated from the disturbances of the outer world. He remains there, peacefully asleep, until the cries of the Earth Mother awaken him. Kiwawk has only one task: to protect the Earth Mother from being destroyed by mankind. Once he is awakened, he infects mankind with a spiritual illness, an illness that affects the mind and leads to a suicidal path of endless consumption.

The Earth Mother calls to Kiwawk when the people of the Earth begin consuming faster than she can produce, and when she is being damaged faster than she can heal. Kiwawk lulls humanity into a trancelike dance of mindless consumption. Then he quickens the pace until our dance becomes frenzied, eventually dancing us to our destruction. He does this so that the Earth Mother can heal and renew herself. Our elders tell us that Kiwawk is awake and humanity is infected by his disease. If left unchecked, this illness will destroy all human life. There is only one way for us to stop this dance with Kiwawk and put him back to sleep, and that is for us to wake up.

Our stories tell us that humanity has reached this point several times before. We are told that we are living in the fourth world. Four times we have reached the point of destruction, and four times we have failed to reverse our course. We are now facing the same crossroad that we have faced in the past – will we dance ourselves to our death or will we end our destructive movement and walk back toward survival? The choice is ours to make.”¹

1. Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions*, North Atlantic Books, pp. 47-48 © 2018

I believe that BnbVT’s mission is closely connected with Shelli’s powerful message - we are committed to “wake up!” Vermonters. We appreciate your help with this work.

With an Open Heart

Bob Fireovid

How You Can Help

Better(not bigger)Vermont works to improve the lives and natural surroundings of present and future Vermonters. Please support our efforts by making a donation and/or forwarding this newsletter to others.

Thank You!

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