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Better(not bigger)Vermont



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In this Issue

- ***What do we want Vermont's housing to look like?***
 - ***Vermont's birth dearth and peak energy***
 - ***UVM continuing education seminar on degrowth!***
-

What do we want Vermont's housing to look like?

by Bruce Post

Vermont is engaged in a fundamental debate about housing, environmental protection and what our future will look like. To date, the loudest voices have been those who argue that Vermont has a housing crisis and must "build, build, build" its way out of it. Such voices include Sen. Kesha Ram Hinsdale,

Kevin Chu of the Vermont Futures Project, and Miro Weinberger of Let's Build Homes.

As reported in [an April 28th article in Seven Days](#), UVM professor Joe Ament called out these assumptions in his study of trends in Burlington, which has had a robust real estate market. The study concludes that building more housing will not necessarily make housing more affordable. Dr. Ament argues that "rising house prices are not a function of lack of supply, but rather an increase in demand, namely from investors and individuals with large down payments."

[In testimony before the House General and Housing Committee on May 7th](#), Professor Ament laid out his research and conclusions, illustrating that housing is a complex, multi-layered issue that does not lend itself to slogans and rhetoric. If Vermont does not get it right, he warned, the rush to build more housing could indeed have long-standing and negative consequences for Vermont and Vermonters. At the end of his testimony, Committee chair and former Dean of Vermont Law School, Marc Mihaly, asked Ament about these long-term effects. Here is a transcript of that conversation...

Chairman Mihaly

When my generation dies, I mean, I don't mean ages into, you know, one-bedroom units. I mean, it's gone. My generation is gone. In 20 years, what's the state going to look like from a housing perspective? Have you thought about that? If you haven't, don't bother with my question.

Joe Ament

I've thought about it a ton, and this is where it goes into, I think, the opinion space. But this is where I believe there are individuals who see Vermont in different ways. I just chatted with a student yesterday who's doing some research for me, and he said he thinks all of Burlington should be brownstones like Brooklyn. I chatted with a person who said he was 80 last week and said we should have 29,000 houses on the waterfront in Burlington. There are different visions for what this state looks like. If you speak to a generational Vermonter, a working landscape is really important. I think there are ways we can address the needs of the future in ways that make everyone happy. What I do fear is if you look around the development you see, it is, in my opinion, ugly because it's been built fast. And I don't think it will be something that people will enjoy seeing in 20 years. And that's another piece that I raise in my paper, is that if we don't engage with population dynamics and pricing pressures and supply, in a way that works for everyone, the reason people come to Vermont in the first place might be gone. And then we'll have a larger exodus because why would you withstand the cold to live in an ugly place? Right. Right now, we love living here because it's beautiful and we deal with the cold. That's an opinion that I have. I love the Vermont working landscape. I love Burlington being low rise and a lot of trees. And I think that if we're not smart about building, it could look like a lot of gray squares, which is what we see going up in Dallas and San Francisco and Miami and along the Jersey Shore. And everywhere you look where they've decided to build, there is massive pushback on what those places look like.

Wages are not keeping up with the increasing cost of everything

In response to an [April 29th article in Seven Days](#) about the low birthrates in Vermont, Robert Fireovid of Better(not bigger)Vermont responded with this letter-to-the-editor, which [Seven Days published on May 13th...](#)

The excellent “Baby Bust” article correctly identifies the increasing monetary costs associated with raising children as a major reason Vermonters are having fewer children. Unfortunately, there’s not much that Vermonters can do about these increasing costs. It’s a matter of simple economics. As the *Seven Days* article states, developers can’t profitably build affordable housing because the rising cost of building such homes exceeds what low-income buyers can afford.

Costs are high because fossil fuels — the natural resources powering our economy — have entered a period of increasing scarcity. Peak oil, peak coal and peak gas are all real. The prices for these energy resources go up as required by supply-and-demand curves. And renewable energy cannot cover the shortfall in supply at an equivalent cost. This is especially true in Vermont, with its cold and cloudy winters.

Furthermore, as energy gets expensive, everything else gets expensive. And, although all of North America is experiencing a housing crisis, it’s more acute in places like Vermont, where difficult weather and geography, paired with a dearth of industrial infrastructure (e.g., cargo ports), increase costs.

People talk about nuclear energy, but that's not cheap either, and the supply of uranium is becoming increasingly limited.

Many economists, geologists, physicists, biologists and systems analysts are telling us that the human enterprise will, by necessity, shrink. The term is “degrowth,” and it's what Vermont should be planning for. Google “degrowth” and learn more.

[UVM seminar on Degrowth](#)

Speaking of degrowth, On June 4th UVM's OLLI (the Osher Life Long Learning Institute) is holding a seminar on degrowth in Shelburne. OLLI seminars are open to OLLI members; and the membership fee is \$15 per semester. Here's OLLI's description of the seminar...

The Environmental Impact of the Economy, and Degrowth as an Alternative

Lead by Juliana Neira

June 4 from 1:30 to 3

St. Catherine of Siena Church Hall

How do everyday economic systems shape our environment—and what alternatives exist? This thought-provoking program examines the environmental costs of growth and introduces “degrowth” as a pathway toward a more sustainable future.

Register at [OLLI - UVM Professional and Continuing Education](#)

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**BnbVT
PO Box 70
South Hero, VT 05486**