

## **Program has proven equal to difficult task**

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One of the difficulties successful government programs face is that over time their benefits are taken for granted.

That is what the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund is up against as it continues its dual mission of conserving open land and developing affordable housing for Vermonters.

The scarcity of affordable housing has received a good deal of attention lately, particularly since Gov. James Douglas made affordable housing part of his affordability agenda. He has offered a variety of proposals to remove obstacles from the path of new development as a way to ease the housing crunch and bring the cost of housing within reach of more Vermonters.

Meanwhile, the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund has been working at that exact task for 20 years. As the state program celebrates its 20th anniversary, officials with the fund are hoping to remind Vermonters of the contributions they have made in housing and land conservation.

The record is impressive. The Housing and Conservation Board has invested \$200 million over 20 years, which has leveraged another \$750 million in investment from public and private sources — nearly a billion dollars invested in Vermont housing and land conservation.

Gus Seelig, executive director of the board, stresses that the program has been innovative in part because of the way it has combined a focus on land conservation and housing development. Board members come from the worlds of business, finance, housing, agriculture, and government, and the goals of conserving open land and developing housing are part of one strategy rather than competing goals.

The board's 20-year record shows it has invested in 8,500 homes and apartments and in 427 farms. About 118,500 acres of farmland has been conserved, along with 250,000 acres of land for public recreation and natural areas. The board has invested in 45 historic buildings, including the Paramount and the Tuttle Building in Rutland, the Latchis Theater in Brattleboro, the Old Labor Hall in Barre and the Flynn in Burlington. It has helped preserve significant natural areas, including the High Pond Preserve in Hubbardton, Bald Mountain in West Haven, the North Pawlet hills and the White River ledges. It has helped create and expand 11 state parks and invested in several trail systems.

This has all happened quietly over 20 years, and it's worth considering what Vermont would have been like without these investments. Housing for low- and moderate-income Vermonters would be considerably more difficult to find; 8,500 housing units is not an insignificant number. The life of our communities has

received a meaningful boost with the development and revival of important historic buildings. It's easy to take it all for granted until one considers what we would be missing if these important activities had not taken place.

None of the public-private investments fostered by the Housing and Conservation Board would be necessary if the private sector was a perfectly functioning mechanism. We have seen, however, the way that the real estate market provides greater incentive for builders to specialize in high-end construction. The Housing and Conservation program provides housing at below-market prices with a pricing mechanism designed to keep the property affordable forever.

The Housing and Conservation Trust Fund is supported by an annual appropriation that comes from the property transfer tax. Initially, the fund was to receive half of the revenue generated by the property transfer tax, but the Legislature has skimmed on that percentage in recent years.

Douglas' emphasis on promoting new housing has been to reduce the bureaucratic obstacles that get in the way of housing developers, and certainly, there is room for improvement in Vermont regulation. But there is little reason to believe that those newly liberated developers would devote a significant percentage of their new housing projects to affordable housing. They don't have the incentive.

In theory, more high-end houses would allow Vermonters to move up to better housing, making less expensive housing available. But that is a slow and indirect way to address the problem of affordable housing. As legislators consider new ways to address the housing crunch, they ought to recognize that the Housing and Conservation Board has a backlog of projects ready to go, and that any additional funds dedicated to their budget would yield quick, affordable results.

Twenty years after the founding of this successful program, it's best not to take this program for granted.

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