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February 14, 2024

Mr. Chris Winters  
Commissioner  
Department for Children and Families  
280 State Drive, HC 1 North  
Waterbury, VT 05671-1080

Dear Commissioner Winters:

On behalf of the Town of Waterbury Selectboard, please accept this letter as a formal statement and inquiry regarding the Town's concerns related to the 40-bed temporary homeless shelter proposed for the Waterbury Armory property.

We appreciated your attendance at the January 19 Selectboard meeting to discuss the potential shelter and attempt to answer questions. As evidenced from the comments received at the meeting, as well as subsequent emails and phone calls to town officials, there are varied and complex community sentiments regarding this proposal. While there is an acknowledgement of Waterbury's current and historical welcoming nature, there nonetheless remains a great deal of community concern, ranging from apprehension to anger, at the proposal. We have heard from many individuals and believe this community would be welcoming towards a homeless shelter that is an appropriate size, managed by a trusted local operator, and is brought forth with a long public input and planning process. Unfortunately, that has not been the case with this proposal.

We therefore have attempted to summarize these issues into a letter to you to seek clarity and answers. We felt it important to send to you a comprehensive list of questions, even if they have been asked by other interested parties, such as Representative Wood.

In addition, section J of the Vermont Homeless Operation Provider (HOP) Standards of Provision of Assistance, there is reference to a required "strategic, community-wide system to prevent and end homelessness for that area." Section J, in our judgment, clearly states the standards require working with the Town on this shared goal. We sincerely hope you share that desire, and answer our questions below with the framework outlined in section J as a guiding principle.

In this spirit we request your assistance, and believe that answering the questions will assist us all to move forward and seek mutually beneficial solutions to the homeless challenge facing Vermont.

**(1) A number of residents expressed concern about the temporary nature of the shelter, and several individuals have specifically noted the investment does not save the state any money unless the shelter operates for the long-term.** Pursuant to this concern, can you please answer the following questions:

- a. Can you again discuss the temporary nature of the shelter and provide us with your estimated renovation costs for the facility? Specifically, you had noted the average cost for a room utilizing the hotel/motel program is \$139/night. Using that figure and multiplying by 90 days and 40 beds yields \$500,400. The purchase price for the building, prior to renovations, exceeds that amount. We therefore are struggling to understand one of the purported reasons for opening the shelter, which was a savings on the part of state government.
- b. Assume for a moment the administration seeks to utilize the facility for a homeless shelter beyond June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024. Is that a decision that requires prior authorization by the state legislature?
- c. Has there been communication between your agency and the Department of Building and General Services, or any other entity in state government, about utilizing the building for a period beyond 3-months? If so, please respond with a summary of that communication.
- d. If the facility, for any reason, is not able to be utilized as a homeless shelter on April 1<sup>st</sup>, but operations commence before June 30<sup>th</sup>, would the proposed 3-month operational timeline remain in place?

**(2) We understand there is not yet a shelter operator in place. We have reviewed the 2023 "Vermont HOP Standards of Provision of Assistance." While these standards are useful information, most of the decisions appear to reside with the shelter operator, and the standards appear to us to be minimum guidelines.** Given that, we have a number of operational questions and concerns:

- a. Will the Town and/or its representatives have a seat at the table in reviewing these standards with the selected shelter operator? Within that general subject, we have specific interest in the following:

Section D: Emergency Shelter providers must have written policies and procedures addressing discharge from shelter that meet the following requirements...

While Section D requires for the shelter to have detailed policies and procedures for discharge, we note there is not a specific requirement for safe and humane placement of the individual(s) in the event of an involuntary discharge. To wit, town residents and business owners have expressed a concern that these individuals will again become unhoused, and without options will reside in Waterbury. We therefore ask the following:

- b. For existing shelters in Vermont, are there procedures in place for finding safe and secure housing for individual(s) who are involuntary discharged from the shelter? If so, please provide us with a detailed overview. Further, what specific resources are available in the immediate Waterbury area should an individual be discharged and need immediate housing?

- c. In the event the shelter, through involuntary discharges or any other mechanism, contributes to the unhoused population in Waterbury, what additional state resources are immediately available that can be used to assist the Town?
- d. Can you provide the Town with average rates of involuntary discharges from similar shelters in Vermont?
- e. With the General Assistance Housing Program (hotel program) winding down, what other resources will be available for involuntarily discharges to meet the needs of individuals who do and do not meet GA eligibility requirements?

Section H: Emergency shelter providers must provide shelter on a 24/7 basis, unless an exception is granted by the Office of Economic Opportunity...

- f. We have heard a number of concerns about the shelter being closed during the day. Can you clarify if that is allowed under Section H?
- g. In the event the shelter is closed during daytime hours we have concerns about the impact on community resources. For example, the Director of the Waterbury Public Library has noted that her staff and facility are likely to be impacted, and that libraries are on the “front line” of the homeless problem in Vermont. The Waterbury Senior Center is also concerned given they are a small organization with little capacity to absorb additional demand. The Waterbury Area Ambulance Service has also relayed similar concerns. These organizations are likely to experience a disproportionate impact from the shelter and will require increased support. Given that, what resources can you provide to the town to assist with this expected impact, regardless of the institution or business impacted? Further, what resources are immediately available?
- h. We were unable to identify requirements for staff training. Does the state have formal standards for education and training for staff that serve individuals and families at shelters? If not, are those standards typically addressed via contracts with shelter providers?

**(3) At the Selectboard meeting on 1/29/24 you discussed bringing services to the Armory; we agree that wrap around services should be requisite.**

- a. Can you specify the full array of services that will be provided at the shelter, and can you further note which services will be provided and by whom? With regards to food services in particular, can you confirm that 3 meals per day will be offered at the shelter?
- b. It appears to us that providing mental health counseling and other services does not lend itself to a congregate setting. Can you specify where these services will be provided, and by which entity?
- c. Similar to the question above, can you please specify how the medical needs of the individuals residing at the armory would be met?

d. For any services that are offered outside of Waterbury can you share the details of the transportation plan?

**(4) A number of community residents have expressed concerns related to public infrastructure and public safety, including the safety of the residents of the Armory. Can you specifically address the following related to these concerns:**

e. The length of Armory Drive, from the Armory itself to the bridge over Thatcher Brook, has no sidewalks or street lights. In earlier correspondence you had alluded to the cohort of individuals who would reside in the Armory as disproportionately senior and/or disabled persons. Can you discuss any plans you have to help ensure their safety given the infrastructure limitations?

f. The bridge on Armory Drive has been impassable twice this past year; in both instances the floods cut off vehicular traffic for over 24 hours. Can you ensure emergency procedures are in place in the event of another flood? Can you describe to us what those procedures entail?

g. The Town contracts with the state police, which provides for two officers to be present in Waterbury. Those officers work typical 40-hour weeks, leaving coverage gaps. The Acting Commander of the Berlin barracks is aware of this proposal. Our understanding is the state police are currently stretched unbelievably thin and their staffing levels have been reduced to levels that were heretofore unimagined. What additional resources, if any, can the state police supply to Waterbury in the event of a public safety impact from this proposal? I do note that the Town has contacted Washington County Sheriff Marc Poulin, who has reported he is short staffed and cannot, at this time, guarantee that he would be able to offer police services to the Town. Additionally, Stowe Town Manager Charles Safford reports their police department is not able to offer police services to Waterbury.

h. A number of individuals have noted the open lands around Thatcher Brook are frequently used by school children and the broader community for outdoor recreation, and they have noted that children frequently play in this area unattended. Have you engaged with the school district to address any concerns they may have regarding the proposal?

i. Will registered sex offenders be allowed to stay at the Armory?

j. Will there be a process for informing the community in the event of changes at the facility that may have an impact, or a perceived impact, on public safety?

k. What would occur at the Armory in the event of an influenza or COVID outbreak that impacts a large portion of the shelter occupants?

l. A number of concerned residents have relayed concerns that Waterbury's unhoused population will increase by virtue of the armory being utilized as a shelter. To wit, there is a concern that unhoused individuals will seek entrance at the shelter regardless of the state's intention to control admissions via a referral policy. Similar concerns have arisen as individuals are discharged from the shelter. Based on the judgment and experience of you and your agency, please opine on this matter and advise the Town in the event we need to prepare for this eventuality.

**(5) Other Questions and Issues That Have Arisen Since Your Presentation**

- a. We have learned that your agency sought to partner with Good Samaritan Haven to operate an Econo Lodge in Montpelier as a shelter, but they declined the opportunity for an array of reasons. Have you reconsidered that facility, rather than the Armory, given your intent is to contract with a provider that is not local? We note that community is better equipped to accept a shelter as they have an array of local service providers and a police department.
- b. While we appreciate the effort the state has made to transfer the Stanley Wasson site to the Town of Waterbury, we note that, in a recent meeting of the House Committee on Institutions and Corrections, it was expressed the Town did not have an interest in the Armory. I want to be entirely clear this is not our position. The Town has a sincere interest in seeing the armory developed into permanent housing.

Zoning permit aside, it is our understanding there are no local barriers that would prevent the state from renovating the Armory and operating it as a temporary homeless shelter. We hope that you recognize the long relationship between the state and Waterbury, and the impact the state complex has had on this community. We have long been partners in success, and believe that relationship can continue in the future. Our concerns above are not merely about this specific proposal; they are also tied to this history and sentiment that history of cooperation could be eroded if a short-term proposal, not fully vetted and without the proper and cohesive support systems, is forced upon the residents of Waterbury.

Thank you in advance for responding to our concerns and questions. I appreciate the work you do to benefit all Vermonters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Leitz", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Tom Leitz, Municipal Manager