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## **Housing start**

The housing bill passed by the House last week is drawing opposition, not just from builders and their allies in the Republican Party, but from some of the officials out in Vermont's towns who are most closely involved in land-use planning.

In Bennington and Addison counties, officials have looked at H.863 and come away with questions about whether it would really help promote more affordable housing. A story in the Manchester Journal, flagged and circulated by the Douglas administration, says that H.863, if it were passed, might have the effect of blocking a Habitat for Humanity project in Manchester.

Manchester does not have a designated downtown, so it would not benefit from the relaxed restrictions that would apply to those districts. Instead, the creation of three duplexes by Habitat for Humanity would be subject to stricter guidelines created by modifications proposed in Act 250. The president of the Bennington area Habitat organization said that the increased costs caused by the new Act 250 requirements might sink the project.

In Middlebury, planning officials described H.863 as less of an affordable housing bill and more of a land-use planning bill. A story in the Addison Independent shows that a new residential development under way in town would not fall within the downtown district, and critics of the bill have argued that the downtown districts in the 27 designated downtowns in the state do not have adequate space to account for significant new housing.

Another effect of H.863, according to critics, will be to force housing prices even higher in those scarce areas that enjoy incentives to build. If downtowns are the only places where land-use laws facilitate growth, the cost of housing in those precious areas will escalate.

There are two impulses at work in H.863, and both of them are good. One is to promote affordable housing, a goal with wide support. The other is to refine the language of Act 250, a goal that may be desirable in a general sense, but which faces opposition at a time when economic pressures are growing more severe.

Act 250 remains sacrosanct in Vermont, though environmentalists

worry about pressures leading to its erosion. Relaxation of Act 250 for downtown projects subject to local planning and subdivision laws is a reasonable way to help Vermont's villages and downtowns. But it would be a mistake to view that step as a precedent leading to the relaxation of other provisions of the law.

In order to strengthen the land-use goals of Act 250 with regard to open land, H.863 makes modifications to one part of one criterion, subjecting more land to rules calling for cluster development and other forms of smart growth. Promoting development of that sort is a worthy goal, but in the present climate, where the lack of affordable housing is a serious problem, the timing may not be right.

Fred Dunnington, town planner in Middlebury, said it plainly in the Addison Independent: "There is no silver bullet for affordable housing other than actual money."

The cuts proposed by Gov. James Douglas in the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund run afoul of this plain truth. As the Senate takes up H.863, it will have the hard task of guiding the money toward the housing that will do the most good, for potential homeowners and for the state.