

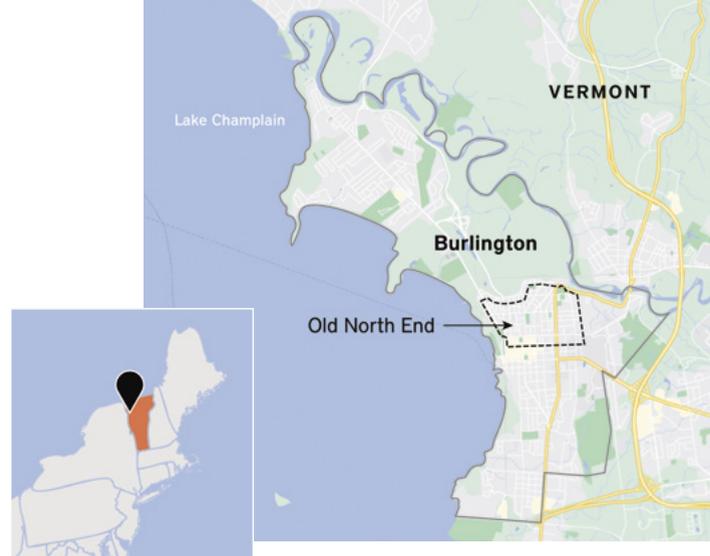
Still the **ONE**

**Lessons from a Small City's Big Commitment
to Neighborhood Affordability**



By Julie Campoli

This fall, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy is releasing a video and case study about a decades-long effort to create and preserve affordable housing in the Old North End of Burlington, Vermont—a neighborhood some residents affectionately refer to as “the ONE.”



SINCE THE EARLY 1800s, a tight grid of streets in the north end of Burlington, Vermont, has been home to laborers, service workers, and anyone else needing an affordable place to live. The Old North End has been a place of arrival, and also permanence. Its modest apartments and small houses offer both a foothold to newcomers and the chance to stay for generations. Forty years ago, it all could have changed.

The global economic forces of the 1980s had brought the neighborhood low. Poverty and crime were rising, along with unemployment. A few years earlier, in an ill-advised urban renewal scheme, city leaders had condemned and demolished several blocks in an adjacent neighborhood, displacing its tight-knit Italian-American community. Residents and housing advocates feared the Old North End would be the next victim of large-scale redevelopment.

“Speculators were buying or optioning properties,” said Brenda Torpy, former director of housing policy for the city. They weren’t interested in building value by improving properties or nurturing businesses: “Their goal was assembling a block where they could tear everything down and make a big move.”

As the local market intensified, Old North End residents were feeling the pressure. Rents were rising as properties changed hands. No tenant protection laws were in place, and previous city administrations had shown little

interest in code enforcement. The situation was creating a sense of unease among residents—and it also created a sense of urgency for an administration led by a newly elected mayor, a young progressive named Bernie Sanders.

Many cities have addressed the problems of displacement and housing insecurity. But few have attempted such an ambitious and multi-faceted strategy over such a long period of time.

The Sanders administration wanted to prevent displacement of working-class residents. That spawned an idea that became an experiment—and eventually, through sustained effort, a reliable method for preserving and producing a critical mass of permanently affordable housing.

While housing was the centerpiece of this effort, the goal was to make life better in many other ways, offering the opportunity to thrive. The dynamic mayor and his young, talented, and tireless staff nurtured public support for universal housing security and implemented a range of programs and policies to achieve it. As the years passed, the city made streetscape improvements and invested in schools, parks, and recreation programs. Burlington’s culture of civic engagement proved fertile ground for

Preserving affordability in the Old North End—Burlington’s most densely populated neighborhood—has helped residents maintain access to good schools, green space, and a reliable social safety net. Credit: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.



nonprofits, which emerged to provide both services—job training, health care, legal aid, recreation, child care, food relief—and emotional support to people facing many challenges beyond paying the rent.

Many cities have addressed the problems of displacement and housing insecurity. But few have attempted such an ambitious and multi-faceted strategy over such a long period of time. Leaders in Burlington took a creative approach to seemingly intractable problems. They worked at the grassroots level, relying on neighborhood organizations to communicate needs and build public support. They remained flexible, adjusting their methods to accommodate changing conditions. And they laid the foundation for a housing delivery system that would keep going for years, through changing political leadership and economic conditions.

Today, residents of the Old North End live in a city with good schools, a county unemployment rate of 1.3 percent, a wealth of green space, and a reliable social safety net. Amenities that could previously only be found in wealthier neighborhoods are now embedded within its borders. The place continues to change: many old-timers have left, and well-off newcomers have moved in. But thanks to a generous supply of subsidized housing, it continues to be a safe haven for working people and a gateway for refugees and those in need of greater opportunity.

Identifying the Need

Children who grow up in resource-rich environments have better outcomes in life, research increasingly indicates (Opportunity Insights). Along with supportive families, children need the social and physical infrastructure found in prosperous and cohesive communities. Defined by researchers and policymakers as “high-opportunity areas,” these places offer excellent schools, community gathering spaces, job options, and vital services like public transportation, medical care, daycare, and healthy food. Their strong social networks nurture resilience and provide a cushion for life’s challenges.

Unfortunately, the people who need these places the most can’t afford to move into them. And they often can’t afford to stay in neighborhoods that are transforming into high-opportunity areas.

In booming metros, a rising tide of wealth emanating from city centers brings safer, more attractive streets and many services to long-neglected urban neighborhoods. But the tide of investment rarely brings permanently affordable housing. Rising rents push low-income residents out to the places they can afford, which offer fewer of the qualities that boost upward mobility. Income-restricted, permanently affordable housing would prevent that

displacement and, in other contexts, provide access to already prosperous neighborhoods. But only 7 percent of the 74,000 subsidized housing units in the United States are located in high-opportunity areas (Freddie Mac 2022). The rest are in under-resourced places.

When the demand for housing rises and spills into neighborhoods that have suffered from disinvestment, the early signs are not obvious. Investors buy the relatively inexpensive properties but don't immediately make improvements, putting upward pressure on the housing market without a visible sign of change. By the time the signifiers of gentrification—renovated buildings and upscale businesses—appear, market prices have risen to a level that makes preserving and producing affordable housing more challenging.

Luckily, leaders in Burlington recognized displacement risk before it was too late to prevent it at a meaningful scale. But they soon faced another question: how could they pay for the anti-displacement efforts they had in mind?

The 1980s had already brought a significant reduction in government spending as the Reagan administration slashed budgets, proclaiming that the market rather than the government would solve persistent social problems. Mayor Sanders believed otherwise, but the fiscal reality—radically reduced federal assistance programs—required an alternative approach to funding.

Finding Funding

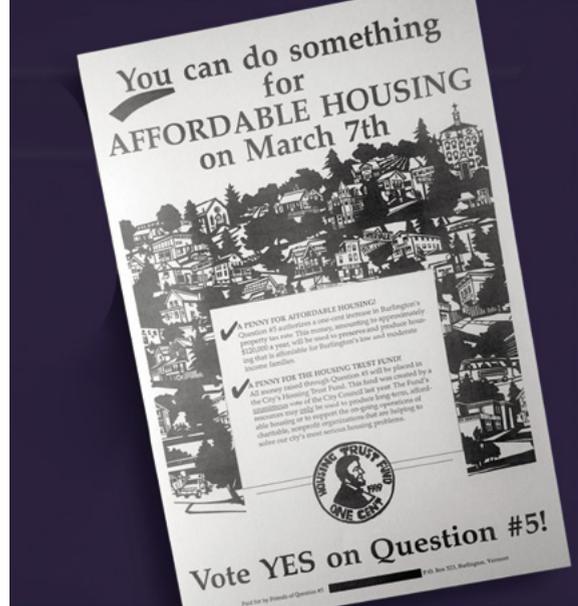
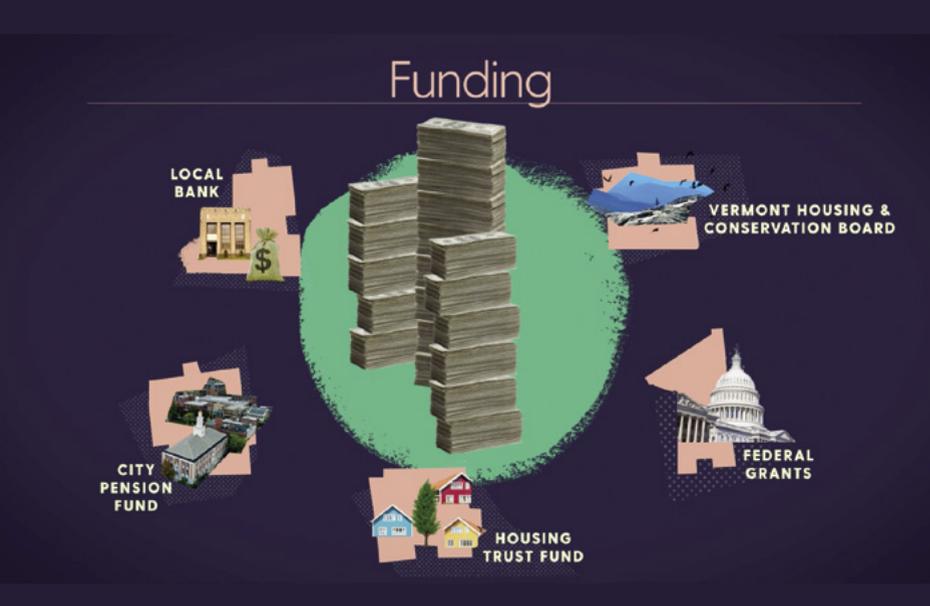
In 1984, Sanders directed \$200,000 in surplus funds to operate the newly formed Burlington Community Land Trust (BCLT), an initiative intended to expand homeownership. Two million-dollar loans from the city's employee retirement fund and a loan from a local bank got the organization's work underway. In the coming years, the city obtained funds from federal programs such as the Community Development Block Grant and HOME programs.

Many working-class residents of the Old North End secured their tenure by buying a BCLT shared-equity home. Through the community land trust (CLT) model—which was pioneered in Georgia in the 1960s and has since been adopted nationwide—individuals buy homes on land that is owned by the CLT. The homeowners agree to sell the property at a restricted price to keep it permanently affordable, but can build equity during the time they own it.

Others who weren't ready or able to own a home found affordable apartments in buildings owned by the Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation (LCHDC). Like the BCLT, the LCHDC was created by the Sanders administration and launched as a nonprofit, but its mission was to provide rental housing. These institutions, along with many other nonprofits, programs, and policies that emerged in the



Mayor Bernie Sanders, right, with Alderman Terry Bouricius at a Burlington polling place in 1983. Sanders served as mayor from 1981 to 1989. Credit: AP Photo/Donna Light.



An innovative approach to financing (left) and popular support for policies intended to curb speculation and displacement (right) were essential elements of Burlington's affordability strategy. Credits: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

1980s and 1990s, were part of a multitude of efforts by officials, activists, and others to help build community and individual wealth in the Old North End.

The city's newly created Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO) orchestrated these efforts. With housing prices rising at twice the rate of incomes, CEDO's focus was on housing—more specifically, protecting the vulnerable, preserving existing affordable housing, and creating homes that low- and moderate-income people could afford. CEDO crafted a flood of renter protection ordinances that were promoted by the housing advocates at BCLT and LCHDC, and approved by an increasingly progressive city council (Davis 1990).

In 1984, the council passed a Fair Housing Ordinance to prevent renter discrimination. This was followed by a law curbing exorbitant security deposit fees. The minimum housing code, which was outdated and sparsely enforced, was overhauled in 1986. That same year, Burlington voters approved an anti-speculation tax (although it was later rejected by the legislature). This was followed in 1987 by a condominium conversion ordinance, which imposed an impact fee on developers who displaced tenants while converting rental housing to condos or cooperatives.

CEDO staffers became creative and persistent grant applicants, obtaining funds from Housing Development Action Grants, Section 8, and rental assistance programs, and cobbling together a budget to keep BCLT efforts moving until a steady stream of money emerged in the next decade. In 1989, Burlington voters agreed to a penny increase on their property tax rate, to be dedicated to affordable housing. The money would be deposited into a Housing Trust Fund and used by the city to add to the supply of permanently affordable homes.

Inspired by what was happening in Burlington, and concerned about land and housing speculation statewide, then-Governor Madeleine Kunin urged the legislature to create a state housing trust fund. In 1988, it established the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). Funded with a percentage of the state property transfer tax, VHCB began to disperse millions of dollars to nonprofits throughout Vermont with the combined goal of preserving both open space and affordable housing. VHCB shared the commitment to permanent affordability. In fact, the emphasis on permanence had seeped into a growing number of state laws and plans, helped along by Kunin's administration.

While BCLT needed money for its operations, it also needed to convince financial institutions to lend money to its homebuyers. At the time, the community land trust model of dual ownership was a new and untested mortgage product. It was not clear that a market for shared-equity homes existed, which made appraisers confused and lenders uneasy. BCLT pushed the Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA), which was tasked with enabling homeownership for moderate- and low-income residents, to help break the logjam. An early agreement crafted by VHFA allowed banks to take both land and house in the event of a default.

BCLT accepted these terms to get things started, and over time, as it became apparent that shared-equity homes were a safe bet—there was not a single foreclosure in the first four years—VHFA and local banks became enthusiastic lenders, creating much more favorable products. By 2015, VHFA had written more than \$80 million in mortgages for land trust owners, with banks throughout the state following their lead (Torpy 2015).

Responding to the Community

A major strength of the Burlington Community Land Trust was its ability to recognize the barriers to secure housing and improvise ways to overcome them. According to Brenda Torpy, longtime director of the organization, the question was not, “What’s the business plan?” but, “What is the need?” BCLT strove to meet the community where it was and find a way to fulfill its needs (Torpy 2015).

When it became clear that not everyone wanted or could afford a single-family house, even at a subsidized price, BCLT dove into the challenge of offering ownership to apartment-dwellers. Just as they had pioneered a model for dual ownership of single-family homes, BCLT staff sought a way to make ownership possible within the structure of a multifamily building. The likely strategy was to create a cooperative, in which residents share ownership of their apartment building, on land owned by BCLT. As with the single-family home model, their monthly payments would build equity.

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The Champlain Housing Trust’s shared-equity model makes it easier for low- and moderate-income buyers to afford a home. Credit: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

At the time, condominiums were a new concept, and there was no enabling legislation in Vermont for limited equity cooperatives. BCLT eventually persuaded state lawmakers to make cooperatives legal. It created a handful of cooperatives in the neighborhood, but it became apparent that the model was not popular. People found the prospect of coordinating with fellow residents on the management and maintenance of a building too daunting. They preferred a responsible landlord.

Although the organization hadn't set out to act as a landlord, by the 1990s BCLT owned a growing number of rental properties, complementing the efforts of the Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation and providing the apartments Old North End residents needed.

At the same time, it moved in another necessary direction. During the savings and loan crisis of the 1990s, banks and landlords of industrial buildings walked away from their mortgages, leaving a swath of the Old North End vacant. State environmental laws assigning liability for cleanup of brownfield sites to lenders prevented any private investment in the properties, which were decrepit and attracting criminal behavior (Torpy 2015). This was not a housing issue, but it had a direct impact on quality of life in the Old North End.

BCLT rallied local leaders and land trust supporters to lobby the legislature to remove brownfield liability laws. Then it spent the next several years redeveloping the polluted sites, returning the abandoned and blighted properties to community use, and renting spaces to nonprofits who operated a food shelf, a child-care center, and a senior center. The brownfield redevelopment also yielded a 40-unit housing cooperative and a small park. The land trust went on to develop more non-residential uses when it recognized a clear benefit to the neighborhood. Its latest project, completed in partnership with many other local organizations, was the creation of the Old North End Community Center.

Focusing on Permanence

The Burlington Community Land Trust and Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation merged in 2006 to form the Champlain Housing Trust (CHT). These entities were able to preserve and protect a critical mass of units in the Old North End because every property they purchased and improved would remain affordable forever. Resale restrictions protecting low-income buyers and tenants would not disappear in 15, 30, or even 50 years.

In the world of affordable housing, permanence is the exception rather than the rule. Depending on the program, federal regulations allow income-based restrictions to expire after 20 or 30 years. Many state and local jurisdictions do not require them beyond 15 years. As Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) projects built in the 1990s reach the end of their affordability period, rents jump to market rates, and low-income tenants face eviction, housing providers are forced to seek public money to buy or replace those properties. When affordability vanishes within a few decades, it's extremely difficult to maintain the status quo, let alone build new homes for the growing number of people burdened by housing costs.

Wanting to achieve maximum return on the taxpayers' investment in affordable housing, the Burlington City Council had stipulated in 1989 that any projects financed from the newly formed Housing Trust Fund would be affordable in perpetuity. Fiscally conservative Republicans saw the value in paying once, not repeatedly, for each affordable housing unit. In the future, BCLT would not need to dip into Housing Trust funds to purchase previously subsidized properties in

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order to maintain their affordability. The policy is in place at the state level as well. Every project built in Vermont using public money will stay out of the private market forever (Libby 2006).

Over the course of a decade, the concepts of housing preservation, shared equity, and permanent affordability gained public support and became normalized for local officials and state policymakers. In 1990, the city passed an inclusionary zoning ordinance requiring developers who build projects with five or more units to dedicate 15 to 20 percent of the total to rent or sell at below-market rates. The developer can subsidize those units in various ways, charging higher prices for the market-rate units, tapping state or federal funds, or partnering with a housing nonprofit. In return, the developer can make the project denser and expect some fee waivers. Between 1990 and 2019, 141 of the 551 housing units built in the Old North End were made affordable under the inclusionary zoning ordinance.

A Culture of Support

Alongside this came a belief that investments in people—in their housing, health, and well-being—were essential. The interest in shared prosperity created fertile ground for many other nonprofits working to shelter and support low-income residents. Before the BCLT existed, Cathedral Square was building and managing affordable rental housing for seniors, and offering services like Meals on Wheels. Today, 74 of its units are located in the Old North End, where it provides senior independent living apartments, homes for adults living with mental health challenges, apartments for individuals transitioning out of homelessness, and housing for families whose parents are completing their education. The 158-year-old Howard Center, a provider of mental health, developmental disability, and substance abuse services throughout the county, partners with Cathedral Square to offer supportive group housing.



WATCH NOW

Still the ONE: Preserving Affordable Housing in Burlington's Old North End

Residents of the Old North End and Burlington officials who were involved in the effort to ensure that the neighborhood remained affordable share reflections and replicable strategies in a new Lincoln Institute video.

www.lincolnst.edu/burlington-affordability

Credits: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (top); Julie Campoli (bottom).

The Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS) was launched during the Sanders administration to serve people without homes. Today it provides 29 transitional single-resident rooms and one-bedroom apartments, a shelter for five families at three different locations, and a day station that offers hot lunches, showers, laundry facilities, workshops, job and housing counseling, and access to computers.

In 1988, the nonprofit Housing Vermont began creating rental housing through partnerships with communities and the private sector. Like BCLT, it expanded its mission in response to need, redeveloping vacant and underused historic mixed-use buildings in Vermont's downtowns, as well as providing equity investing, community development lending, and energy services. While its service area now extends to all of northern New England (as Evernorth), it still contributes to the pool of permanently affordable homes in the Old North End.

Many other organizations focus on supporting the health and safety of Old North End residents, including Feeding Chittenden, which operates a food shelf, a hot meal program, and a culinary job training program; the Community

Health Center, which provides free or sliding-scale medical and dental care; and Vermont Legal Aid, which provides free assistance to those facing eviction, discrimination, bankruptcy, and other legal problems.

Low-income residents can access low-cost transportation through Everybody Bikes and Good News Garage, which refurbish and resell donated bicycles and cars. Pathways Vermont provides peer support for mental health challenges. Outright Vermont, a statewide organization supporting LGBTQ+ youth, is based in the neighborhood. Steps to End Domestic Violence provides shelter, a crisis line, legal advocacy, and education. The Sara Holbrook Community Center has provided a safe and educational space in the Old North End since 1937 with after-school care, summer camps, a teen drop-in center, a food pantry, and other programs.

Together these policies and organizations help ensure that Old North End residents can access not only housing but also food, health care, legal and financial assistance, emotional support, enrichment, and the sense of community that will help them overcome daily challenges and improve their prospects.

The Ramble, an annual celebration of creativity and community, is a mainstay of the Old North End's vibrant cultural scene. Credit: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.



Putting People Before Profits

In the 1980s and 1990s, before the Old North End became attractive to outsiders, most of the housing was “naturally occurring affordable housing.” Typically this means older Class B and Class C multifamily rental properties with market-rate rents suitable for low- and moderate-income people. In the Old North End, this meant worker housing built in the previous century that was neither fancy nor up to date.

The majority of landlords were local residents who owned only a few properties (Quigley 2019). One exception was Stu McGowan, who became deeply attached to the Old North End after moving there in 1984 and wanted to help prevent displacement. As of 2019, McGowan owned 78 housing units in 31 properties in the Old North End, at a value of \$10.4 million. He could make a tidy profit by selling to the outside investors who contact him at least once a week. They have run the numbers on Burlington’s housing shortage and the Old North End’s popularity, and discovered what McGowan already knows: he could also make a lot more money by raising rents.

But he hasn’t and he won’t. He has a strict policy against it, despite leaving about \$100,000 on the table every year. His business model is highly unusual in a hot real estate market. He invests enough in his apartments to make them safe and clean—insulation, a new heating system, a fresh coat of paint—but not enough to force a substantial rent increase. Except for his large portfolio, McGowan’s ethic isn’t different from many other local landlords who invested in a few properties around their home and “took good care of them, but didn’t go overboard with any of it,” he said. “There’s a lot of conscientious landlords out there. And there’s two reasons: one, they want to do the right thing, and the other thing is, they don’t want to lose good tenants, because small landlords can’t deal with tenant turnover.”

Timing is everything. If McGowan had arrived in the Old North End 20 years later, he likely

would not have become a local landlord to 78 households. His portfolio would almost certainly be in the hands of outside investors. He might not even have been able to afford to live there himself: “We bought a duplex back in ’89,” he explains. “We paid \$130,000 for it. And it’s worth \$750,000 now. I’m not poor, but I’m not rich yet. I could not afford the mortgage on this house right now if I had to buy it.”

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Naturally occurring affordable housing depends on a cool market. And even when it’s owned by community-minded landlords like McGowan, it’s not permanent. It lasts only as long as the individual is committed to putting people before profits.

Was It Enough?

The Old North End appears to be growing and changing. Census data show that the population is more racially diverse, median incomes have grown, numbers of households below the poverty line shrank, and crime levels dipped. What’s harder to gauge is whether the lower poverty levels are a result of wealthier residents moving in or current residents enjoying more economic security.

Retired city planner David White, who served in that office for over two decades, has watched the demographic trends unfold. “Many young, idealistic folks with means are moving in,” he notes. “They can afford to acquire property.”

In fact, Census data also indicate an increasing educational level among Old North End residents. In 2010, 30 percent had a college degree; by 2016, that figure was 39 percent. According to White, college graduates are drawn



In recent years, affordable and inclusionary housing projects have included the Bright Street Co-op, a 40-unit complex built on a former brownfield (left), and infill development on Elmwood Avenue (right). Credits (l-r): Courtesy of Champlain Housing Trust, Julie Campoli.

to the neighborhood by the eclectic businesses and culture built by immigrants from Vietnam, Africa, Nepal, and other places, with both groups taking advantage of the opportunity they are finding in the neighborhood.

Has the decades-long effort to prevent displacement succeeded? Plenty of anecdotal evidence suggests that people are finding it more expensive to live there, but there's no data indicating how many residents moved out because they were evicted or their rent was too high. Households relocate for many reasons other than financial, such as a change in family circumstance or a job opportunity. Because there is no authority systematically recording those reasons, it's impossible to confirm whether the changing population is a result of displacement or choice.

What's clear is that over 480 households in or next to the Old North End now have a vastly reduced risk of being forced out. If they rent an apartment owned by the Champlain Housing Trust, Cathedral Square, the Burlington Housing Authority, or Evernorth, their monthly rents are tied to their income. If they live in a shared-equity

home, their odds of staying put or moving to a more expensive market-rate home are good.

Champlain Housing Trust has evaluated how well it is meeting its goal of generating community and individual wealth. A 2003 study concluded that while the sellers of land trust homes earned less profit than they might with an unrestricted, market-rate home, it's considerably better than the most likely alternative of renting, which yields no returns. Between 1988 and 2003, home sellers enjoyed an annualized rate of return of about 17 percent, recouping their original down payment and then realizing a net gain in equity.

A more recent study, looking at sales of 150 homes between 2016 and 2020, found the average equity gain to be \$38,300. CHT has also found that shared-equity homeownership provides a bridge between renting and owning a market-rate home. Sixty-eight percent of those selling a shared-equity home buy their next home on the open market. The equity they've earned allows them to enter a market that was not available to them earlier, and offers the buyer of their land trust home the same.

Brian Pine has observed change in the Old North End from several perspectives. He joined the Community Economic Development Office fresh out of college in the 1980s, worked on housing issues there for decades, led a statewide affordable housing advocacy organization, represented the neighborhood as a city councilor, and is now the director of CEDO. He has watched

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his neighbors who bought land trust homes in the 1980s thrive, and he believes the high percentage of permanently affordable housing helped working-class residents remain if they chose to.

But for low- and moderate-income residents who do not already live in a permanently affordable home, the risk of displacement is higher. By 2000, the Burlington Community Land Trust had slowed its acquisition of properties in the Old North End as it expanded its reach into other neighborhoods. Its merger with the Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation in 2005 brought an even greater geographic and programmatic scope. It now houses over 2,500 families in rental apartments and group homes throughout the three counties of northwestern Vermont. In the past few years, it has initiated projects to build an additional 560 units. Fifty-two families bought a land trust home in 2022 and others received no- or low-interest loans from CHT to make improvements to manufactured and farm labor housing.

Although the land trust continues to steward its properties in the Old North End, it is not producing new affordable housing there. The business model that worked for nonprofits in past decades doesn't make sense with higher real estate prices and a shortage of buildable parcels. Despite the relatively high percentage of affordable units, there is not nearly enough. It's still possible to move into a CHT apartment, but the waitlists are long and it takes approximately 15 months to get one.

So the answer to "has it been enough?" depends on who you talk to. The neighborhood is facing a housing shortage within a hot real estate market, gentrification is occurring, and basic housing and economic needs are still great (Jickling 2018). But the efforts that unfolded over decades made a huge difference for many individual people, transformed a neighborhood culture, and influenced the way local residents, city leaders, and state policy-makers view their responsibilities related to displacement and affordability. □

Julie Campoli is an urban designer, editor, and author who writes about urban form and the changing landscape. She is the author of *Made for Walking: Density and Neighborhood Form* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy 2012) and coauthor of *Visualizing Density* (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy 2007).

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