

From: [Celina Barton](#)
To: [Jennifer Devine](#); [Tommy Barton](#)
Cc: [Joseph Brooks](#); tractornate1720@gmail.com; [Celina Moore](#); [Eliza Moore](#); [Lisa Kreis](#); [Emily Levin](#)
Subject: "[EXTERNAL]"Preliminary Vacancy Tax discussion
Date: Monday, February 23, 2026 9:01:29 AM

Dear Members of the East Montpelier Selectboard,

I write to respectfully urge the Board to consider the adoption of a vacancy tax—or a comparable mechanism, such as a higher tax rate on long-term vacant or blighted properties, particularly those owned by absentee landlords—focused on neglected buildings in our village centers, specifically North Montpelier.

Vermont is confronting a profound housing shortage marked by constrained supply, rising costs, and a troubling number of vacant or underutilized properties. At the same time, we struggle to retain and attract young families and professionals who seek walkable, vibrant village centers where housing, employment, and community life converge. Central Vermont, including Washington County and towns like East Montpelier, faces a stagnant grand list, increasing municipal and education tax burdens, and an urgent call to revitalize our historic cores. Long-abandoned or blighted properties erode community morale, depress neighboring property values, diminish tourism, and forfeit meaningful tax revenue from occupied homes and operating businesses.

In North Montpelier, several prominent properties illustrate this challenge. Once-active community anchors—containing apartments, small businesses, gathering spaces, and even public recreational access—have remained vacant or severely underutilized for more than a decade. These sites formerly generated jobs, commerce, and tax revenue. Today, they contribute little beyond minimal land value while imposing broader economic and social costs.

Among them:

- 3065 VT Route 14 North — The empty two-apartment complex with the historic Cornie's General Store (including deli, sandwich shop, and gas station), vacant for over a decade. Once a vibrant community hub run by Joe and Laura Brown, who fell so in love with this historic property, they moved all the way from Virginia to run it — it is now derelict and depressing the values of other properties in the town. And the landlord has made no efforts to help save it nor invest in it — instead he buys other properties and leaves those properties most of those properties empty and falling down too.

- 2040 Vermont Route 214 North — The historic Riverbend Store and two-apartment complex, former post office, ice cream stand, public beach with canoe/boat rental, potential for outdoor restaurant, and storage barn. It closed around 2012 and remains vacant and off limits to the public.
- 35 Butterfield Road — The former Masonic Hall, once a vibrant gathering space where notable bands such as Phish etc would play, contra dances would swing, community dinners, theater and dances elevated community pride and with apartments and potential restaurant space, presently empty and underutilized. Portions of the adjoining land also serve as essential public land for key community infrastructure and the lack of investment and cooperation by the current owner constrains essential public infrastructure improvements.

These properties represent more than individual vacancies; they reflect lost housing units, lost jobs, lost tax revenue, and lost opportunity. A carefully structured vacancy tax —triggered after a defined period of prolonged vacancy, with reasonable exemptions for active rehabilitation (within set timelines and clear penalties — such as forfeiting property rights to the town should landlords abuse the time of town officials) —could discourage speculation, incentivize productive use, and strengthen our tax base. Similar tools have been employed in other jurisdictions to combat blight and stimulate reinvestment. While Vermont does not currently have a statewide vacancy tax, local measures or adjustments to nonhomestead rates on persistently vacant properties merit thoughtful exploration.

Such an initiative would not be punitive for its own sake. Rather, it would affirm a principle: that stewardship of property within our village centers carries civic responsibility. Our historic downtowns are shared economic and cultural assets. When they stand empty for years on end, the cost is borne by the entire community.

Due to a major family loss this weekend, I was unable to prepare a more comprehensive research brief. Should the Board have interest, I would be glad to assemble comparative data and policy options so that East Montpelier might thoughtfully evaluate this approach as part of a broader strategy to restore vitality to North Montpelier's downtown core.

With respect and appreciation for your service,

Celina

Celina Moore Barton

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