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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Beautifully and powerfully written, Laura. I added a sentence or two around line 102 that I think you need to give your point sufficient backstory. Please let me know if this (or any other more minor changes) need further attention. All the best and thanks, Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Winter does not ask for a permit

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

What the Brattleboro Selectboard's zoning vote reveals
about its compassion

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

NOT THAT LONG AGO, Brattleboro voted to formally
identify itself as a Compassionate Community: a town that
commits to dignity, care, inclusion, and shared responsibility for
one another, especially in moments of vulnerability. I believe this

9 to be true and, through my professional and volunteer work, have
10 seen it in action many times.

11 As individuals, most of the people who serve on the
12 Brattleboro Selectboard would rightly describe themselves as
13 progressive, caring, and deeply concerned with justice. They
14 often and sincerely speak about equity, inclusion, and the
15 dangers of authoritarian governance when they see it play out on
16 the national stage.

17 So it was a true shock when, on Dec. 22, while most of
18 us were thinking all the holiday thoughts, the board held a public
19 hearing to change a zoning rule. The language was technical:
20 “interim bylaw,” “conditional use,” and “orderly growth.”

21 But the heart of the matter was not technical at all. It was
22 moral.

23 The proposed bylaw would turn “Social Services or
24 Charitable Assistance” from something once embraced into
25 something that must plead its case. Though the Selectboard chair
26 insisted the change was neutral, the urgency behind it told a
27 different story.

28 * * *

29 AGAIN AND AGAIN, a small but vocal group returned to
30 one place: 69A, an art and community space that welcomes
31 everyone, including people without homes, people struggling
32 with addiction, and people living with mental illness.

33 The complaints were not really about zoning. They were
34 about visibility. About having to see suffering downtown. About
35 behaviors that made some uncomfortable. About the belief that
36 hardship and the messiness of humanity should be kept
37 elsewhere, out of sight, so commerce could proceed undisturbed.

38 But 69A did not create homelessness. It did not create
39 addiction or mental illness. What it created was a little bit of
40 space. A bathroom. A place to sit. Some warmth. A place where
41 people could be indoors without having to buy something first.

42 If that door closes, the people do not disappear. They
43 return to the sidewalk. They lose the bathroom. They lose the

44 warmth. They lose one of the few spaces where they are treated
45 as neighbors rather than nuisances.

46 * * *

47 THAT NIGHT, 25 community members spoke up. The
48 overwhelming majority asked the board to slow down, to follow
49 the normal process, to involve the Planning Commission, to give
50 the community more time to be part of the decision.

51 As Joshua Davis, executive director of SEVCA, wrote in a
52 letter submitted to the record: "Service siting debates become de
53 facto referenda on poverty, homelessness, addiction, or 'who
54 belongs where.'"

55 When rules change in ways that make help conditional,
56 the question quietly shifts from land use to human worth.

57 Even the Planning Commission itself, its members highly
58 experienced and well-versed, unanimously but for one absence
59 asked the board to delay its vote and allow them to weigh in.
60 They reminded the board that the first public hearing notice
61 automatically put the interim bylaw into effect for 150 days.

62 There was time for due process. Time for research. Time
63 for community engagement. In other words, there was no true
64 emergency.

65 It is also important to note that board members Isaac
66 Evans-Frantz and Oscar Heller spoke out clearly and publicly,
67 raising thoughtful, compelling objections and urging the board to
68 slow down.

69 But the vote moved forward. By the narrowest margin,
70 the bylaw passed.

71 * * *

72 THIS IS WHERE the contradiction becomes hardest to
73 ignore. Three members of a board that largely sees itself as
74 thoughtful, community-minded, forward thinkers chose a rushed,
75 top-down approach, one that bypassed normal democratic
76 processes and concentrated decision-making power in a way that
77 I dare say most of them would almost certainly condemn if it
78 were happening at the federal level.

79 During a recent visit to Washington, D.C., I noticed that
80 the one place consistently prioritizing the safety and dignity of
81 people without homes was the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial
82 Library. It was warm. It welcomed everyone. Many people
83 gathered there, likely because of its basic amenities and because
84 so many other spaces had been made hostile under the
85 inhumane actions of the current presidential administration.

86 I found myself wondering what would happen if those
87 policies and approaches to homelessness ever reached the library
88 as well. If even that door were closed, where would people who
89 were already suffering the most be expected to go?

90 I now find myself asking the same question of
91 Brattleboro. Are we moving toward a future where we continue
92 to make it increasingly uncomfortable for people without homes
93 to exist anywhere at all? As if their lives are not already painful
94 enough. As if people are not already dying in frigid Vermont
95 nights, forced to live outdoors.

96 What feels intolerable when imposed from afar somehow
97 became acceptable when applied locally, to people with the least
98 power to push back. The change now makes it harder for 69A to
99 secure an occupancy permit for a new space, one farther from
100 downtown, larger, and better equipped to address the very
101 concerns raised.

102 After complaints about 69A's previous space closer to
103 downtown, this step toward compromise — moving farther down
104 the street — was met not with patience but with a new barrier.

105 The irony deepened quickly. Two days later, a local
106 emergency warming shelter announced it would close
107 temporarily through the holidays, which have seen some of the
108 most dangerous weather conditions of the winter so far.

109 They were not closing because the need had disappeared
110 but because they had hit a staffing crisis. Volunteers were
111 stretched thin. The message was simple and heartbreaking: *We*
112 *want to stay open. We cannot do it alone.*

113 * * *

114 AND THERE, in the space of a few cold days, the story
115 reveals itself.

116 A town willing to act swiftly to restrict spaces of
117 welcome moves far more slowly when it comes to sustaining
118 them.

119 It is easier to regulate compassion than to practice it.
120 Easier to move suffering out of sight than to share responsibility
121 for it.

122 But winter does not care about zoning categories. Cold
123 does not ask whether someone is permitted. And humans,
124 neighbors, friends continue to suffer.

125 The measure of a community is not how orderly its
126 downtown appears, but whether its values endure when care is
127 inconvenient and uncomfortable.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

128 **LAURA CHAPMAN** is a civic volunteer, social justice
129 activist, and works with human-services nonprofits that help
130 neighbors in need.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

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LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

132

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

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####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

134

####END LOGLINE####