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—For section.....Voices/Response
—Format.....Opinions
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Thanks, Scott. I appreciate the conversation in our pages.
All the best, Jeff



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Compassion need not be a zero-sum game

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Public policy must hold compassion for everyone. When
3 one group bears disproportionate costs, the social contract frays
4 and the common good suffers.

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 OVER THE YEARS, I have served on the Compassionate
7 Brattleboro board, I have attended many Selectboard meetings,
8 and I currently serve on the town's Community Homelessness
9 Strategy Team. I have also participated in Beloved Shelter Support
10 Team meetings and visited the former 69A site.

11 For these reasons, I read Laura Chapman’s Viewpoint
12 with great interest.

13 Chapman levels two main charges: that sectors of
14 Brattleboro are insufficiently compassionate, despite its
15 designation as a Compassionate Community, and that the
16 Selectboard acted undemocratically or underhandedly in passing
17 stricter zoning regulations for social service organizations —
18 particularly those affecting the central business district and 69A.

19 I will not address the governance concerns, which are
20 complex and technical. Instead, I will address the question of
21 compassion.

22 * * *

23 HISTORICALLY, the idea of “the common” reflects a social
24 contract — a covenant of mutual responsibility and shared
25 benefit. Compassion in a healthy society must extend to
26 everyone. Those without means deserve assistance, dignity, and
27 care. Those with means deserve safety, stability, and the
28 expectation that the common good will be protected.

29 A good society requires mutual accountability, not
30 compassion offered in only one direction. Centre Church on
31 Main Street exemplifies this commitment.

32 Our faith compels us to serve those with little or nothing,
33 and we do so extensively: supporting Groundworks, hosting
34 Loaves & Fishes, enabling Carry Me Home, providing space for
35 Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, subsidizing
36 affordable child care, and contributing to numerous social-
37 service and immigrant-support organizations, including the
38 Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) and the
39 Community Asylum Seekers Project (CASP). We are not afraid of
40 the messiness of humanity, nor do we seek to hide it.

41 Chapman argues that the Selectboard’s zoning decision
42 was driven by a desire to avoid “seeing” poverty — that it
43 prioritized downtown appearance over human need. While I
44 support the dissenting votes of Isaac Evans-Franz and Oscar

45 Heller, I do not believe the majority's decision necessarily reflects
46 a lack of compassion.

47 The concerns surrounding 69A and similar facilities in
48 the central business district are not merely aesthetic.

49 Crime is not merely an appearance; it is experienced.
50 Trash, vandalism, discarded syringes, and public drug use are not
51 abstractions — they require cleanup, increase costs, raise
52 insurance rates, and create real safety risks. Tourism declines
53 affect tax revenue, which in turn limits the town's ability to fund
54 social services.

55 My concern is not "seeing poverty," but whether my
56 children can safely walk downtown at night from the Latchis or
57 the Boys & Girls Club amid jarring mental health crises and drug
58 use.

59 Centre Church faces these tensions daily. We serve the
60 poor with joy and commitment, yet we must also protect our
61 tenants, our child care center, and our facilities. We cannot allow
62 encampments near fuel tanks, unrestricted bathroom access that
63 leads to vandalism, or unsafe conditions that jeopardize our
64 ability to serve. When damage occurs, our capacity for
65 compassion is reduced.

66 The same is true for the town as a whole. Public policy
67 must hold compassion for everyone: the unhoused, yes — but
68 also churches, businesses, tourists, taxpayers, and families.

69 When one group bears disproportionate costs, the social
70 contract frays and the common good suffers.

71 While Jesus clearly showed a preference for the poor, he
72 lived under an imperial system without democratic governance
73 or public social services. In a modern democratic society,
74 compassion must be structured through policies that balance care
75 with responsibility so that all may flourish.

76 When the central business district suffers harm,
77 Brattleboro becomes less capable of acting compassionately.

78 * * *

79 I DO NOT BELIEVE the Selectboard members who
80 supported the zoning changes were primarily motivated by
81 appearances. I believe they were attempting to limit real, tangible
82 harms that threaten the town's long-term capacity to serve
83 everyone well.

84 Dr. Rebecca Jones's proposal to provide space for 69A
85 offers a hopeful path forward.

86 Relocating the center slightly west provides a larger,
87 more suitable, and less expensive space for services while
88 preserving access. At the same time, it strengthens the central
89 business district's economic vitality, safety, and appeal. This
90 solution honors the social contract and seeks the common good.

91 Compassion need not be a zero-sum game. When we
92 seek one another's welfare rather than privileging one group at
93 the expense of another, we may discover that we have chosen the
94 most compassionate path after all.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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

95 **REV. DR. SCOTT COUPER**, minister and teacher at
96 Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, who
97 writes in his private capacity, not speaking for the church he
98 serves.

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

This piece is in response to "Winter does not ask for a
permit" [Viewpoint, Jan. 7].

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