

When it comes to housing, Stamford can't afford to do nothing.

There are few subjects more important to Stamford right now than affordability. The economic impacts of the pandemic continue as inflation, rising gas and grocery bills, and underemployment have made life harder for so many of our residents. For Stamford and all of Fairfield County, these concerns about affordability are not new: our region has historically struggled to bring down the cost of living, especially for middle-class and low-income families.

As Mayor my goal is to build a more equitable, affordable, and economically vibrant City where everyone can thrive. That is why I kept tax increases low in this year's budget, expanded the senior citizen tax credit for the first time since 2015, worked with our state legislative delegation to secure hundreds of millions in funding to upgrade our public schools, and am rigorously pursuing additional state and federal funding to further reduce the burden on taxpayers.

It was, therefore, disheartening to watch a committee of our Board of Representatives recently vote against a proposal that is also aimed at making Stamford more affordable: the creation of new, high-quality, affordable housing for our residents.

Under the plan, a deteriorated City-owned property would be transformed into 51 units of workforce housing, while also providing community space, revitalizing a historic building, and returning it to the tax rolls. This plan was thoroughly vetted and passed by the Planning Board and the Board of Finance over the past two years before coming to the Board of Representatives' Legislative and Rules Committee. That prior work ensured that the project would include community space and preserve the historic facade of the existing building – all without using any taxpayer funds. The full Board of Representatives can still approve this important project and I urge them to do so.

Projects like this don't just help the hard-working people who make our City work, they're also vital for Stamford's economic future. Making Stamford affordable allows more young people who grew up here to live and work here as adults. It also helps attract more workers to fill the many job openings with our great local employers – from services and nonprofits, to innovative, high-growth industries such as data science, advanced manufacturing, and insurance technology. Business leaders have made clear that housing a broad spectrum of our workforce is essential to our City's continued success, and I agree.

Unfortunately, years of progress were upended when a few City Representatives circulated misinformation about the project in the days before the committee vote, posing a false choice between workforce housing and community center space. My team and I listened to these opponents' concerns directly, but we learned their last-minute ideas for the property were not operationally viable or fiscally responsible, as none of the other proposals we heard were able to demonstrate an ability to invest the funding needed to make this building safe and operational.

The recent events leading into the Committee vote feel like what happens across the country when workforce housing developments are about to cross the finish line. At the 11th hour, opposing voices manufacture reasons to block specific projects, even while claiming to support affordable housing in general.

As the second largest city in the state, Stamford needs to grow its economy, and to do that we need to grow our workforce. That can't happen without safe and affordable living options. There will never be a perfect affordable housing plan – which is why getting these projects passed becomes so difficult. But if

we sincerely believe in growing our economy, supporting our hardworking teachers, nurses, and essential workers with quality places to live, we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And this project – funded by private dollars, near the train station, and offering housing and community space to a broad segment of our community – is very good. If not here, where? If not now, when?

My office receives dozens of calls each week from residents who face eviction or cannot afford their current housing. I speak regularly with business leaders confounded that job openings sit vacant, even in a recovering economy, in no small part because prospective employees can't find housing. There are common solutions to these problems, and I am committed to acting with urgency to ensure that Glenbrook and every Stamford neighborhood has the community services and space it needs, but that must be in addition to this critically needed workforce housing, not in place of it.

We must not close our doors to those who make our City thrive. If you believe as I do that we must make Stamford more affordable, please reach out to the Board of Representatives to urge their support for this proposal.

Caroline Simmons is the Mayor of Stamford.