



CHURCHES RESPOND. HOMELESSNESS ENDS. HOPE BEGINS.

**P.O. Box 535 Harrisonburg, VA 22803**

December 8, 2022

Planning and Zoning Commission  
Department of Community Development  
409 South Main Street  
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

Re: Bluestone Town Center housing

Dear Mr. Fletcher and Commission Members:

I am writing in favor of the affordable workforce housing development at Bluestone Town Center on Erickson Avenue and Garber's Church Road in Harrisonburg City. We fully support the Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority's efforts to bring affordable housing and workforce housing to our community.

We at Bridge of Hope serve single-parent families living on one income. Now more than ever we struggle to find affordable units for our clients to maintain after graduating from our program. We are already at least 1,256 units short of meeting current housing demand. We trust that the Planning and Zoning Commission has the best interest of the entire community at heart - with considerations for protecting green space and working to ensure an efficient and effective design for traffic flow and general safety.

We need to House Harrisonburg Now, and support housing for all. We need to be the Friendly City for all, in ways that are not only fair, but equitable and consider the most vulnerable in our community - women and children. We are happy to support the Authority as it expands critical housing options in our community. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Chris Hoover Seidel  
Executive Director, Bridge of Hope Harrisonburg-Rockingham



SIERRA  
CLUB  
FOUNDED 1892

Letter of Support for the Bluestone Town Center  
Shenandoah Group of the Sierra Club

Thanh Dang  
Interim Zoning Administrator  
City of Harrisonburg  
Department of Community Development  
409 South Main St.  
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

Dear Ms. Dang and Harrisonburg Planning Commission members,

Sierra Club has been a long-time advocate for the environment. We have been and continue to be concerned about deforestation, wildlife preservation, and community connection to the environment. More recently, we have become alarmed by the lack of climate action, and aware of how climate change can devastate the environment. Climate change will impact not just the wildlife around us, but also the health and well-being of our community and the planet. We have also come to realize that solutions to climate change are also solutions to inequity, injustice, and poverty because inequity, injustice, and poverty are key drivers of climate change.

When we think of the lifestyle changes that are needed to combat climate change, urban density and bikeable/walkable communities are just a few solutions to the massive problem we all face, but they are very important. Indeed, smart growth solutions and transforming our transportation systems are essential to preventing catastrophic climate change. It is also important to note that affordable and equitable housing options are essential aspects of smart growth solutions and transforming transportation systems. These solutions also have add-on benefits for individual health and wellbeing.

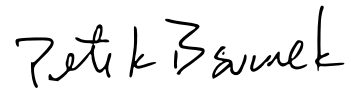
*This is why the Shenandoah Group of the Sierra Club supports the Bluestone Town Center project and encourages Planning Commission and City Council to approve it.* Despite some of the obvious concerns that have been raised about its potential environmental impact, we believe that its benefits outweigh its risks to the environment. While the project is not perfect, it is desirable and we encourage all concerned to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

In what follows we address some of the specific concerns that have been raised about the project and make a few suggestions for improving it.

1. The project provides affordable housing in a way that can reduce our community's use of fossil fuels. The location of the project, on the south end of town, is conveniently located between a shopping center (for food) and schools. Traffic impact will actually be quite minimal. Further, we see this project as a "smart growth" model or test case for future development in the city, and believe that a rejection of this project will make future investments in smart growth much more difficult in our community.
2. The project promises diverse housing types (single family and multi-family units) that are integrated with retail spaces. This type of development is the very model of "smart growth" that is needed to address climate change. Furthermore, diversifying the type and size of our housing stock is key to providing affordable housing and overcoming the history of racial exclusion and segregation that are the legacy of exclusive zoning patterns.
3. We are not experts in school overcrowding, but we are experts in sustainable development and smart growth and in this regard, we can only say that unless we find a way to encourage and promote smart growth, which means increasing the density of our urban spaces in livable, equitable ways, there really is no hope to avoid climate catastrophe. Certainly, our community is going to have to find ways to school more children whether or not this project is built and we believe that a friendly city can figure out how to do so. We do note that more residents and more businesses mean more revenue and a bigger tax-base, and isn't that how public schools have always been funded?
4. The project promotes urban density development, which is essential to preserving rural green and open space. It is unfortunate that this project will result in the loss of a portion of an existing urban forest, but absent a policy or plan to permanently preserve that forest and make it a public resource for our community, we expect that it will eventually give way to development. It is better that it be a development like this one, than the kind we have traditionally seen in the city. Ideally, future projects like this will be located in areas that have been previously developed. For example, replacing or revamping aging "strip malls" and their ridiculously large parking lots with designs similar to the Bluestone Town Center.
5. Finally, we encourage all those involved to make sure that this project is as sustainable, smart, and equitable as possible. This means:
  - that the buildings exceed minimum requirements for energy efficiency and weatherization;
  - that building materials use low carbon content, and non-toxic materials;
  - that the buildings be powered by solar energy, or are at least "solar ready;"
  - that Electric Vehicle (EV) charging stations are included and available to all residents, or, at a minimum, can be easily added;
  - that proper rain gardens and/or biofilters be required to protect surface and underground water quality;
  - that requirements for sustainable landscaping be put in place including expectations for urban forest planting, landscaping with native plants and pollinator friendly species, and that opportunities for vegetable gardening be supported and enabled.

Thank you for your consideration and please do not hesitate to contact us should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pete Bsumek". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and larger than the others.

Pete Bsumek  
Executive Committee Chair  
Sierra Club, Shenandoah Group



## Environmental Coalition Statement of Support for Bluestone Town Center

Climate Action Alliance of the Valley, 50 by 25 Harrisonburg, and Shenandoah Valley Faith and Climate are committed to addressing climate change, promoting social justice, and promoting community resilience. To that end, we support the proposed Bluestone Town Center (“Bluestone”). We support this project because it provides needed affordable housing with walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented development consistent with the City’s Environmental Action Plan. We thank Harrisonburg Redevelopment & Housing Authority (“HRHA”) for their commitment to making Bluestone Town Center a reality. We ask members of the City Council and Planning Commission to approve the present proposal.

### Harrisonburg Needs Additional Housing Units

The Harrisonburg housing study shows that we suffer from a severe shortage of housing. According to the study, “Harrisonburg is a growing city and lacks an adequate inventory of housing for current residents of all income levels.”<sup>1</sup> In 2022, the median home sold within 5 days of posting.<sup>2</sup>

The effects are clear. Employers have difficulty hiring staff because applicants have nowhere to live. Essential city staff positions, including those for Community Development itself, go unfilled. For individuals without stable housing, the situation is even more precarious.

### Additional Housing Units Should Match Development Needs in the Environmental Action Plan

Having recognized the need for additional housing, we must also ensure that such housing is sustainable. Low density, car-dependent suburban sprawl hurts our climate first by taking up more land, and second by requiring people to drive. Instead, we should promote more dense, compact development and encourage a mix of uses and transportation options. When people can easily walk down the street to the neighborhood grocery store, to schools, parks, and businesses, we can make their lives easier and tackle climate change at the same time.

*That is precisely why we favor this project.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Comprehensive Housing Assessment and Market Study Project* (2021), page 100.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.harrisonburghousingtoday.com/blog/archives/2022/12/home-sales-slow-in-november--but-prices-keep-on-rising\\_1670933344/index.php?f=1](https://www.harrisonburghousingtoday.com/blog/archives/2022/12/home-sales-slow-in-november--but-prices-keep-on-rising_1670933344/index.php?f=1)

The Environmental Action Plan adopted by the City Council on January 14, 2020 declared the need to apply smart growth principles in housing policy.<sup>3</sup> The plan states, in pertinent part:

“High density, compact, and mixed use development, as opposed to low density, car-dependent, suburban sprawl, can help make communities more sustainable, economical, and healthy. High density and mixed use neighborhoods that are designed well with a mixture of housing types (single-family detached, duplex, townhomes, and apartments) located among public transit routes, jobs, schools, shops, services, green space, and walking and biking facilities can encourage behaviors that contribute to reducing traffic congestion and vehicle emissions, and can provide opportunities for more social interactions.”

We agree with this provision of the Action Plan laid out by the City Council, without reservation.

#### Bluestone Town Center Matches Our Development Needs in the Environmental Action Plan

Bluestone’s location is along the Friendly City Trail, a new shared use path connecting three schools, three large public parks, and several residential neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> HRHA proffers two connections to the Friendly City Trail. HRHA will provide two-way bike lanes along Erickson Avenue, with the city paying 10% of the cost of these improvements.<sup>5</sup> Three HDPT bus routes will be created through the area.

Bluestone has easy walking and biking access to groceries. The development is located under a mile away from Food Lion on Hidden Creek Lane. In anticipation that residents will walk to Food Lion, HRHA offers to pay 50% of sidewalk construction costs on the south side of Hidden Creek Lane.

HRHA hopes to create a new “town center” in the area provided. In a central area, they propose multifamily units above mixed use spaces, with a community center nearby. “Pocket parks” are included as gathering places. Farther out, there will be townhouses and multifamily units, with detached single family homes on the edges of the development.

HRHA proffers that solar panel systems will be incorporated on all multi-family housing units as a supplementary energy source,<sup>6</sup> and that at least 6 electric vehicle charging stations will be constructed and maintained at various locations throughout the project. Modern building and appliance efficiency standards proffered also help reduce energy consumption and residents’ energy costs.

The proposed development has met Council’s expectations as specified by the Environmental Action Plan. Bluestone has easy walking and biking connections to schools,

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<sup>3</sup> *Environmental Action Plan* (adopted Jan. 14, 2020), page 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Environmental Action Plan*, page 31 (“Continue to Expand Sidewalks, Shared Use Path, and Trail Facilities to Connect People to Places they want to go, Including Private and Public Green Spaces”).

<sup>5</sup> *Bluestone Town Center Street Improvement Agreement*, page 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Bluestone Town Center Proffers*, page 4; See also *Environmental Action Plan*, page 26 (“Encourage the Construction of High-Performance Buildings and Operations”).

parks, stores, and other residential neighborhoods. It includes space for public transit. It includes a variety of housing options and housing density levels, which contribute to walkability by shortening the distance between homes. It includes mixed-use space so individuals can walk to work and to stores. It includes widespread solar and energy efficient construction to lower energy costs, especially important to low and middle income residents.

### The Proposed Development Can Benefit from Higher Density and Tree Coverage

We are deeply gratified by HRHA's strong commitment to the environment as evidenced in their proffers. Substantial room for improvement is still possible, however.

First, we recommend more of the development be used for townhomes and multifamily units rather than detached single family homes. The land in question has strong access to public amenities including schools, parks, stores, and the mixed-use space provided by the development. Even so, the proposed plan uses more land for detached single family homes (27.816 acres) than for multifamily units (25.984).<sup>7</sup> We recognize the desirability of individuals to gain equity in homes, but this goal can likewise be accomplished through building more townhome units at nearly three times the density.

Second, we ask for clarification on the amount of tree coverage to be created in the development. As of this writing, the proposal does not include a proffer on such tree coverage. Tree coverage and green space are essential for combating climate change, mitigating the heat island effect, and making the space more attractive for residents and visitors.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

While there are aspects of Bluestone Town Center that can be improved, the plan clearly recognizes the need for sustainable development and modern urbanist "smart growth" principles. In this design, Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority met the standards developed by City Council in the Environmental Action Plan. More than that, this project meets the needs of residents by providing sorely needed affordable housing in the city. Students will be able to walk to school. Residents can get groceries without spending hours on a bus or adding to traffic. Anyone can walk down the street to local parks and employment opportunities.

Fighting climate change is a challenge on every level, from international agreements to household expenses. It often involves making difficult sacrifices and tradeoffs. This is not one of those situations. This project is an opportunity to provide for the needs of our community and fight climate change simultaneously. For that reason, we ask you to approve the application for Bluestone Town Center.

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<sup>7</sup> *Bluestone Town Center Rezoning Narrative*, page 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Environmental Action Plan*, page 31 ("Maintain and Increase a Healthy Tree Canopy")

Respectfully,

Andrew Payton, Steering Committee Chair  
**Climate Action Alliance of the Valley**

Earl Zimmerman, Coordinator  
**Shenandoah Valley Faith and Climate**

Steering Committee  
**50 by 25 Harrisonburg**



January 13, 2023

Members of the Planning Commission  
City of Harrisonburg

Re: Letter of Support for Bluestone Town Center

Dear Planning Commission Member,

This letter supports the approval of the Bluestone Town Center because there is not enough housing that meets the needs of working families in our community. Everyone in Harrisonburg should have access to decent and affordable housing. Currently families have to spend a disproportionate amount of their income just to find adequate housing. The 2021 City of Harrisonburg Comprehensive Housing Assessment and Market Study says:

**“More than 3,600 lower income renter households are cost-burdened and pay more than 30% of their income on housing costs.”**

1/12/21 City of Harrisonburg Comprehensive Housing Assessment and Market Study Powerpoint- page 7

Additionally, the Study's primary conclusion is that there is a mismatch in housing available for homeownership and rental. Only ten percent of Harrisonburg's rental units are available for families making \$27,750 (30% of the Area Median Income) and 8% of the ownership units are available to families making \$38,250 (50% of the Area Median Income). 1/12/21 Powerpoint-Page 4

While much more needs to be done, I support the plan for the Bluestone Town Center because it will begin to address the critical need highlighted in the Study by offering a mix of rental units and for-sale homes. Rental units will be affordable to families with an income of \$64,000 and below. The new homes that will be sold to households making \$64,000-\$100,000. These are households that are working in our educational institutions, factories and medical facilities. At present this type of housing is not being constructed in Harrisonburg. The demand for these units already exists in Harrisonburg.

Having enough housing for working families is not unique to Harrisonburg, many communities around the country are facing the same challenge as the cost of housing escalates. I have no doubt that due to the good quality of life in Harrisonburg and the Shenandoah Valley, we will continue to attract people, particularly higher income households. The Bluestone Town Center represents an opportunity to make sure that working families have homes where they can thrive in the community.

As leaders you have the opportunity to lead and prepare for the future by supporting the Bluestone Town Center.

Regards,  
Art Stoltzfus