May 8, 2022

Statement of Support for the Senior Living Facility at Sand Hill Road (Permit application #8177 – Section 417)

My name is Dr. Francesca Catalano, the Dean of Health and Sciences at Castleton University. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. I would like to review the original intent for the use of the land gift from Castleton University as well as discuss the impact this proposed development would have on the education of Castleton University students.

Healthcare reform constantly challenges communities to improve the overall health of its constituents by innovating ways to not only increase the quality of the healthcare received but to improve access while decreasing overall cost. This Sandhill project will create an independent, assisted living and memory care facility that supports this industry push to a more community-based healthcare infrastructure.

The concept of a senior living project is in alignment with the use that Castleton University envisioned when it donated the parcel of land to the town of Castleton years ago. In August of 2021, retired CU President David Wolk wrote the following to the Castleton Zoning Administrator:

“I offered to deed the property to the town with the express interest that it would be used for "the public good", and in fact that was part of our written agreement. We even conceived of a senior living environment, somewhat akin to Elderhostel arrangements at many universities, concepts growing around the country where active seniors participate in the social, educational and cultural opportunities afforded to them. Universities benefit from the community service opportunities for students, academic as well as co curricular, that would enhance undergraduate and graduate education. I can envision several academic departments offering internships and shadowing experiences for students, and I can imagine concerts, plays, poetry readings, and the widely acclaimed Soundings Program being very attractive opportunities for seniors and students to mix together for mutual benefit.”

The project as currently envisioned dovetails perfectly with the intended use as articulated by President Wolk.

In addition, I believe this facility will significantly impact the clinical training of students studying in several different programs at Castleton University, notably nursing, social work, and athletic training. The project will directly impact nursing education by providing additional clinical learning opportunities for students enrolled in our nursing program. The national shortage of nurses is acutely felt in Vermont, resulting in the state placing renewed focus on nursing education as a key area of workforce development. Clinical site experiences for our nursing students are currently limited in part because
facilities cannot always extend their staff to provide these experiences for our students. For example, our second-year nursing students must use simulation laboratories for the required clinical hours needed to meet accreditation standards. This facility would directly provide these students access to an additional and local clinical site, a significantly improved education experience over simulations. The community-based nature of the project would also allow specific training for student-nurses interested in practicing community-based medicine upon licensure.

The benefits of the site extend beyond nursing education. Social work students might gain valuable experience working with the elderly as well as supporting family dynamics centered on elder care. Athletic training students in our master’s program are required to gain experience treating a wide variety of client populations; this facility might prove itself to be a viable clinical site for these students. Other programs like exercise science and even music might find ways to incorporate internships and performances with this facility, either in credit bearing ways or in developing co-curricular experiences.

All of these opportunities increase the number and types of experiential learning for our students while at the same time providing meaningful social and intellectual interactions with members of the facility. These relationships underscore the ways a community can support, educate and care for its own members. The proposed use of this properly reflects its intended use and will provide rich educational and social experiences for all members of the community. I offer these reasons in support of this permit and I thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee.

Francesca Catalano, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Health and Science
Castleton University
62 Alumni Drive
Castleton, VT 05735
(802) 468 – 1213
francesca.catalano@castleton.edu