

AN OPEN LETTER FROM BURLINGTON SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

May 9, 2025

Mayor Emma Mulvaney-Stanak
City of Burlington
149 Church Street
Burlington, VT 05401

Dear Mayor Mulvaney-Stanak,

We, the undersigned small business owners in downtown Burlington, are writing to express our deep concern about the current state of our city center. Many of us have been proud to operate here for decades, serving as anchors on Church Street and in the surrounding neighborhoods through various economic shifts, construction, the pandemic, and cultural changes. We have consistently supported Burlington by providing local jobs, sales tax revenue, mentoring students, sponsoring community events, and contributing to the vibrant character that defines our city.

However, we have reached a critical point where we must voice a serious alarm: our downtown is facing a crisis.

We have participated in numerous meetings and focus groups with the hope of seeing positive change. Despite a stated desire by the administration to impact change, these statements have not translated into tangible results. Businesses are closing their doors, valued long-term employees are leaving, and residents are increasingly choosing to avoid the downtown area. Those of us who remain feel neglected and increasingly unsafe. Our expectations are not for an unattainable ideal, but for effective leadership, genuine support, and the fundamental resources necessary to operate businesses that are safe, welcoming, and sustainable.

Therefore, we urgently request that the City Administration take immediate action on the following:

1. Clean, Safe, and Usable Parking Garages

Downtown parking garages have become unwelcoming and unsafe for customers and employees alike. Poor lighting, lack of surveillance, and the frequent presence of drug use or harassment are actively deterring visitors and impacting business.

We urge the City to prioritize immediate safety upgrades—improved lighting, visible security cameras, and a consistent security presence. We also recommend reinstating the first two hours of free parking as a gesture of good faith to encourage downtown visits and support struggling businesses.

2. Employee Safety and Retention

Many of our employees—particularly young women and students—feel unsafe coming to work. Incidents of street harassment, visible drug use, and threatening behavior have led several staff

members to quit after just one or two shifts. This directly affects our ability to operate and retain reliable teams.

We ask the City to implement a visible downtown safety presence during our peak months—such as walking patrols, trained community ambassadors (who stop into businesses at night to check in)—to deter disruptive behavior and support those who work in our city. Small businesses cannot serve as crisis responders.

3. Accountability and Support for Public Safety

While we are encouraged by the hiring of Chief Burke, downtown businesses continue to shoulder the burden of managing overdoses, confronting shoplifting, and responding to mental health crises without adequate support. This is not our role—we need trained professionals and a responsive system in place. The administration must address the lack of meaningful consequences for repeat offenders, which has led to emboldened behavior and a troubling escalation in both frequency and severity.

As a constructive step, we urge the City to explore restorative approaches. Assigning offenders to community service—such as picking up needles, cleaning human waste, or removing graffiti—could provide a path toward accountability while addressing the visible impact of these harms.

4. Needle Removal and Public Drug Use

It is unacceptable that families, children, and workers must step over used needles on sidewalks and in doorways. Burlington must adopt a serious, sustained strategy for needle cleanup and make this a top public safety priority.

We call on the City to implement a consistent and visible needle cleanup program, including daily sweeps of high-traffic areas, responsive reporting tools, and clear accountability for results. While the public supported harm reduction through a needle exchange program, what we are seeing today falls far outside that intent and must be urgently corrected.

5. Children's Safety

Let us not forget: our downtown includes a high school, a middle school, and a YMCA daycare. Students can't safely ride their bikes to school without risk of theft, and they regularly encounter needles or erratic behavior on their way to class. This is a crisis for the entire community—not just business owners.

6. Relocation of the Free Lunch Program from the Parking Garage

We support efforts to feed and care for those in need. However, the free lunch program operating out of our main parking garage has had a negative impact on the area. Some attendees have repeatedly stolen from businesses or caused harm. We respectfully ask that this program be relocated to a more appropriate and secure setting—not eliminated. We are aware there have been alternative spots brought to the City's attention and we would like those explored.

7. Graffiti and Property Damage

Graffiti covers public and private buildings with little to no recourse or support for removal. While we understand that private property is not a municipal responsibility, rampant graffiti is a theft-of-value of a collectively incalculable amount. We propose a cleanup enforcement program and grant funding to assist property owners. We also support restorative efforts—such as assigning cleanup duties to those caught shoplifting or vandalizing.

8. Better Communication and Mitigation from City Departments

The massive multi-year construction project on Main Street has severely impacted foot traffic and accessibility for businesses in that area. There is minimal signage to help redirect or reassure visitors, and no visible effort to offset the economic harm to affected businesses. We respectfully urge the City and Department of Public Works to take immediate steps to improve directional and wayfinding signage throughout the downtown area. Clear, professional signage—both pedestrian and vehicular—should inform visitors that businesses are open, and guide them on how to access storefronts and available parking. This is an essential measure to support our local economy during this disruptive period. We urge the City and DPW to restore the two free hours of parking downtown to help support the customers who continue to come despite these challenges. This would be a simple, meaningful step to show that the City values and supports its downtown economy.

Additionally, there is little to no notice when construction or street work impacts access to our buildings. Most recently, the sidewalk and employee entrances next to one business were blocked off with no prior communication. This is unacceptable and disruptive to operations. Customers and deliveries were confused, staff didn't know how to enter the building, and no timeline or contact information was provided. A simple heads-up could have prevented confusion and lost revenue.

9. Public Nudity Ordinance

We are formally requesting an ordinance that would prohibit public nudity within Burlington's downtown core, similar to the regulation in Brattleboro. We have observed an increasing trend of individuals engaging in deliberately inappropriate behavior in public spaces, which is causing alarm among families and negatively impacting Burlington's reputation as a welcoming environment. We believe this issue warrants prompt attention and can be effectively addressed with an ordinance before the summer months.

10. Invest in Downtown's Image

The perception of Burlington as unsafe is now widespread—from Chittenden County to our own student population. Tax dollars must be used to support coordinated marketing and PR efforts that promote downtown and re-establish it as a vibrant, safe, and inclusive space. College students in particular have stopped visiting downtown—what can be done to rebuild that trust? Many of the same mitigation issues mentioned above will help regain students' trust.

Keeping Downtown Local

While newer ventures have come and gone, we have remained—through COVID, economic hardship, and an increasingly difficult downtown environment. But even we have limits. If we go, the local feel of downtown goes.

The growing number of local business closures is a serious concern, posing a threat to the distinctive charm that defines Burlington. We face the risk of these unique establishments being replaced by ubiquitous national chains. This trend is also making it increasingly challenging for emerging Vermont entrepreneurs to thrive.

We are your partners in building a strong Burlington. Now we need you to act like our partner. We respectfully request that your administration address these urgent issues and work on meaningful solutions.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned Burlington Business Owners