in Vermont'' which I think lends itself very well to our mission. For many, there is joy in discovering the individuals, businesses, small producers, and artisans who are preserving the traditions and craftsmanship made famous by Italians both in Italy and here in Vermont. For example, there are many businesses valued for their commitment to sharing Italian culture as business owners, native-born Italians, Italian Americans and purveyors of Italian food, wine and Italian made products. And like Italy, Vermont has its own brand with its reputation built on local production, appreciation for quality and craftsmanship.

Vermont and Italy share similar values and I believe there is already a deep appreciation for Made in Italy. We are fortunate to have Italian farms like Agricola, a small diversified farm in Panton, VT run by Alessandra and Stefano. Both native Italians they are continuing the traditional methods for making authentic Italian salumi and have established Monti Verdi Salumi. More recently Trenchers Italian Farmhouse began producing and selling home-made pastas, sauces, bomboloni, focaccia and more at local farmers markets. Jenny and Giacomo Vascotto are also sharing traditional Italian techniques, practices and delicious food with a growing number of devoted followers. So you see, in some ways Made in Italy is also Made in Vermont.

RECOGNIZING DAN & WHIT'S GENERAL STORE

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, in Vermont, the general store is the epicenter of a community. It is where people not only buy their groceries and newspapers, but also tools and hardware, mittens and hats, axes and chainsaws, gas for their cars, and too many other things to name. But just as important, general stores are where Vermonters meet their neighbors, and when the weather is good, pass the time and talk about their families, things going on in town, or the state of the world.

Marcelle and I have been to just about every general store in Vermont, and each one has its own history and character. One of them, Dan & Whit's, stands out. Located in Norwich about halfway up the eastern side of the State bordering on the Connecticut River, the store that became Dan & Whit's has been operating since 1891. It was originally called Merrill's Store, and the old Merrill's sign is still affixed to the front. The same neon clock, mounted high on the front of the store's façade, has told the time to the town since the 1950s. Made by the Electric Neon Clock Co. in Cleveland, it was recently restored and made energy efficient.

In 1955, Dan Fraser and Whit Hicks, who had both worked at the store for over 20 years, bought it from Mr. Merrill. Since then, Dan & Whit's has been open for business 365 days a year, including a half day on Christmas and a half day on Thanksgiving. Dan and Whit ran the store as partners, and Dan's wife Eliza, known to all as ''Bunnie'', did the bookkeeping in the raised office near the stationery and greeting cards until Whit retired and sold out in 1972.

Dan, who from what I am told hardly took a day off during all those years, retired in 1993, and turned the management of the store over to his sons George and Jack, and their sister Jane pitched in off and on. George's wife Susan took over Bunnie's job in the office, which hadn't changed in decades, except the typewriter was replaced by a computer. Ownership of the store is currently shared between George and his two sons Dan and Matt. Dan, after a 14-year career as a special education teacher, has taken over the day-to-day management.

Most townspeople have an account, so they can simply sign the register and pay the bill at the end of the month. At no charge for local calls, anyone can use the push-button phone with its long cord by the ice machine, and before cell phones, it was a vital link from the magical abundance of the store to the outside world: ''Do we need anything at Dan & Whit's?''

There is a reason why the sign in the store window says, ''If we don't have it, you don't need it,'' because when you walk in and keep walking, the store never seems to end. Dan & Whit's has got absolutely everything, at least everything a person could reasonably want or need. There is fresh fruit and vegetables, a selection of wines, kitchen utensils, bins of nails and boxes of screws, fishing tackle, ladders and rakes, paint, bags of horse feed, maple syrup and candy, toys, ice cream scooped on the premises in summertime, home-brewed beer, bright orange hunting caps, snow boots, plumbing and electrical supplies, shovels and wheelbarrows, wood stoves, birdseed, the local and national newspapers, a deli, gasoline pumps and an electric vehicle charging station, and lots more. The place is kept warm in the winter by a wood-fired furnace in the basement, requiring cords and cords of wood—delivered, split, and stacked behind the Frasers' homes, and there are solar panels on the roof. Dan & Whit's has long been a favored stop for hikers on the Appalachian Trail, which passes through the center of Norwich.

Over the years, Dan & Whit's has hired local high school students to run the cash registers, and there was a time not that long ago when the employees who stocked the shelves and helped you find what you were looking for were long-timers like Larry Smith, who worked there for over 50 years.

Recently, like so many other businesses in our State and around the country, it has been hard to find help. In fact, Dan & Whit's was facing the real possibility of closing, which would have been devastating for the people of Norwich, as well as countless others who come there to shop, as well as former residents of Norwich who stop at the store just to be sure that it is the same as it always was.

As many have remarked, Dan & Whit's is the heart of Norwich, and losing it would have changed everything. I can't imagine Norwich without Dan & Whit's, and I suspect just about everyone who knows the store feels the same way. Real estate listings for property sales in the town include the distance from Dan & Whit's. Hundreds of notices are along the wall by the entrance: dog lost, secondhand items for sale, yoga lessons, a free concert, snow plowing. It all happens at the general store.

Fortunately, but not surprisingly, when word got out that the store might close, the people of Norwich came to the rescue, and Dan & Whit's has not lost a day of business. I want to add my thanks to Dan and the volunteers who saved the heart of Norwich. They have reminded us of what is best about Vermont and, in doing so, have set an example for people everywhere.

I ask unanimous consent that a piece written on December 7 by Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

THE HEART OF A COMMUNITY: A SMALL BUSINESS

(By Robert Reich)

I've got a special place near my heart for Dan & Whit's general store in Norwich, Vermont. It was there for me during my undergraduate years in college in nearby Hanover, New Hampshire—often on snowy evenings when I couldn't get supplies elsewhere. Years later, when my parents moved to Vermont for their retirement, Dan & Whit's was there for them, too.

Like many places around the country, Vermont has been struggling with finding enough workers to fill jobs. But unlike most urban centers, where the obvious answer is to pay workers more, rural towns can't always count on higher wages to elicit more job applicants because populations are thin and often declining. And unlike profitable national retail chains, mom-and-pop businesses can't just absorb higher labor costs. And they can't simply pass them on to customers in higher prices, because small-town customers might not have the ability to pay.

So when Dan & Whit's owner Dan Fraser recently put up a ''Help Wanted'' sign, the inhabitants of Norwich knew it was bad news. (I never met the younger Dan but I'm sure I met his grandfather, who passed the store on to his father, who passed it on to Dan.) After three generations, Dan would have to close the place down if he didn't get help. So what was he to do? I heard the rest of the story on the radio. It turned out that Dan didn't need to do anything. Word went out. Soon, Dan's customers began applying for the jobs. Rick Ferrell, a local doctor, took on a shift at the register. A retired finance director applied for the deli counter. A nurse, a teacher, a psychology professor, a therapist, a school principal—nearly two dozen customers have stepped up to stock shelves, do the inventory, and clean up the place, so that Dan & Whit's can remain open. (Virtually all of these new hires are donating their hourly wages to some of Dan's favorite charities.)

I've spent a lot of time over the years examining what happens to communities when important businesses close or abandon them—often because some bean counters back in headquarters hundreds or thousands of miles away decide it's not worth the cost of keeping the businesses going where they are. Economists often praise capitalism's wondrous ''efficiencies'' at moving assets to their ''highest and best uses.'' Well, there's

something to that. But what's left out of the equation are the social costs of these moves. They can be quite high.

When asked why the people of Norwich stepped in to help Dan & Whit's keep going, employee Dianne Miller said it was ''because Dan & Whit's is the heartbeat of this community.'' Others described it as the ''heart of the town.'' That's the best quick summary of the social benefits of a place like Dan & Whit's I've ever heard. Communities do have hearts. When businesses at those hearts disappear, more is lost than an economic asset. The community loses a place that allows it to be a community—a place where people meet up, congregate, exchange gossip and information, barter, learn about common problems, sometimes decide to take action.

I remember Dan & Whit's as such a place. I can't imagine Norwich without it. Luckily, it won't have to be. But this isn't just a ''feel good'' story about one country town coming together to save an iconic general store. It seems to me there's an important lesson here for all of us, wherever we live.

American capitalism is the harshest form of capitalism in all of the world's advanced economies. It takes almost no account of social costs and benefits. Businesses swoop in and swoop out wherever and however profits can be maximized and losses minimized.

But communities are different. They aren't nearly as footloose as financial capital. They're built on social capital, which often takes years to accumulate and can't be cashed in.

I think people owe something to businesses that are the hearts of our communities. Maybe we shouldn't allow big chains or Walmarts to drain our main streets of the commerce they need to survive. (Even if Walmart's items are cheaper, the social costs of losing the small businesses that undergird our community are often way higher.) Maybe we should donate some of our own time and labor to account for the importance of these core businesses. Maybe those of us who can afford to should buy shares in them, to give them an added financial cushion. At the very least, we owe them our patronage—rather than, say, the Waltons or Jeff Bezos.

What do you think?

NOMINATION OF DILAWAR SYED

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, I rise today to reiterate my strong support for Dilawar Syed to serve as Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

For those who are unfamiliar with Mr. Syed, he is a highly qualified and widely-supported nominee for Deputy Administrator, who has the backing of numerous business groups and organizations. In many ways, he is the very picture of the American Dream, a businessowner, entrepreneur, and job creator who was born in Pakistan and educated in the United States. Mr. Syed also has firsthand experience dealing with challenges small businesses have faced during this pandemic.

As Deputy Administrator, he would largely be responsible for running the day-to-day operations at SBA. He has repeatedly made himself available to discuss any concerns Republicans may still have related to his background and qualifications, things that actually matter in his ability to do his job. However, for reasons completely unrelated to his background and qualifications, Republicans on the Small Business Committee have continued to block his nomination, for months.

Earlier this summer, they disputed the results of a committee meeting we held to advance the nominee based on a technicality, even though Mr. Syed was approved during that meeting by voice vote. Since then, they have taken a different approach, deciding to boycott committee meetings on five separate occasions, denying a quorum to consider the nominee. We are now at the point where Senate Republicans, even on this normally very bipartisan committee, will not even show up to provide fair consideration for this nominee. Not one Republican will show up.

Over the course of the process, Republicans have changed their reasons for blocking the nominee. First, they were concerned about SBA loans his company received during the pandemic, even though these loans were lawfully obtained and fully repaid before he was even nominated to be Deputy Administrator.

Then, they insinuated he was somehow anti-Jewish and anti-Israel, despite broad support he has received from within these communities.

Now, they are concerned about lawful SBA loans to Planned Parenthood health centers. Just to be crystal clear, these health centers lawfully received loans through bipartisan COVID legislation that was signed by President Trump. It is unacceptable to unfairly and unlawfully target organizations for political reasons. And it is even worse to then stall a qualified nominee because of this.

When it comes down to it, Mr. Syed would be an asset to SBA and the businesses they serve. He deserves fair consideration in the U.S. Senate.

If Republicans actually cared about helping the small businesses struggling during the pandemic, they would stop blocking nominees to fill positions that are critical to helping them.

Republicans should do their job and let us consider his nomination. Every day they continue this obstruction, they are doing a disservice to businesses in our country, which cannot afford uncertainty at this time.

Enough is enough.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. President, I rise to speak on the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2022.

The National Defense Authorization Act provides crucial resources for our Armed Forces and our national defense, including a 2.7 percent pay increase for our servicemembers and DOD civilian employees, parental and bereavement leave for servicemembers, and the creation of basic needs allowance. I am glad that the Senate was able to come together on a bipartisan basis to pass this legislation to support our servicemembers, strengthen our national security, and invest in critical projects in my home State of Maryland, including over $500 million in authorized military construction projects across the State. This legislation also includes several important pieces of legislation that I introduced to strengthen our Foreign Service, ensure that all students have a fair shot at attending one of our Federal service academies, and support our Federal firefighters. While there are parts of this legislation that I have concerns with and important priorities that were left out, I believe that, on balance, this bill serves our national interest.

In particular, I am pleased that this NDAA includes the Foreign Service Families Act of 2021, which I introduced with Senator Sullivan, with whom I cochair the Foreign Service Caucus. As the son of a Foreign Service Officer, I know the challenges that Foreign Service families face in accessing education and employment when they accompany our diplomats abroad. That is why I introduced this legislation, which authorizes expanded employment services for the spouses of Foreign Service officers serving overseas. It also extends in-state tuition at public colleges and universities for Foreign Service members and their families after 30 days of residency in a State and allows Foreign Service families to terminate leases without penalty when ordered to move for work. This legislation will make a real difference in the lives of our Foreign Service families and will help reduce attrition and attract the talented and diverse diplomatic workforce we need to compete on the global stage. It is modeled after benefits we extend to military families, who also have to move frequently in service to our country.

I am also glad that this legislation includes the SERVE Act, which I introduced with Senator CARDIN and Representative BROWN. This bill ensures that high school students applying to attend one of our Federal service academies do not lose out on opportunities to be nominated because of a vacancy in Congress. After the tragic loss of my friend and colleague, Representative Elijah Cummings, my office learned that nomination slots at our service academies, like the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, cease to exist if a seat in Congress is vacant at the time nominations are due. This meant that a student from Congressman Cummings' district had one-third fewer opportunities to receive a nomination to a service academy. As a result of this new law, Senators may make nominations on behalf of a vacant seat, ensuring that students do not lose an opportunity to serve their country through no fault of their own.

Further, I am glad Armed Services Committee agreed to include the Federal Firefighter Flexibility and Fairness Act, which I introduced with Senators TESTER, COLLINS, and CARPER and Representatives SARBANES and WITTMAN. This legislation grants additional