

Affordable Housing Listening Sessions

Summary Report (August 5, 2018)

Between January and May 2018, the Norwich Planning Commission held a series of five listening sessions on affordable housing.

- Two of the sessions (on May 5 and May 10) were public meetings, held at Marion Cross Elementary School and Tracy Hall.
- Two of the sessions involved joining previously planned meetings of the Norwich Business Roundtable (January 12) and Energy Committee (February 27) to gather input from attendees.
- The fifth session was hosted by the Congregational Church on April 15.

The purpose of these sessions was to learn what Norwich residents see as the most pressing housing needs facing the town and what ideas they have for potential solutions. This report briefly summarizes what was learned through these sessions.

Housing Needs

- Most participants recognized there is a significant need to create housing options in Norwich that rent or sell at levels below what is currently being offered in the market and increase the diversity of Norwich's housing stock.
 - As one participant noted: Norwich has a very limited range of housing sizes. There is a need for smaller homes, including condos and apartments, so that Norwich could provide housing with a mix of sizes and price points; the goal should be to provide a housing stock that includes units affordable to people at all incomes, and not just housing that is affordable to one particular group.
 - Different housing is needed for people with different demographics. Seniors may be fine with sharing walls through townhouses or multifamily housing. Young people may benefit from starter homes built at a greater density. Low-income families may require subsidized housing developed by a nonprofit or local government.
 - Some expressed the view that townhouses and small cottages would work better in Norwich than multi-story condos.
 - One participant asked why new housing was needed in Norwich when Vermont's overall population was shrinking.
- Participants urged a focus on the following populations:
 - *Seniors* – Many seniors live on a fixed income and some existing Norwich seniors struggle to pay their property taxes and mortgage. Some seniors would like to downsize

and remain in Norwich, but there are insufficient affordable options for doing so. One participant suggested we focus on creating residential communities where seniors and families with children could interact.

- *Families with children.* With enrollment at Marion Cross below capacity and projections of future enrollment reductions, there is a risk that school taxes will climb due to rising per-pupil expenditures. By creating affordable housing with larger bedroom sizes geared to larger families, the town could attract more families with children, helping to lower school taxes (by lowering per-pupil expenditures) and increase diversity in the schools.
- *Norwich employees.* Many people who work in Norwich cannot afford to live here. While not all of the individuals employed in Norwich would want to live here, many believe they should have that opportunity by creating more affordable housing options. Among other benefits, this would make it easier to recruit people to work in Norwich and reduce energy use due to long commuting car trips.
- *Residents who struggle to pay their property taxes.* A number of participants expressed concern that it is difficult for some Norwich residents to afford their property taxes and urged consideration of options for reducing the overall tax burden so their housing expenses would be more manageable.
- *Young people, including children of existing residents who wish to stay or return.* There are very few options affordable to young people. There is a need for lower-cost rental units and starter homes.
- *Workers making \$15 to \$20 per hour,* including both current Norwich residents and individuals that may wish to move here.

Potential Solutions

Participants identified a wide range of potential solutions, including the following:

- Developing new affordable rental housing by a nonprofit housing developer such as the Twin Pines Housing Trust that can tap state and federal housing resources.
- Modifying zoning rules to reduce the cost of development in Norwich, such as by strengthening the existing policy in Norwich that allows developers that build affordable housing to build more units on a given property than otherwise allowed under the zoning code.
- Increasing the density of housing along the Route 5 South corridor.

- Several participants noted that Route 5 South would be a good place to put affordable housing. It is close to the center of town with good access to public transit and jobs, making it easy to provide town services and reduce car mileage.
 - Other participants expressed concerns with this idea, especially if it would lead to large-scale development projects.
- Some participants urged a focus on creating affordable owner-occupied homes, while others urged a focus on creating affordable rental opportunities.
- Facilitating the creation of accessory dwelling units, which are additional housing units located adjacent to or on the same property as a principal residence. While Norwich’s zoning rules permit accessory dwelling units, participants raised a number of concerns, including questions of how these additional units would be treated for tax purposes. One specific question was whether the assessor would assume the accessory unit is to be rented at the full market rent even if the owner chooses to rent it at a more affordable level.
 - A related idea was to split up some of the larger homes in town into apartments.
- Developing a planned and well-landscaped development of 15 to 30 small square-footage housing units that would provide a place for seniors and young families to interact. It could have a day care center or other amenities to make it feel like a community. The units could share a wall or perhaps be small cottages. One participant suggested that the clustering of small houses would help overcome the feeling of isolation. The sharing of walls would reduce construction costs and provide environmental benefits in terms of reduced energy use.
- Placing affordable housing on property owned by the Norwich Fire District off of Beaver Meadow Road to which the town has development rights.
- Integrating affordable housing throughout the town
 - One specific idea that was raised was to create a nuanced exception to the town’s zoning that would allow for the subdivision of land to create individual housing units sold at an affordable price, even if subdivision would not currently be permitted.
 - Another suggestion was to find 10 to 20 small parcels within town that could be developed with affordable housing and put up to six units on each lot.
 - However, some expressed a desire to develop affordable housing close to where the jobs are – i.e., in or near the village area to reduce energy associated with long and frequent car trips.

- Creating a location for individuals to site manufactured homes, which tend to be less expensive than stick-built homes. [\(Note: Current Norwich zoning regulations already allow for manufactured homes.](#) See Town of Norwich Zoning Regulations 7-1-09 Section 4.10 page 56)

Other Suggestions

Participants offered a number of additional suggestions for educating town residents and making progress toward an affordable housing strategy, including:

- Setting goals, such as specific goals for the share of housing in Norwich that should be affordable or goals for the number of affordable units to create in the next five years.
- Adopting a grand plan with a mix of different solutions for affordable housing, rather than putting all of our eggs in one basket.
- Developing cost calculators and models to help resident understand the financial impact on the town of adding affordable housing.
- Assembling photos that provide illustrations of what different types of affordable housing would look like to help residents understand the options.
 - As one participant noted, it is difficult for the public to address affordable housing in the abstract. Visualizations that make it clear what the housing might look like could help to allay people’s fears.
- Communicating more effectively about affordable housing by, for example, emphasizing environmental benefits and creating and maintaining a sense of community.
- Reestablishing the town’s \$45,000 fund for affordable housing and clarifying how the funds can be used.

Other Notes and Concerns

- Some participants urged that we focus on mixed income housing rather than developments dedicated to one income group. One participant cited Gile Hill as a model of a mixed-income well-landscaped development. Another cited a new building going up in White River Junction.
- A number of participants focused on the importance of creating homes that are not only affordable but also energy-efficient, including net zero homes.
- Several participants felt it was important to limit business development outside the Village Center that would compete with current businesses

- One participant raised a concern about whether affordable housing would be truly occupied by those in need. How would income be monitored?
 - There was also a concern expressed that people who qualify for affordable housing because of their incomes and then experience an increase in income nevertheless stay in the housing, which is needed by others.
- A number of participants raised concerns about whether new development would raise taxes.
- There were different views on the question of scale. One participant suggested we start on the smaller side and don't push the scale of development. On the other hand, another participant expressed support for the previously discussed Route 5 South Zoning proposal that would have facilitated development at a somewhat larger scale in order to create economies of scale that make it possible to create affordable housing at no cost to local taxpayers.
- There was concern about how any new affordable units would remain affordable, as well as how existing rental units could remain affordable. Is some form of rent regulation or rent stabilization needed?
- Several participants noted that lack of public sewer is a big limitation on the ability to develop affordable housing
- One participant suggested we have meetings with Thetford to discuss common problems and solutions.