

Community Listening Session on Affordable Housing in Norwich

May 10, 2018: Tracy Hall

Attendees

Planning Commission Members: Jaci Allen, Susan Brink, Jeff Lubell, Steve Thoms, Melissa Horowitz, Chris Brien

Community Members: Roger Arnold, Claudette Brochu, Ernie Ciccotelli, Linda Gray, Paul Manganiello, Mark McMahon (from Thetford), Kathleen Shepard, Doug Wiberding

The session commenced at 7:05 and ended at 8:20 p.m.

Jeff Lubell and Jaci Allen welcomed the attendees and described the affordable housing listening session as an opportunity to obtain input from town residents on their understanding of the housing challenges facing the town and their ideas for addressing them. After the listening sessions on May 5 and May 10, the Planning Commission plans to hold a series of public forums on key options for increasing the affordability of housing in Norwich. Both the listening sessions and public forums will help inform the development of a proposed housing strategy for the town.

The discussion focused on four questions:

1. Do you believe it is important for there to be housing options in Norwich for people of different incomes, including working families, older adults and people with low and moderate-incomes?
 - Are there any particular populations you are concerned about?
 - Is there a particular type of housing that you believe is needed, such as rental housing, housing for seniors that want to downsize, or affordable for-sale homes?
2. What suggestions do you have about how to expand the availability of housing affordable to people of different incomes in Norwich?
3. Do you have any questions about affordable housing?
4. Are there any topics related to affordable housing you'd like to learn more about?

The following comments and ideas were raised by one or more participants in the dialogue:

1. There is a need for workforce housing for young people and young families, including housing for people making \$15 to \$20 an hour. Employers say there is no housing for people who work here.
2. There is a need for more housing options affordable for older adults. There's a long waiting list for Norwich Senior Housing and turnover is minimal.
3. There needs to be a focus on helping current residents continue to afford their homes. Some residents cannot afford the taxes, and other residents cannot afford necessary maintenance.
4. While most participants agreed there was a need for more affordable housing options in Norwich, one resident asked why new housing was needed when Vermont's overall population was shrinking.
5. Norwich would benefit from a greater variety of housing options at a range of price points. Emphasis is now on single family home ownership, and median price is the highest in Windsor County. We need more options, including rental housing, condos, apartments and lower-cost housing for purchase.
6. Norwich should adopt a grand plan with a mix of different solutions for affordable housing, rather than putting all its eggs in one basket.
7. Mixed income housing was favored over developments dedicated to one income group. Gile Hill was cited as a model of a mixed-income, well-landscaped development. Another cited a new building going up in White River Junction.
8. Need clearer messaging that Norwich is interested in ensuring an adequate stock of housing for people at all price points, and not just focused on housing for people with the very lowest incomes.
9. There's a real shortage of rentals at different price points. Very few options available for young families and folks starting out. One participant expressed a preference for homeownership, but others suggested rental housing was also important.
10. Some expressed the view that townhouses and small cottages would work better for Norwich than multi-story condos. There was also interest in developing 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.

11. 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?
12. There was also a concern expressed that people who qualify for affordable housing because of their incomes, then experience an increase in income but nevertheless stay in the housing which is needed by others.
13. Try using the approach taken by successful energy programs as a model to increase the amount of affordable housing in Norwich – i.e. develop financial incentives that encourages more affordable units.
14. Twin Pines was recommended as an excellent resource to help develop more affordable housing.
15. A suggestion was made to find 10 to 20 small parcels within town that could be developed with affordable housing and up to six units on each lot.
16. Another suggestion was to split up some of the larger homes in town into apartments.
17. Another suggestion was for the Town of Norwich to purchase land, use Fire District land, or contribute to a joint venture with Twin Pines to create more affordable housing.
18. A number of participants expressed interest in trying to develop accessory dwelling units, but expressed concerns with how the improvements would be assessed for property tax purposes. One participant asked whether there could be some guaranty that if you rent the unit out at an affordable level, that affordable rent level would be used to assess the income potential of the property, rather than the maximum income that could possibly be generated. Another idea was to provide low interest loans to build accessory dwelling units.
19. Another idea was to create a fine-tuned exception to the zoning laws that would allow the subdivision of a large lot far from the center of town in order to build affordable housing. This resident was generally supportive of the policy of reduced density as you moved further from the center of town, but thought that a narrow exception for the development of affordable housing would facilitate the availability of inexpensive land for affordable housing.
20. Have meetings with Thetford to discuss common problems and solutions.
21. The attendees discussed whether limitations on rents or sales prices were needed to ensure ongoing affordability.

22. Topics identified for for future forums:

- Financing options for affordable housing projects
- Potential partnerships for affordable housing projects, e.g. other towns, private partners
- Clarify the basis for the analysis that has concluded '4k-5k additional housing units are needed in the Upper Valley.' Where do these numbers come from? Discuss Norwich's responsibility for the regional need.
- Are there alternative septic solutions that could allow more units on land without sewers?
- Consider what else we may need to do to attract young workers to live in Norwich. Consider how to expand the availability of high-speed internet.
- The impact of more students on the schools and the benefits of growing the student population.
- Partnering with Vermods.
- Creating housing that is not only affordable but also energy-efficient and energy-generating / net zero.