

Community Listening Session on Affordable Housing in Norwich

May 5, 2018: Marion Cross Elementary School

Attendees

Planning Commission Members: Jaci Allen, Susan Brink, Jeff Lubell, Steve Thoms

Community Members: Chipper Ashley, Terri Ashley, Bill Hammond, Mary Layton, Irv Thomaes, Anne Garrigue

The session commenced at 3:05 and ended at 4:15 p.m.

After attendee introductions, 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 the 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. Norwich would benefit from 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 community member 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.
2. Norwich needs a stable or growing school population. Every 10 kids would bring our school property taxes down by reducing per-pupil spending. Marion Cross could accommodate 50 more students. This year they lost 5 students because a housing development stopped offering rental housing and 3 families could not find replacement housing they could afford in Norwich.

One resident noted that people do not understand the school tax issue and the fact that more children in the district can help lower taxes. Discussion ensued on how clearer information on this topic could help improve understanding. This topic was suggested as one possible topic for a future public forum.

A related issue raised was the adequacy of the leech field at Marion Cross, which apparently may need to be addressed at some point.

3. The attendees discussed whether limitations on rents or sales prices were needed to ensure ongoing affordability. One participant suggested it might be enough to restrict the square footage, while another noted that even smaller homes can rent or sell for a high price when there is a shortage of available units, as is presently the case in Norwich and the Upper Valley.
4. 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 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.
5. Strong support was expressed for: (a) Twin Pines; (b) the use of federal or state subsidies to produce affordable housing; (c) mixed income housing; and (d) providing housing that would enable town employees to afford to live here. One participant noted that it was difficult to find employees willing to take non-teacher jobs at Marion Cross due to the low salary relative to housing costs.

6. A number of ideas were raised for how to effectively talk about affordable housing:
 - a. Focus on energy-efficiency, climate warming concerns, and building and maintaining a community – in sum, “community and the environment.” A related idea discussed in the forum was how the placement of housing close to jobs and services helps reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.
 - b. Improve public understanding of the effect of additional children in lowering our school property taxes.
 - c. There were differences of opinion on whether it is productive to focus on the importance of Norwich doing its fair share to provide housing for working families, including those who work in town. One individual thought this was helpful framing while another feared that it put people on the defensive if they disagreed.
7. There was some discussion about setting affordable housing goals. One idea was to set 5-year goals rather than 10-year goals, as the latter might encourage complacency during the first 5 years of the 10-year period.
8. There was some discussion about the \$45,000 in town funds previously reserved for affordable housing, with questions raised about the current status of the funds and how they could best be used.
9. There was some discussion about where to put affordable housing, with participants variously recommending: (a) Route 5 South and river road (due to the availability of public transit and the proximity to jobs and services); (b) spreading affordable housing out around town and (c) looking into whether it might be possible to build affordable housing on the land owned by the Fire District on which the town of Norwich may have development rights.
10. Topics identified for future forums:
 - a. Effect of affordable housing on school taxes
 - b. An overview of the process from town plan through to development approvals so the relative responsibility of different parties would be clear, as well as the hurdles that make it unlikely that sprawling new development will take place.
 - c. Accessory dwelling units – how could these be made more feasible.
 - d. Provide examples of developments that have been implemented in other places, preferably in New England and especially Vermont.

APPROVED 5-10-18