

Working the Amherst Housing Puzzle: A Community Problem Solving Forum

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Notes Compiled by Etta Walsh, League of Women Voters of Amherst

Note takers: Kathy Campbell, Phyllis Lehrer, Cynthia Brubaker, Etta Walsh and Rebecca Fricke

Opening remarks were given by Rebecca Fricke (League of Women Voters of Amherst), Dave Ziomek (Town of Amherst) and John Hornik (Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust). These were followed by a panel discussion “**Studio Apartments Coming to Amherst**” with Joanne Campbell and Laura Baker (Valley Community Development) and Danielle McColgan (CHD). Following the panel discussion the audience was asked to pick one of five discussion groups. The groups were given the following instructions.

***Group Goals:** The purpose of these groups is both to **INFORM** participants about the topic and to **GENERATE IDEAS** about next steps for the community and then prioritize. Finally, if there are participants who appear interested in working further in this effort, please be sure to identify them. Encourage everyone to offer ideas without comment or criticism from others. The task here is to generate at least a few next steps that the community could take to address problems of homelessness.*

Group A – Studio Apartments

Led by Laura Baker, real estate project manager, Valley Community Development

Studio apartments (for single tenants) and SROs (single-room-occupancy) housing, where tenants have private rooms and public areas for cooking, bathing and congregating, are good steps to combat homelessness and provide housing for low-income workers. But Amherst does not have any of this housing and it is unclear if it is allowable under current zoning laws.

Amherst has **inclusionary zoning**, an affordable-housing tool that links production of affordable housing to the production of market-rate housing. Currently, the town is battling with the owner/developer of Presidential Apartments, charging that its approval for expanding the apartment complex was a 6-apartment set-aside for low-income residents. The developer instead rented those apartments to market-rate tenants and Amherst officials have issued a \$600-a-day fine until the issue is resolved. That matter is under litigation.

Studios and SROs need to be situated in the downtown area, where tenants could access public transportation, retailers and social services to transition from homelessness.

But public reluctance to create this type of housing may be a powerful barrier. To overcome this, housing advocates must build support among Amherst residents, Educating residents about the need for this type of housing, and how it would look and operate, was considered the top priority for this group.

Outreach efforts should be mounted, using:

- News media
- Community groups (such as the Amherst Women’s Club and LWVA)

- Faith community, and;
- Display boards mounted in public places such as the Amherst Senior Center.

Education efforts could center on older residents (empty nesters) who might be persuaded to donate, or sell at a reduced price, outdated houses to the nonprofit Valley Community Development agency for conversion to studio apartments/SROs.

Amherst also needs to inventory sites that are currently available (non-conforming lots, infill lots and others) that could be used for studios/SROs.

Amherst's very success as an upscale community is, in itself, a barrier to creating studio apartments/SROs. Larger homes in the downtown area are expensive, as are house lots. Low-income residents who have cars would face another obstacle – the lack of adequate parking in town.

Recorder Etta Walsh

Group B: "Encouraging and Supporting Development"

How can Amherst leverage available resources to maximize affordable housing. What are the barriers to affordable housing? What changes are needed?

Led by Tom Kegelman, Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust

The town is not making full use of existing zoning laws. Specifically, (1) there are too many exemptions to the inclusionary zoning law, as currently interpreted, and (2) too little use of tax incentives, which are supposed to help developers recoup the difference between "affordable" and "market" rental rates.

The Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust is a new option for the town, in that it can hold assets. The town hasn't had this in the past, and it should be used.

Set aside a portion of conservation land for small-house cluster development. (The current version of this is when a land owner puts a large tract in a conservation trust, the part with frontage is left out and those frontage lots are sold at market rates.) Small houses can be built for as little as \$50-60,000. Perhaps AMAFT can provide mortgages. Might need zoning changes for cluster housing.

Expand the possibilities for "backyard homes" (also known as "carriage units" or "mother-in-law apartments.") A few can be built as a matter of right by homeowners, but their use is fairly restricted. Some require special permits (e.g., finishing a carriage house over a certain number of square feet.) In addition to expanding existing zoning laws to allow for this, Amherst could provide incentives to provide housing for income-restricted individuals/families, rather than students.

There is opposition to just about every new project that comes before the Planning Board. This seems to be (at least, in part) an education problem, to make Amherst a more welcoming community for affordable housing -- we are not talking about the large-scale urban "projects" of the '60s.

Be more proactive. Put out a targeted RFP itemizing what the town has to offer (tax incentives, surplus property, CPAC money, zoning adjustment possibilities) and ask developers to propose projects with a lot of affordable units, see what they come up with.

Recorder Katherine Campbell

Group C: "Preventing Homelessness"

Outreach counselors, small investment for significant returns; useful models, effective strategies. Led by Julie Federman, Amherst Department of Health director

First, there needs to be more education about the issue, concentrating on removing the stigma of poverty, homelessness, etc.

Educate public officials such as Town Meeting members and government administrators about homelessness, so that stigmas and negative perceptions are reduced, thus improving chances of increased funding for homelessness prevention in the community of Amherst.

Homeless shelters need to be better funded and there needs to be a shelter in our community that serves families. This is not the case now. We have virtually nothing to help families who are homeless.

Once someone is in a shelter, they need support -- mental health and/or substance abuse services, job training, and housing.

Priorities would include:

- Increase units of SROs.
- Work with landlords to make it financially feasible for low-income renters to move in without high deposits, connection fees, security deposits, credit history, etc. This has been done in other communities.
- Build a broader safety net for the potentially homeless or those now living without separate housing, perhaps living with family members because they can't find affordable rentals.
- Build a comprehensive service network for those who are about to become homeless, by funding and delivering programs/services which deal with this group. For those who are homeless, build a wide support network to get them basic services and housing.
- Help the homeless build and maintain self-respect and pride. This should always be at the top of service providers' lists, as well as the community at large.

Recorder Cynthia Brubaker

Group D: Finding homes

Recruiting landlords, caseworkers, to assist individuals and families in getting housed; useful models, effective strategies.

Led by Jay Levy, Eliot Homeless Services regional manager

EHS networks with other agencies in dealing with the homeless and has compiled a list of 70 local people who are considered "chronic homeless." There are few housing units available and very few that are affordable.

Some families have housing but are unable to rent to family members. This natural resource should be taken advantage of. Perhaps a voucher could be provided so families could be together.

Two possibilities were discussed: the existing Adult Foster Care program, for elderly adults or adults with developmental or physical disabilities who cannot live alone safely. AFC members live with trained, paid caregivers who provide daily care. where a family allows a homeless adult to share their residence. The other idea was to trade housing for assistance such as lawn mowing, raking, snow shoveling, etc.

Landlords were a major focus for this group. Some landlords are leery of renting to the homeless. Requirements for first/last month rents, security deposits and often a finders' fee is very expensive -- a lot of money needed at one time. Solution: try to get landlords to waive some of the expenses.

Build relationships with landlords by providing a forum for landlords and providers so they can understand the needs of formerly homeless tenants and learn how those needs are addressed by caregivers. Providers know their clients and understand mental health and addiction issues.

Perhaps landlords could be given recognition by those helping the homeless, possibly awards for landlords who provide housing for veterans, for example.

Possible short-term housing might be arranged. There are typically highs and lows in occupancy rates in apartment complexes catering to students, where residences might be vacant for three months. Those temporary vacancies could be used for the homeless.

Research and fact finding are necessary to document the issue.

Recorder Phyllis Lehrer

Group E: "Changing the Amherst Housing Market"

Developing town and university policies to assure greater access to affordable housing.

Led by John Hornik, Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust chair

The University-Town of Amherst Collaborative is made up of UMass and town officials/residents and has a housing subcommittee. UTAC members think that it is not enough just to build homes. Job creation is also needed.

UMass has 13,500 beds for students. In 2016, the university was at 100 percent capacity. This year, capacity is 98 percent. When not at full capacity, UMass does not advertise off-campus housing to students. The university is 5th in the nation for offering on-campus housing in proportion to its student population. Still, there are 4,500 UMass students living in town.

This year, UMass is exploring a public-private partnership that would provide 1,200 more beds, as well as a possible new hotel and health-services building.

The town's master plan needs updating. All Town Meeting members, the Select, Zoning, and Planning boards, the Housing Trust, etc., should work toward a common goal.

There is a wide range of needs for the homeless, low-income and moderate-income families who are looking for affordable housing in Amherst. A staggered plan is needed to meet those different levels of need.

We also need other draws to the area. Families are not moving here for other reasons besides housing.

To attract more students to Amherst public schools, the town needs more large-scale developments of affordable low- and moderate-income residences that offer lawn space. The last development of this kind was in the '60s.

We need to move away from the large-scale standard of "units per acre" to "total floor area" per acre, to allow for smaller and denser units. We need to encourage zoning bylaws that are more effective.

We need to identify the mix of housing that is needed and aggressively use RFPs, cluster-housing developments, tax incentives, and Community Preservation Act funds to provide it. We need to figure out how to use some conservation land for low- to moderate-income housing projects. There is a lot of conservation land to use.

The group's top three options were:

- Town needs to agree on a common housing goal for everyone to use.
- Coordination among public boards and private groups is needed.
- There is a wide range of need. The homeless don't have the same needs as low- and moderate-income families that cannot find affordable housing.

Recorder Rebecca Fricke