

Housing charrette looks at how zoning can promote affordability



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By Tom Eastman

CONWAY — The Mount Washington Valley Housing Coalition is partnering with the White Mountain Board of Realtors and local municipal leaders on a MWV Workforce Housing Design Charrette, June 3-6.

The theme is “Reuse, Revitalization and Right Sized Rural.”

The sessions are being funded by a \$5,000 grant from the National Association of Realtors, with support from Northway Bank, Chalmers Group, White Horse Press and Lupine Inc.

The sessions are intended to demonstrate how zoning can be used to promote affordability, home sales and ultimately, a more prosperous economy.

That's the word from Theresa Kennett of the Mount Washington Valley Housing Coalition; Janine McLauchlan, executive officer of the White Mountain Board of Realtors; Brendan Battenfelder of the White Mountain Board of Realtors; and Evelyn Whelton, chair of the MWV Housing Coalition, Northway Bank vice president of mortgage lending, and an affiliate member of the White Mountain Board of Realtors.

The housing charrette is intended to provide teams of planners and housing development professionals with “a hands-on experience that offers the opportunity to test the development concepts related to reuse and/or revitalization of existing structures and development of raw acreage,” according to Kennett.

“The objective,” she added, “is to develop a design that fits in with the surrounding landscape and is affordable for people working in Mount Washington Valley. Team members will literally sketch out workforce housing developments that suit sites in local towns.”

She added that although the properties identified will be real, the exercise is “hypothetical” because it falls outside the municipal permitting process.

“The benefit of a hypothetical process is that the sometimes contentious working relationships that occur between developers and municipalities in a real situation are removed. Participants can discuss how local regulations impact the cost of development, as well as discuss ways in which the impediments to affordability can be removed,” said Kennett in a press release.

According to Kennett, the charrette will:

- Envision workforce housing developments possible under current regulations.
- Suggest modifications to current regulations to better suit workforce housing.

- Test the financial feasibility of design concepts.
- Exercise some influence over what might ultimately be proposed for the studied sites.

"While there is no guarantee any of the design proposals will move ahead for actual development, the charrette process offers a quick infusion of ideas and enthusiasm that could translate to action," notes Kennett. "Most importantly, we believe that community and business leaders will be prompted to do all they can to make sure that affordable housing for the workforce is a priority in every community."

Charrette outline

According to Kennett, the charrette occurs over the course of four days in the towns of Jackson, Conway and Fryeburg.

"There are three subject properties and the respective design team will be going on a site tour and hosting a listening session in the town in which the property is located; citizens, abutters, town officials will be invited to attend to talk about what they would like to see at the site," said Kennett. She outlined the following schedule for the charrette:

Monday, June 3:

- 3:30 p.m.: Team No. 1 goes on a site tour of a 20-acre parcel located on Haleytown Road in Fryeburg, Maine.
- 7 to 8 p.m.: Listening session at the Fryeburg Town Office.

Tuesday, June 4:

- 3:30 p.m.: Team No. 2 goes on a site tour of 3 acres and buildings located in Jackson Village.
- 7 to 8 p.m.: Listening session at the Jackson Town Office.

Wednesday, June 5:

- 3:30 p.m.: Team No. 3 goes on a site tour of 22 acres located at 1290 East Conway Road in Conway.
- 5:15 to 6:15 p.m.: Listening session at the meeting room in the Conway Public Library.

Thursday, June 6:

- 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.: Design session involving all three teams.
- 2:30 to 3:30 p.m.: Design teams present their plans to each other and the local citizens and elected officials who attended the listening sessions.

By participating in the charrette, Kennett said municipalities may test the functionality of their regulations and generate ideas for improvement.

She added that housing industry representatives may make new contacts and express their creativity for possible outcomes.

According to the MWW Housing Coalition, the single biggest cause of out-migration in the state is the lack of affordable rental and owner-occupied housing. The most impacted demographic group are young families, they assert.

The deficit of first-time home buyers in New Hampshire is expected to be a serious drag on home sales over the next five years, according to consumer markets expert Peter Francese.

Conway in recent years has initiated zoning that allows in-law apartments and greater density for complexes that are served by municipal sewer.

Conway also saw the construction of the Conway Pines workforce housing units. That complex consists of 32 rental units.

Pending financing, planned next door is the 36-unit Conway Pines Senior Living Housing rental units.

Both projects were developed by Great Bridge Properties of Manchester.

“This is a much broader initiative than Conway Pines,” said Whelton.

“Bringing one building to the valley doesn't resolve the issue of our aging local demographic. Housing is a vital part of having a healthy economy.”

Housing affordability is among the goals of a regional collaboration initiative being undertaken this year by the MWV Housing Coalition, the MWV Economic Council and the MWV Chamber of Commerce. Results from the charrette will be shared with the regional initiative, according to Kennett.

Housing Matters

In the foreword to the 2012 MWVHC booklet, “Housing Matters in Mount Washington Valley,” the need for affordable housing was underscored.

“The recent turmoil in the housing market has not reduced housing prices to affordable levels for Mount Washington Valley's working families. While price declines have led to an erosion of equity for many existing homeowners, potential first-time buyers have remained priced out of the market. Not only does the affordability gap persist in the residential market, it also persists in the rental market. Many working families must choose between commuting long distances or spending too much of their take-home pay to live closer to work.”

“The problem of workforce housing not only impacts those in need of housing, it also impacts the broader community. Mount Washington Valley businesses report that the mismatch in affordability is having a negative effect on business expansion, workforce recruitment and employee retention. Housing matters in Mount Washington Valley because businesses need workers and workers need an affordable place to live.”

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