

LICP2035 Housing Forum
August 18, 2021

Attendees

Zoom – Jane Conley, Meredith & Ralph Sweet

On-site – Wes Wolfertz, Janice Avignon, Steve Hart, Beth Marchak, Carol Welu, Richard Surry, Lorinda Valls, Dennis McCann, Linda Ferguson McCann, Mark Greene, John Burke

Outline of Forum

Wes introduced the discussion as a wide-open one, no preconceived solutions, actions, or positions. To start the conversation he asked what do people think about the question “Do you think there needs to be more available housing to attract new working families to the island”.

Summary points

Overall, there was full support of the notion of more available housing to attract AND RETAIN working families. Consensus was more families would contribute to viable school system and year-round community. They would also add to the town volunteer pool, and to the skilled trade professionals group. “New blood always welcome”!

Concern raised about seasonal rentals getting high weekly rents, and the “loss” of houses/rentals to the ABnB/VRBO craze. A counterpoint was some folks reasonably rent a few weeks each year to offset taxes, etc. Many renters return year after year, and some eventually become homeowners and/or year-round residents.

Do we need more families to sustain a year-round community? Mark G. gave historical perspective having been involved with the ‘affordable housing’ effort for over a decade. He noted that the housing corporation’s initial goal was to retain young adults and young families who wanted to stay on the island but they ended up leaving due to lack of available housing. The island was losing the families who were needed to sustain the community. Those who ran the town could no longer afford to live here.

Conversation moved to - do we really need to attract new families? Or do we need strategies to keep families we already have and/or enable ‘next generation’ of current families to stay on the island as adults with their own homes? People noted the importance of targeting the right families – kids in school, able to volunteer on fire/rescue, and providing a service that is in high demand on the island (plumbing, mechanic, plowing, trash removal, carpentry, etc.) But there are potential restrictions on being selective.

Point was made on importance of understanding that in many ways island living is expensive by definition – ferry tickets, freight and parking on the mainland.

What are ways to expedite more housing?

- Hang on to the land the town owns now to address year-round housing availability (8 to 10 parcels w/2 sites immediately available)
- Revise land use/ordinances to make new building less arduous/daunting
- Add rental housing to allow people to “try island living” without the mortgage. The Cliff Island email was shared where a family approached Cliff Island and wanted to move there, but there are no housing options.
- Selection process is challenging, especially if grants are involved. You can designate housing for a specific purpose (retirement community).
- With past grant experience the restrictions with grant made it cost prohibitive to move forward. Needed a \$500,000 investment. We could get a grant for \$350,000 but could not make the math work to rent at \$850 per month which was highest allowed with grant.

One person suggested that the town might subsidize people who want to renovate seasonal homes to become year-round homes. There was then discussion suggesting that idea could be troublesome and unfair.

Local housing zoning generally involves only single-family homes. We should consider other options to expand. In-law apartments and accessory dwelling units could be a great addition to the mix. Lots that are not currently accessible are another barrier to building housing for families. Could the road system be expanded? Could we ease other constraints on buildable lots. We have shoreland zones, conservation land. Can we re-think?

Some progress is being made with the cluster housing amendments passed at town meeting this year, and ordinances that facilitates accessory dwelling units (aka granny apartments)

Constraints to even modest development include “paper streets” that lock down land as unbuildable because there are no roads or frontage on public way for many lots – see the town map, especially the East End/Black Forest areas. Water and septic requirements cited as additional constraints.

There was no issue in the 70's and 80's when there was plenty of ‘poor’ housing stock (fixer uppers) that was a blessing for working families. However, now there are high-quality double-wides and modulars available for under \$200,000 if there was available land.

One comment re: access to the 120-plus acres in “the area” so it is better utilized as a town asset.

Discussion around how much housing is needed? Response centered on 6-10 rental units would be a great start.

Maybe we should figure out why families leave? Some have left for reasons other than available housing. Related - How do you find families who will stay?