

Last night was a rousing meeting on Housing at the Housing Authority offices at Willow Brook. Their goal last night was to have three presentations that spoke about a variety of housing types/housing needs/types of developers (for profit, not for profit and Public Housing). Some of the most enlightening information came from commentary from attendees of the meeting, most in particular the head of the local homeless shelter and the head of Section 8 for Bennington County. Also of note, was conflicting data regarding housing, one set of numbers presented by the BCRC and another set presented by the second presenter, using a different study. I would recommend looking at both sets of data before making decisions about housing for Pownal. I will get to their comments and their data when we get to the appropriate sections.

All power point slides from these presentations will be available on the BCRC website.

### **Presentation 1: Catherine of BCRC**

#### **Current Housing Conditions**

- 75% of all housing is in only 3 towns in Bennington County (Hereafter BC)
- BC has lower amounts of single family attached housing (condo style) housing than the rest of the state
- BC has a lower rental availability than rest of state
- median year houses were built is 1969, which has led to many degraded houses if they are no longer being kept up. However, these houses also present an investment opportunity for developers
- "unaffordable" housing is defined by more than 30% of income being used to pay for housing
- we have an aging population, which is often seen as a negative, however, there are positives as well if we are willing to look at it from different perspective...for instance, there are a lot of retiring people, which means these are positions that might be opening up to younger professionals who might want to move to the area

#### **Strategies :**

- create greater densities in development
- allow diverse types of housing
- improve existing housing

#### **strategically designed land use regulations**

-UPDATE BY-LAWS

Beginning level: increase density and reduce setbacks in strategic areas

Intermediate Level: Separate lot size from density (go from minimum lot size to dwelling units per acre). For instance, allowing 4 dwelling units on one acre.

Advanced level: consider whether "density" makes sense and/or can be replaced with better building form code

#### **Adaptive reuse**

-allow multifamily units in pre-existing larger structures like barns and commercial buildings

Beginning level: make sure zoning allows for mobile homes and parks, multi family and group homes

Intermediate Level: update zoning to lessen restrictions

Advanced Level: encourage multifamily developments and zone for it

#### **Mixed Use Housing**

-this is the urban style "stack and pack", with commercial on the street level, offices above, then apartments on top floors. This is to encourage "live where you work", which is more suiting to urban areas than rural. This is what they are attempting to do with the Putnam Block project in Bennington

#### **OTHER STRATEGIES:**

- reduce requirements for parking in downtowns and walkable areas
- waive permitting fees
- make town land available for housing
- ensure infrastructure exists for density
- create a housing task force or commission

- work with housing non-profits like Shires
- create partnerships with healthcare and senior advocacy groups to create housing that helps our aging population "age in place"

### **Create a State Designated Neighborhood**

- towns can apply to the State for a State designation of "**Neighborhood Development Area**"
- the area you designate already has to have village or town center designation
- this state designation opens up pathways to development grants

### **Improve Existing Housing**

- Energy Efficiency
- utilize the services of organizations such as Efficiency Vermont, Neighborworks of Vermont and BROOC
- Neighborworks of Vermont helps with no interest loans to do efficiency upgrades, mortgages and refinances, and repair services
- BROOC has a well known weatherization program, helps with energy efficiency upgrades and also helps intervene in situations of hoarding and homelessness

Final word, if you want to start working on upgrading housing policy, etc....go to [housingdata.org/toolbox/steps-for-municipalities](http://housingdata.org/toolbox/steps-for-municipalities)

### **Presentation #2:**

#### **Hale Resources**

- Hale Resources is a family run for-profit business that works in a variety of ways including:
  - Community Resource Management
  - Orchard Apartments
  - Vermont Housing Initiative, which hopes to invest in rehabilitation of existing buildings to make sustainable housing
  - Jon E Suds laundromat
- one goal they have is to try to attract young entrepreneurs to the area
- also a goal to upgrade and change the housing stock in Vermont

#### **Vermont Futures Project**

- the housing data presented by Hale Resources came from this resource
- most notably, this resources shows Vermont housing at less than one percent vacancy, whereas a study presented by the BCRC showed it at 4-5 percent vacancy.
- Vermont Futures Project might be a good resource for Pownal when evaluating data that helps determine action items
- this study shows that there is a growth of STEM employment in our state
- also shows that we have a large influx of young people coming to VT for college, but they typically don't stay

#### **Vermont Housing Initiative**

- this arm of Hale Resources seeks outside investors (out of state) to buy housing here to rehabilitate and rent out (then Hale resources would manage the properties)
- they have already fixed numerous houses and turned them into viable rentals that have equal cost to Section 8 vouchers for housing (750 for one bed and 1200 for 3 bed). Three houses on Depot Street alone.
- They only work with market principles as they are a for-profit business, and no matter how they try, they are not able to access grant money for the work they do.

### **Presentation #3:**

#### **Bennington Housing Authority**

- this was a presentation of the history of public housing in America
- spoke about public housing in Bennington, of which Willow Brook is a part (where we met)
- Willow Brook is a public housing development where the tenants have to have children to qualify to live there

-public housing is intended to be transitional housing, but the problem is it ends up being multi-generational institutionalized public assistance recipients, with up to three generations having occupied the same unit at Willow Brook

-the regulations do not "age out" a family when the children get to an age of majority, so the adult children have a benefit of staying in the unit so the parents can keep the home. Then, those adult children have children, etc....

-the head of the Bennington homeless shelter very passionately spoke about how this system of public housing is terribly broken. He spoke of working with homeless people/families, and when it was time to transition them to housing from the shelter, these public units are never available because although they are meant to be transitional, they end up not being so. There just aren't any spaces available for people truly in need of transitional housing.

-a massive need for helping people "get out of the system", and to make it work as intended.

The night concluded with both Jim and Catherine emphasizing that not all solutions make sense for all communities/areas. This is why we have to talk about a wide variety of approaches to housing needs.

**My personal reflections/thoughts in regards to how this applies to Pownal:**

-Always look to multiple data streams to make conclusions whenever/wherever they are available. Ask questions as to why the differences between the numbers and statistics. Look into the Vermont Futures Project for their studies on housing statistics to compare with other numbers.

-Reach out to the Homeless Shelter AND to the Bennington Housing Authority to learn about how public housing works/doesn't work, what its particular obstacles and difficulties are, and the reality of public housing being a true viable option to other kinds of low income housing that already exists in Pownal. It may be that we are better suited to improving housing stock as opposed to new development.

-Starting a relationship with Hale Resources might be beneficial, as they might be interested in investing in our local housing, especially if we have tax sales/auctions for houses that need to be rehabilitated. Talking to them personally about what they have learned with boots on the ground in housing in Bennington County would give a much more rounded view of all aspects of this topic. They have a real idea of the housing market, especially as it pertains to creating housing for young working professionals.

Let me know if you have any questions about any of this. I would be happy to reach out and speak to any of the presenters if you want to seek more information on anything mentioned above. All slides will be on the BCRC webpage.

Rebecca Dragon  
BCRC Commissioner Pownal