



AMHERST MUNICIPAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST **PUBLIC MEETING**

Thursday, November 12, 2020
7:00 PM

Virtual Zoom meeting. Video recording available at:
https://youtu.be/h_hJx4Q4pJ8

IN ATTENDANCE

Members: Rob Crouner, Francis Goyes Flor, John Hornik, Tom Kegelman, Carol Lewis, Erica Piedade (6)

Absent: Paul Bockelman, Sid Ferreira, Will Van Heuvelen (3)

Staff: Nate Malloy, Rita Farrell

Guests: Janna Tetreault of Community Action Pioneer Valley, Hwei-Ling Greeney of Amherst Community Connections and Maura Keene

Prepared by John Page from Recording.

Meeting called to order at 7:00PM.

1. **Announcements**— None.
2. **Review Minutes from October 15** — Minutes from the October 15, 2020 excluding the Executive Session of the Trust meeting were approved by consensus as submitted.
3. **Update on Craig's Doors Seasonal Shelter and Discussion**

Kevin Noonan, Executive Director of Craig's Doors, provided an update on the seasonal shelter in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of COVID-19, he explained the previous host location – the First Baptist Church of Amherst was simply too small a facility. After meeting with various locations including the Immanuel Lutheran Church in North Amherst, Craig's Doors was able to find a new temporary home at the Unitarian Universalist Society in Downtown Amherst. Using the community room, where Craig's Doors has held their Wednesday morning Community Breakfasts for a few years now, they are able to safely socially-distance 14 beds. At that level the space simply couldn't serve the need. In addition, however, Kevin explained, Craig's Doors was able to rent the University Lodge at 345 N Pleasant Street, owned by Curt Shumway of the Hampshire Hospitality Group. Kevin notes that activity at the lodge has been quiet, and to any passerby simply looks like a busy motel. Those that are staying are simply grateful for the space and are taking proper care of it. Having the motel is essential not only for expanding the number of residents the shelter can house but in particular for isolating an individual if that was necessary,

Kevin explained, because they must maintain negative COVID-19 testing status for residents of the congregate site.

Kevin noted that for placement at the University Lodge, preference is being given to women and elderly and those with special health needs including mental health. Kevin noted that for the first time all 14 beds are filled at the Unitarian Church and there is one vacancy (20 rooms total) at the University Lodge. He expressed concerns what to do when all their options are filled particularly given the lack of a shelter site in Northampton.

Kevin called for a regional solution to isolation and quarantine of individuals experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic but also a regional approach to addressing homelessness in general. Kevin also made an appeal for volunteers. In addition, he noted that they remain a temporary shelter and a permanent location and solution is truly necessary to address homelessness in Amherst.

When asked by Tom, whether to invest Trust funds in permanent housing or sheltering, Kevin said unemphatically that motels are better than shelters and permanent housing is better than motels. John asked Kevin, what action by the Trust in addition to spreading the word about volunteers would be most helpful to Craig's Doors. Kevin remarked that expanding the emergency rental assistance program to go beyond those that at risk of losing their home to serve those that are currently homeless would be extremely helpful by offering first, last, and deposit to permanently house individuals.

Nate mentioned that Craig's Doors has 14 Rapid Rehousing vouchers to use based on the fair market rate in Amherst. Kevin explained that because Craig's Doors has not yet actually received the funding from the state they have yet to place anyone in housing using the Rapid Rehousing vouchers.

4. Progress Report of Emergency Rental Assistance Program and Discussion of Issues and Challenges

Janna Tetreault from Community Action, Pioneer Valley provided a memo in advance of the meeting which summarized Round 1 and indication of progress of Round 2 of the Amherst Emergency Rental Assistance Program as well as outlining the changes that were made for Round 2. John asked for questions on this memo.

Tom raised an issue which Janna identified that co-habiting students are treated as a household and that students applying had expressed frustration with that designation and it is preventing eligibility for the program. Tom did note that as far as he knows this is the same procedure followed by any housing assistance program. Nate underscored that if roommates, regardless of student status, are on one lease, they will be treated as a household and if either not, all roommates provide the necessary financial information or the combined income exceeds the eligibility requirement, the applicant will be deemed not eligible. Nate further explained that as it stands the only way an individual roommate could apply and document their hardship is if they had some form of sublease or lease by room which identified how much everyone will be responsible for paying. Carol noted that most likely any sort of agreement especially among students is probably an informal agreement.



John shared that he had spoken with Ellen Schacter, the Director of Housing Stability for the City of Somerville about ways their city had sought to ameliorate the impact of the eviction crisis in their municipality, and they had found a way to aid households even if there was no lease, or if no one living currently living in the household is on the lease (they had moved out and rented to someone else for example). John will confer with Ellen and bring back to the Trust.

John also explained that Nate and he had talked with Janna and Donna from Community Action in response to a call the Town Manager had received complaining that they were slow to respond after the preliminary application had been sent in. In general, John said, he had expected to see more people approved for payment at this point in time and Round 2 than we are seeing. The good news, he explained, is that 80 families have applied for assistance. However, the process of getting that applicant to a completed application, gather the documentation, and execute payment seems to be taking a long time for each case. Many of these cases, John explained presented special circumstances and required extra consideration and thought before a determination of eligibility was made. John provided an example to illustrate the difficulties CAPV is having — one household consisted of two men — non-students — who shared a lease. One was experiencing financial hardship, the other was not and by the rules the Trust has put forth, they were deemed ineligible as a household. Nate later raised a household with working-age children and whether their income must be included as an example.

Nate further explained that the Community Action staff believe the pre-application *has* improved the process and serves as an important initial screening tool so that everyone's time is persevered both client and case worker. However, Nate explained, it is taking several days for caseworkers to get in touch with clients to setup the initial phone call the work on the application together, those are typically taking at least an hour and it is taking 2-3 phone calls to get the applicant through the entire application process. In the end, it is taking 4-6 weeks to get a household approved and payment processed.

Nate noted that once again, rather unexpectedly, only one or two households in Round 2 declared being behind in rent at the time of application. Carol highlighted that report notes that one of the things that is difficult for applicants demonstrating COVID-relatedness of loss of income. John gave the example of restaurant workers being paid cash and not having documentation to prove loss. Nate stressed that the Town has told Community Action that if their loss of income explanation is plausible that the applicant can be allowed to self-declare using a type of signed affidavit that the statement they are giving is true.

Reflecting, John said he does not intend to propose any changes to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program through December, however, once Round 2 is wrapped up and CARES funds can no longer be used (after the end of the calendar year) the Trust may want to consider how to best support families facing eviction. The City of Somerville, John notes does have a municipal rental assistance program but is focusing now on getting residents who need support into the state's RAFT program, in-part because there is simply more money in it. The maximum award for

RAFT recipients is up to \$10,000 now whereas Amherst's Rental Assistance Program is capped at \$3,300 per household.

Tom expressed that it can take years and many revision and even just practice to get a program like this right and therefore he recommended taking advantage anytime the Trust can "piggyback" onto or expand access to existing programs with existing rules and staff that have been tested by time. He also noted that Way Finders, our region's administrator of RAFT, has a new administrator beginning Monday and that they have expanded their team quite drastically to address the increased need for emergency assistance.

Nate did note that Housing Court is resuming hearings on evictions with a goal of hearing three cases an hour, and they have pledged to refer households facing eviction to mediation and local programs, so it may be that in the coming month(s), Amherst's program will see a significant increase in applicants.

Lastly, John mentioned that four other strategies which the Town could spearhead, and the Trust should consider which to recommend and support:

- Legal aid organizations are recommending that tenants preemptively notify landlords that they are experiencing hardship and want to take advantage of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) federal eviction moratorium. While, currently set to expire at the end of the calendar year, this is a way to delay evictions while tenants apply for RAFT or another assistance.
- Promulgate a landlord pledge which, originating in Boston, is being adopted throughout the state and has already been signed by many of the larger landlords which commits them to and reminds them of all eviction laws as well as a commitment to taking other measures first such as a payment plan or mediation.
- Adopting a Housing Stability Notification Act which would require landlords to send information about resources that can be used to try to prevent eviction for potential sources of funding that will enable them to pay their rent or pay the rears when they send a notice to quit to a household.
- Implementing a local eviction moratorium

5. Reviewing and Updating Housing Trust Strategic Plan

Erica and Rita outlined their recommendations to update the Trust's strategic plan in a one-page memo as well as a tracked changes version of the document. Erica stated that these are recommendations, and it is up to the Trust to decide whether to adopt them.

The discussion began on page 4 of the strategic plan by adding "Goal Number 7. Identifying and secure funding resources." Erica explained the importance of achieving financial independence to enable long-term strategic planning/budgeting. Erica cited Cambridge's Housing Trust which has its own endowment provided by Harvard. Obviously, Amherst is different, she notes, but there is potential, whether it be Amherst College or other sources, to achieve the true flexibility and financial independence of a trust. Currently, the Trust's

ability to act is heavily dependence on annual CPA grant awards and other eligibility-restricted government sources.

John emphasized the need to move forward on both fronts — to pursue a multi-year agreement with CPAC to fund housing a certain level or to entrust the Trust with making the Community Housing decisions given a budget each year. He noted CPA currently invests about \$500K on community housing initiatives.

Erica then presented updates to current initiatives and accomplishments since the strategic plan was adopted. Francis asked for clarification on “11. Explore opportunities for conversation-based development with town departments.” Rita used the example of Hickory Ridge and cited Amherst commitment to purchasing and preserving open space to illustrate this goal. Number 11 refers to the completed and ongoing work of making sure that during land-disposition by the Town or during mostly CPA-funded projects such as Hickory Ridge housing is incorporated in some way. She also provided the example of Misty Meadows which was an affordable homeownership project which was a part of a larger conservation acquisition by the Town.

Next Erica moved on to the revisions on page 21, recommending the addition of “The HSC was successfully merged with the Trust and now operates with a nine-member board.” Additionally, Erica noted, as outlined in the one-pager that the strategic plan does mention subcommittees and working groups and recommends that the Trust consider defining standing subcommittees of the Trust and communicating that it is the responsibility of Trust members to serve on subcommittees of the Trust as well. Nate emphasized clarifying expectations for future residents who wish to serve is important. One possible task which Erica identified as a job for a working group is developing a communication strategy and toolkit for the Trust to effectively keep housing priorities at top of mind for government and community members.

The final update Erica identified was the need for an updated five-year budget which is included on page 22 of the strategic plan. John noted that the first step of drafting the five-year budget should be to look at how the Trust has spent money in the last five years.

These revisions are detailed in a memo in the Trust’s November 12, 2020 meeting packet. Nate noted that any additional comments from Trust members could be sent to him directly and he can give them to Rita and Erica to produce the final draft of changes for the next meeting. John will include a final review and vote on adoption of updates to the Trust’s strategic plan on the agenda for the next meeting.

6. General Updates — Tabled.

7. Update on State Legislation — Tabled.

8. Public Comments — None.

9. Items Not Anticipated Within 48 Hours — None.

10. Executive Session

John moved that the Housing Trust end the regular business portion of the meeting and reconvene in Executive Session. The reason for the Executive Session is to consider the purchase of real property for development of affordable housing. The chair declares that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the Housing Trust. Only Trust members and Town staff may participate.

VOTE: To move to Executive Session.

MOTION: John

SECOND: Carol

VOTE PASSES unanimously, 6-0-0 (*Crowner – Y, Goyes – Y, Hornik – Y, Kegelman – Y, Lewis – Y, Piedade – Y*)

Regular meeting ended at 8:35PM. Trust members and staff entered executive session. Tom recused himself from the Executive Session.