
**AMHERST MUNICIPAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST
PUBLIC MEETING**

**Thursday, May 13, 2021
7:00 PM**

Virtual Zoom Meeting. Video recording available at: [LINK](#)

IN ATTENDANCE

Trust Members: Allegra Clark, Rob Crowner, Sid Ferreira, John Hornik (Chair), Carol Lewis, Erica Piedade, Will Van Heuvelen (7)

Absent: Paul Bockelman, Francis Goyes Flor (2)

Staff: Nate Malloy, Rita Farrell, John Page

Guests: Community Resource Committee (CRC) Members Mandi Jo Hanneke (Chair), Dorothy Pam, Shalini Bahl, Steve Schreiber, and Members of the Public Linda Slakey and Chad Fuller

Prepared by John Page.

Meeting called to order at 7:00PM.

1. **Announcements** — None.

Carol shared about a presentation of changes to Boston zoning requirements to promote Fair Housing, she attended and in particular wanted to share remarks by Boston City Councilor Lydia Edwards and referred Trust members to a video of her remarks https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_7Zf1yIrP4&list=PLAAX6aInLjO8o5c89xENFkciToLH4g_uX&index=4

John highlighted one quote “Zoning is supposed to be acknowledging injury and promoting healing.” If we can’t expect people aren’t going to operate with that mindset then it’s not going to change, he said advocating for out of the box thinking and begin opening your mind. Erica asked about the possibility of inviting her to speak in Amherst.

2. **Review of Past Minutes** — Minutes from the April meeting of the Trust were accepted as presented.

3. **Presentation and Discussion of Draft Comprehensive Housing Policy with the Community Resources Committee (CRC) of the Town Council**

John explained that for this agenda item the Trust will be joined by members of the Community Resource Committee (CRC) of the Town Council as requested at the last Trust meeting. Then he began by making six points before giving members of the Housing Trust the opportunity to add their thoughts. He explained:

- 1) On the positive side, the Community Resources Committee has done a fine job in reviewing past reports related to housing in Amherst. Fifty-one strategies have been scooped out from these documents and collated into the present draft. The strategies are organized under five overarching goals and each strategy is identified as high priority, medium priority, and low priority.
- 2) Affordable Housing is clearly NOT valued. Generally, the lowest of all priorities. The term “affordable housing” is left undefined. AH should be its own goal category with associated, high priority strategies.
- 3) The University is largely ignored. With 28,000 enrollees and only 13,500 on campus residential capacity, the policy and plan is to rely entirely on Amherst and the surrounding communities to provide housing for students and their families. We need a commitment from the University to add capacity for new residential units to house 3-5,000 students.
- 4) The draft policy jumps almost immediately into proposing strategies without first describing what problems they are designed to address. There should be problem descriptions, based at least in part on available data. There is no presentation of any relevant data. For example, we know that 57% of renters are either cost burdened or severely cost burdened. Cost burdened means that renters spend over 30% of their income on housing which puts them at risk. Is that a problem that the Town wishes to address? And what are the strategies proposed to address it? What is the numerical goal that would be an indicator of success?
- 5) Among the strategies listed are improving access to homeownership to persons who are Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color (BIPOC). This is certainly a laudable goal, but how is it to be achieved? Some discussion of existing barriers and how they might be addressed would be helpful.
- 6) The same could be said for many of the other 51 strategies. As I pointed out earlier, these come largely from existing documents. It is reasonable to ask both why these have not been implemented in the past and what assurance is there that including them in this new policy-report will make a difference?

John opened it up to all Housing Trust members and CRC response.

Carol acknowledged improvements from previous drafts of the policy she had reviewed but was concerned that while increases in density are labeled as high priority, affordability is not mentioned in that context. Instead of having a separate part of the policy on affordable housing, she noted, affordable housing should be woven in throughout. In particular she praised the measurable data in the addendum.

Allegra noted that under specific housing needs section, seniors and people experiencing homelessness should be prioritized.

Mandi Jo thanked the Trust for inviting the CRC and for providing feedback. She labeled the policy a work in progress saying it will change substantially before adoption. She also underscored that they had undertaken the task of developing a *comprehensive* housing

policy, but does take seriously the comment that affordable housing was not featured prominently enough in the latest drafting.

Lack of acknowledgement of UMass student population, Mandi attributed to not having been discussed by the CRC in detail or included yet, while it has been raised multiple times. She also noted the lack of regulator leverage by the municipality on on-campus housing or development in general. In terms of the strategies, she emphasized that the inclusion of prioritization is up for consideration, and a recommendation has not yet been adopted.

Dorothy expressed concern that unaddressed, the demand presented by the large student population, would always outstrip supply of housing, regardless of additional housing production.

Steve raised an area where he would like to see a larger emphasis — owner-occupied single family or rental apartments. Amherst does not have many owner-occupied housing complexes, he noted, citing the few condo developments in town. That is a pathway to affordable ownership, he offered. A two-family duplex condo in my neighborhood could be a viable alternative for households that a single-family property is just out of reach. We cannot just think of homeownership of a single house on a lot, he continued. Smaller lots is not as critical as more people *per* lot.

Shalini asked to hear from Trust members what strategies have been effective in the past. For example, she cited, Better Cambridge came up with an affordable housing overlay district which produced more affordable units than inclusionary zoning. In order to make projects feasible using a more wide-spread inclusionary zoning policy will people in the market rate units have to pay more? Inclusionary zoning, in her study, provided incremental addition at best. How can we invite builders, developers, for-profit and non-profit to the table, Shalini questioned. How do we engage in a healthy community engagement process that includes all stakeholders. How can our policies make it profitable to build smaller starter homes? Would changing dimensional regulations/lot size spur production of starter homes for young families and professionals?

Responding to Shalini, John emphasized that Amherst cannot rely on a single strategy to solve our housing crisis. Inclusionary zoning is one strategy he noted, which “helps on the edges.” Bringing in non-profit developers is a critical way but the property – the land itself – is so expensive, rare, and hard to come by. Once they find a property the process is not easy – 6-7 years from purchasing the property to a tenant walking in the door. One strategy to address this is when the Town buys or uses an existing piece of property it owns to produce affordable housing, at a nominal fee through a land disposition agreement. There is also developments like Beacon’s North Square apartments which brought in 28 units through tax incentive financing. Barry Roberts at 70 University Drive and 1 University Drive South, as well as Aspen Heights all utilized inclusionary zoning.

Nate complimented the inclusion of metrics in the policy but expressed concern that with so many strategies it is hard to prioritize and implement. As a comprehensive housing

policy, it needs to cover housing in general, Nate asked, is there another policy in Town we could model it after?

Mandi explained that the only comparable document the Council has only adopted is a comprehensive policy on delegation of use of the public ways. The CRC has looked at the housing policies of other cities around the country, she explained, we saw policies that ranges from 2 pages to 200 pages, depending on whether included strategies and implementation and metrics. Then she posed a question to the Trust, saying, the CRC pulled the numerical goals from Trust documents. Citing that the Trust set a goal that 10% of overall production be affordable. What type of rates were you assuming, Mandi asked, because with a goal of 250 affordable units at a 10% that requires 2,500 total new units over 5 years? Is that 25-50 units a year a reasonable target Amherst can meet, she asked, or that goal aspirational?

John shared that this issue came up when discussed with CRC and Finance Committee. Based on projects currently in the pipeline maybe we could reach 250 units in 10 years. What Amherst does not have is a consistent reliable pipeline of projects in the work. This policy should encourage that.

Nate continued the line of questioning to the two committees assembled. If the Town is only permitting 100 units a year, expecting 50 units a year is very difficult to achieve. Most developers cannot have four projects in the pipeline. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) recommend a half percent of your year-round housing as the goal. John countered that Amherst finds itself between a rock and hard place – even if we met the goal of 50 new affordable units per year, we still would not meet the need.

Dorothy then shifted the conversation saying one of the things needs to happen is redefining this from a housing crisis to a University housing issue. Can we get local taxes from public-private partnerships, she asked? Can we finding grants, public money to improve existing housing stock.

Separately she asked, how do we increase ownership options? How can we push a larger homeownership likely done through redevelopment because of the lack of land or offer a combination of homeownership and rental opportunities. Is there an opportunity that the Belchertown Road and East Street School properties include homeownership?

John explained that the Trust is pretty far down the road to change the trajectory of that project. I do think there are other opportunities for homeownership. John cited a property on Strong Street that the Town received through tax default. That would be an affordable condo/ownership opportunity. Hickory Ridge is another opportunity, there are approximately 13-acres along West Pomeroy Lane, that is developable.

Regarding the University John commented that he does not think UMass is doing their share of adding residential units. Even though they are adding new units, the net growth is marginal. If the University does not develop more housing for students, then we will not be able to meet the demand. The Town of Amherst must advocate for the development of

residential units on the campus, he said. The UMass Master Plan includes the addition of more residential units, but they are not doing it because they don't have the funds to do it, he explained. The use of private partnership to build new units is therefore essential.

Shalini shared support collaborating with the University but against labeling student or UMass as the problem. Data shows trends of declining on-campus students in the next decade. Given the new production and new trends in enrollment do we have the latest figures of what that might look like, she asked. Do we know what efforts have been made so far? What is important is that we work with them and help them see the value of adding one campus unit. Maybe through the angle of retaining good faculty and staff or attracting students but how do we make it in their interest to add residential units.

John labeled conversations with UMass as cordial but lead nowhere which he attributed to many of the key decisions being made in Boston.

Steve shared that although he works at UMass, he has no additional insight on the status of Town and UMass discussions. I have absolutely no idea if there is coordinated conversations between town and gown on this topic, he remarked. We need to find the pipeline to the decisions are being made. "I was on the Planning Board for 10 years," he remarked. "The student housing taints everything – it ruins all efforts to do right. Every strategy of the housing policy is met with the fear that it will fill up with students. Something has to happen. About 10 years ago, UMass could require a certain number of students to live on campus. During the pandemic very few students lived on campus so many went off campus. The University can make policy decisions without any recourse for the Town."

Shalini noted that the Town Council is considering how to support communities of color and specifically create greater racial equity. John served on one of the Energy and Climate Action Committee (ECAC) working groups and one of the issues that arose there was substandard housing still high priced, much of which is occupied by people of color. Nate shared the results of recent Way Finders / Donahue Institute study that wealthy homeowners pay a significantly smaller portion of their income on average on housing versus people of color who are renting, *and* homeowners retain wealth/equity in their property. This data really gives a comprehensive unbiased view, he noted. Continuing the issue of access to homeownership for John raised the question but how much do people of color have an opportunity to purchase on the market. Do they experience de facto discrimination through realtors, bankers, and etc.? Moderator Isolda discussed experiencing discrimination when trying to apply for a loan when she moved to Amherst. They actually had to make a deal with the owner to pay them over time.

Mandi sought to answer a final outstanding question – what will happen with this policy and how will it be used. She returned that question to Trust members saying are there specific measures you need in this policy for it to be useful that are not currently reflected?

John named one policy saying whenever there is unused Town-owned land – prioritize disposition of that land for housing development or homeownership. He also advocated for

the need for policies that make land that is on public transportation and services available to the Trust to develop affordable housing.

CRC members adjourned their meeting at 8:15PM.

4. Staff Presentation and Discussion of Proposed Changes to Inclusionary Zoning (IZ)

Nate very briefly reviewed the Planning Departments recommended changes to the Town's inclusionary zoning bylaw and encouraged Trust members to speak at May 19th joint hearing before the Planning Board and Community Resource Committee of the Council, beginning at 6:30PM. He also encouraged Trust members and members of the public to write the Planning Board with comments via the Town website or via email to planning@amherstma.gov

5. Discussion and status update on Draft Request for Proposals (RFP) for Belchertown Road and East Street School

Nate reported that Rita, Dave, John, and himself had met and reviewed Town Hall's concern and corrections to the RFP. One sticking point is the reuse of existing buildings and greater specificity about sustainable design. The Trust then reviewed the RFP and comparative criteria section by section one more time before recommending the updated draft.

VOTE: To recommend the amended draft of the East Street School and Belchertown Road RFP to staff for final edits and presentation at a Special Meeting of the Trust on June 1, 7PM.

MOTION: John

SECOND: Erica

VOTE PASSES unanimously, 6-0-0 (Clark – Y, Crouner – Y, Hornik – Y, Lewis – Y, Piedade – Y, Van Heuvelen – Y)

6. Financial Status of the Housing Trust – Postponed to June Meeting.

7. Discussion of Community Safety Working Group (CSWG) Recommendations

Allegra explained the charge of the Community Safety Working Group (CSWG) and strategy. In their conversations with the community, CSWG has taken a proactive approach to community safety working to address upstream needs to prevent downstream crises —housing, education, and employment among them. In public forums of the CSWG, Allegra, explained, community members of color felt like they had not had equitable access to resources in Town and that they have the same opportunities. Allegra had drafted a letter responding to the CSWG's recommendations which was circulated to Trust members prior to the meeting.

John asked for clarification on whether CSWG had adopted recommendations yet. Allegra shared that their recommendations are in line with the consultant's recommendations and that a formal vote on their final report was forthcoming.

Providing context, John explained that there has been some criticism from the public that the amount of money set aside in the FY22 budget was insufficient. John shared his perspective explaining that when government starts a new program, a whole new department, it is not fully operational in the first fiscal year. The Town Manager reserved about \$130K for the first year of setting up a department, developing the structure, organization, and begin hiring human resources. Say that takes 6 months, he proposed, to hire a director, create a space, vehicles, etc., and figure out policy and approach to its relationship to existing departments. Toward the end of the year, they can begin hiring staff. In this type of phased rollout, \$130K would not be the amount that would be set aside in Year 5 of the program, for example. The real question, John posited, is how much would be allocated in the next fiscal year.

Erica, sharing John's experience working within in state agencies, agreed that the first year is devoted setup and organization, and it does take time. However, she expressed concerned that the Town Manager's initial commitment is not adequate to ensure the program's success noting that there is no guarantee that there will be an increase in its department every year.

Carol noted the stark contrast between their recommendation of dedicating \$2.2Million and the proposed \$130K. She said she would find John's argument compelling if someone were to show a business plan that starts in \$130K and details the new department's evolution over several years.

Allegra: Intentionally left out a number and discussed goal. Note \$130K there was nothing allocated to another center or multicultural center. Help mitigate and bridge the gap to accessing services that community members identified including to housing resources.

Rob expressed support for sending the letter Allegra drafted, focusing less on the allocation, and more as a statement of support for the work of the Community Safety Working Group (CSWG). All we need to say is from a housing perspective, he offered, is note the intersection of housing affordability and racial equity and their codependence for the advancement of either.

Concurring, Nate noted that the letter addresses the very concerns that Keith Farley, CEO of Way Finders identified in his presentation at the forum on racial equity and housing that revealed deep racial disparities in housing throughout the Pioneer Valley outlined in the recently published Greater Springfield Housing study in partnership with the Donahue Institute. Awareness and acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of racial justice and housing is key, and that is what this letter brings about, he said.

Reaching the consensus that the final sentence speaks briefly to the budget issue specifically but leaves room for further conversation, the Trust concluded to send the letter as drafted to the Town Council and Town Manager.

VOTE: To empower the Chair to finalize and send a letter responding to the Community Safety Working Group's recommendations on the Trust's behalf to the Town Council supporting based on the presented draft.

MOTION: Carol

SECOND: Rob

VOTE PASSES unanimously, 7-0-0 (Clark – Y, Crowner – Y, Ferreira– Y, Hornik – Y, Lewis – Y, Piedade – Y, Van Heuvelen – Y)

8. Update on Emergency Rental Assistance Program

John briefly reported out that Community Action had only received one application last month, four additional households were approved for an additional \$5606.50 in assistance during that period. Community Action has now spent all of the admin funds to administer the program. They will continue to work on it until June 30th.

John also relayed information from Keith Fairey, President and CEO of Way Finders' on their assistance to Amherst Renters. He reported a recent sharp increase for emergency rental assistance in Amherst. More specifically, financial assistance (RAFT/ERMA/ERAP) payments from January through March totaled \$142,703 or 75% of all financial assistance payments for Amherst residents for the entire fiscal year (FY 21 Total July – March = \$189,261). March saw the biggest payout with \$78,770 for Amherst residents. From Are they accomplishing the goals we sought to do but with state and federal funds.

The Trust elected to take no action allowing its Emergency Rental Assistance program to sunset in June 30 of this year.

Erica asked how much money from the emergency rental assistance program remains left over and whether the Trust wants to invest in the organizations that are already serving Amherst residents such as Way Finders, Amherst Community Connections, and Family Outreach of Amherst.

John responded that the Trust could only do so through an RFP or RFQ process and cannot simply make a contribution to those organizations. However, immediately the Trust can advocate for CPA and CDBG fund be invested those organizations.

Nate pondered whether the Town will experience and see increased need in the Fall? When other programs expire. John noted that Family Outreach of Amherst and Way Finders are monitoring that need will report to him if there is an increase.

9. Report on State Legislation — Tabled until next meeting.

10. Discussion of Racial Equity and Housing Forum and planning for May 25 Forum on Climate, Sustainability and Affordable Housing

The Amherst Affordable Housing Advocacy Coalition is hosting a forum on Climate Change and Affordable Housing on May 25, 2021. The speakers included: Amherst Sustainability Coordinator Stephanie Ciccarello, Beverly Craig from the MA Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Ashley Muspratt of Center for EcoTechnology, as well as three members from the Town's Energy & Climate Action Committee (ECAC) – its Chair Laura Drauker, and members Steve Roof, and

The fundamental questions posed are:

- What are the benefits of improving energy efficiency in our housing?
- How do we assure energy efficiency and cost savings in both new and existing housing?
- What are the roles of local and State governments in assuring that energy efficiency in housing is achieved?

This event is co-sponsored by the Trust, the Town, and the League of Women Voters of Amherst.

11. **Public Comments** — None.

12. **Items Not Anticipated Within 48 Hours** — None.

13. **Upcoming Meetings:**

- May 25: Climate Change, Sustainability and Housing
- June 1: Special Meeting of the Trust to Review RFP
- June 10: Regular Meeting of the Trust

VOTE: To adjourn

MOTION: John

SECOND: Carol

VOTE PASSES unanimously, 7-0-0 (Clark – Y, Crowner – Y, Flor – Y, Ferreira– Y, Hornik – Y, Lewis – Y, Piedade – Y)

Meeting adjourned at 8:58PM.