

Small Town Housing Work Group

February 24, 2021 Meeting Notes

[Meeting held via Zoom]

In attendance: MJ Adams (Greenfield), Barbara Carulli (Leverett), Marybeth Chichester (Colrain), Lili Dwight (Deerfield), Gina Govoni (FCRHRA / RDI), John Gould (Buckland), David Greenberg (Colrain), Katy Lacy (MHP), Alyssa Larose (FRCOG), Mary McClintock (Conway / CAPV), Megan McDonough (PVHH), Mariah Kurtz (Erving), Amanda Watson (HRA), Otis Wheeler (Greenfield), Susan Worgaftik (Greenfield), Analee Wulfkuhle (Deerfield)

Alyssa Larose welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that this group has met periodically since a 2018 Housing Roundtable event identified the need for small towns to meet to discuss housing. New funding, through the Improving Housing to Improve Health project, will make it easier for FRCOG to continue to facilitate these meetings moving forward.

Katy Lacy from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) presented an overview of recent changes related to zoning for housing that were passed as part of the Economic Development Bill, known as Housing Choice. The changes amend parts of the MA Zoning Act (Ch. 40A) and the Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District Act (Ch. 40R). The changes allow for certain zoning provisions to be adopted by a simple majority vote instead of a 2/3rds majority vote at Town Meeting or by the City Council. The types of zoning this may apply to includes multi-family (3+ units) and mixed uses in eligible locations, accessory dwelling units, open space residential development (OSRD) or natural resource protection zoning (NRPZ), reduction in parking requirements for residential or mixed use, allowing for denser development, adopting a Ch. 40R Smart Growth or Starter Home district, and transfer of development rights.

The legislation goes into more detail, and the MA Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is expected to post guidance for municipalities soon. There will also be upcoming opportunities through webinars to learn more. Mariah Kurtz noted that a webinar offered by the Massachusetts Municipal Lawyers Association, Inc. recommended separating out zoning amendments requiring 2/3rds majority vote from those needing only a simple majority when drafting Town Meeting warrant articles. The group agreed that a follow-up on the Housing Choice changes would be helpful at the next meeting as more information becomes available.

Alyssa Larose presented an overview of the Improving Housing to Improve Health (IH2) project. The project is funded through a five year grant from the MA Department of Public Health's Community Health Funds. The funding seeks to improve health outcomes of the population by

addressing fundamental “social determinants of health” which includes housing. Housing challenges in our region include old housing stock, high housing and transportation costs compared to incomes, low housing vacancy rates and little investment in affordable housing, making it hard for people to access safe, healthy, affordable housing. People with substance use disorder (SUD) or a history of incarceration face even more barriers to housing.

The IH2 project has multiple partners serving different roles. Community Legal Aid and the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority are providing direct services to people with a history of incarceration or SUD to help them overcome barriers and find housing. The Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA) is working in communities that are interested in forming or supporting housing advocacy coalitions. An advisory board made up of members with lived experience is helping to guide the project. FRCOG’s role in the project is to support municipalities with housing efforts.

FRCOG already assists towns with housing plans and supports implementation of housing efforts, but this support is piecemeal and limited to when there are grant funds available. The IH2 project will provide FRCOG with a sustained funding source to help communities move forward with a number of initiatives, including addressing abandoned housing through the Attorney General Office’s Neighborhood Renewal Division, establishing a Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, zoning revisions to support affordable housing, and preliminary site identification for affordable housing. FRCOG can also help towns with Community Preservation Act (CPA) identify options for spending CPA funds on housing, assist with setting up a CPA-funded housing program, and also assist communities with adopting CPA. Alyssa provided some examples from recent technical assistance work on zoning for housing in Buckland. She also noted that MHP is currently offering technical assistance for creating or supporting a municipal affordable housing trust.

Mary McClintock spoke next about the potential for forming a Franklin County Housing Task Force. Mary coordinates the Franklin County Resource Network as part of her job as Community Collaboration Coordinator for Community Action Pioneer Valley. She also is a member of the Conway Planning Board and Community Preservation Committee and has been a landlord/owner of a two-family owner-occupied house for 35+ years. There are many programs involved in housing issues in Franklin County as well as a lack of available housing and need for increased housing production. Mary has had conversations with key stakeholders involved with housing production and she and Alyssa Larose (FRCOG) and Gina Govoni (FCRHRA) are exploring the possibility of convening a meeting of stakeholders focused on housing production in Franklin County. This is in the early development stages. Please stay tuned for more information as it evolves. If you’d like to talk with Mary McClintock about this, please email her at mmclintock@communityaction.us.

A discussion followed about the difficulties of producing housing in our region. A weak market makes it difficult to recoup the cost of constructing new units. Developing a mix of affordable and market rate units is difficult with the rents we have – there is little difference between market rate and affordable rents. A big challenge is getting community support for new affordable housing. At the same time, there is a lot of interest in communities right now around housing, and a desire to figure out how to work together. It would be helpful for the community to understand more about affordable housing development challenges and why it is so difficult. Low wages and income disparity is also a root cause of many of the housing challenges in the region.

Participants were asked to share any news from their own communities. Gina Govoni noted that Alyssa Larose will be joining the FCRHRA Board of Commissioners, and that more Commissioners are needed. Please contact her if you know of someone who may be interested.

The group decided that a quarterly meeting schedule moving forward would be most useful. Meetings will be scheduled quarterly for the 4th Wednesday of the month from 5:00 – 6:30 pm. Alyssa will send out a schedule of future meetings to the group.

Future meeting topics of interest include: Housing Choice updates; overview of Municipal Affordable Housing Trusts; CHAPA's Affordable Housing 101 training; overview of Ch. 40R Smart Growth and Starter Home zoning. Please contact Alyssa at alarose@frcog.org with other meeting topic ideas.