



Meeting Notes

Small Town Housing Working Group

Date: Thursday, November 16, 2023

Time: 5:30-7:00 p.m.

Location: Remote

Staff Contact: Andrea Donlon, adonlon@frcog.org (413) 774-3167 ext. 127

Working Group Webpage: <https://frcog.org/boards-committees/small-town-housing-workgroup/>

Next meeting date: Thursday, February 1 at 6:00-7:30 PM

Attendees:

Andrea Donlon (FRCOG, Buckland PB)	Alyssa Larose (HRA/RDI staff)
Megan Rhodes (FRCOG)	Jerry Lund (Leyden, FRPB)
Judy Atkins (Franklin County Community Land Trust)	Megan McDonough (PV Habitat for Humanity)
Rick Chandler (Ashfield Planning Board)	Dan Murphy (Sunderland Select Board; FRPB)
Charlemont Planning Board (attending as a group)	Chris Nolan (Deerfield Assistant Town Administrator)
Sari Hoy (Sheffield Housing Commission)	Anna Oltman (Greenfield Dept. of Comm. Develop.)
Mike Shaffer (Erving; FRPB)	Martin Omasta (FCCLT)
Shannon Wissman-Hoar (Bernardston Planning Board)	Kathy Orlando (Sheffield Housing Commission)
Abhi Kurve (CHAPA)	Chris Slocum-Wysk (Bernardston Planning Board)

1. Housing Bond Bill

Andrea Donlon showed several slides summarizing the various funding and policy components of the Housing Bond Bill that was put forward by the Healey administration in October. Abhi Kurve from Citizens' Housing and Planning Association ([CHAPA](#)) explained that the Housing Bond Bill is a commitment for capital expenditures for 5 years. One of the policy components the state is proposing will change the MA Zoning Law (Chapter 40A) to allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs) by right. Towns will not be allowed to require owner-occupancy or require a special permit process; towns can limit the use of ADUs as short term rentals and they can require a site plan review. This will be a shift for many towns in Franklin County, most which have various restrictions on ADUs. In rural areas, ADUs will still need to be reviewed by the board of health to make sure an existing septic system can accommodate the ADU. Another policy change is that any zoning change that involves inclusionary zoning (giving incentives for affordable housing) can pass by simple majority at town meeting, rather than the usual 2/3 majority for zoning amendments. There is also a policy proposal to allow towns to assess a property transfer fee for home sales that exceed \$1 Million and the funding will go towards affordable housing. Andrea explained that there are not that many home sales in Franklin County towns that exceed \$1M to make this

useful for our towns; comparatively, in the Boston area, almost all home sales exceed \$1M, and the policy is being criticized for potentially taxing so many home sales.

The next slides showed all the funding provisions. This Housing Bond Bill represents a significant investment in housing. It calls for \$4.1 billion in spending, compared to \$1.8 billion in the last Housing Bond Bill in 2018.

Alyssa Larose from [HRA/RDI](#) next presented slides that she has previously presented to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission ([RPAC](#)). Alyssa showed how many of the state's housing programs did not benefit small towns in rural Franklin County. Unless changes are made to the Housing Bond Bill before it is finalized, this is unlikely to change. She demonstrated how the smaller scale of projects, with the same high costs of building, put our region at a disadvantage. Many funding programs have a minimum of 10 units or 25 units; this is small in the eyes of the state, but for our smaller towns, that would be a very large project. Alyssa argued that if you looked at per capita investment, the state should be helping to fund 400 new units and preservation of 250 units over the next five years. This far exceeds what the programs have been able to fund in our region in the past. Other states regularly fund smaller-scale projects and have a rural set aside for rural projects that can't compete.

The Housing Bond Bill will be finalized by June 2024, so there is still room for advocacy. Abhi from CHAPA explained that this is the governor's proposal; it will move through multiple committees, so expect changes. CHAPA is gathering information, and they see more opportunity for shaping policy. There will be a hearing in January and there will be an opportunity to provide testimony in person, by video remote, and in writing. Moving the bill along is important because of the funding programs (any delays shorten windows for applications to grant programs). Abhi also explained that it's unusual to have so much policy in a Housing Bond Bill.

2. Franklin County Community Land Trust: new grant project and 2023 accomplishments

The Franklin County Community Land Trust gave us an introduction to community land trusts and their efforts to create a new one for our region about a year ago. Notes from that meeting are here: https://frcog.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/STHWG_Meeting_notes_09-29-2022.pdf

CLTs are organizations (generally 501c3s) devoted to ensuring that affordable housing is available in communities. The goal is to retain community control by taking land off the market and dedicating it to affordable housing. Typically, the community land trust acquires property and retains ownership of the land, but sells housing built on it to residents who meet eligibility requirements. Deed restriction limits profit on sale of property. Champlain Housing Trust in VT is an example of an established and successful CLT. Amherst also has one that has had some successful projects.

The Franklin County CLT has been engaged in discussions about regionalizing efforts and bringing racial equity into the equation by collaborating with other CLT groups and other housing supporters. They have been looking at needs and opportunities of the larger region rather than town by town. They have been advised that 400

units is the scale needed to make the finances work without a subsidy and/or support from donors/grants. Smaller local CLTs exist, but they depend on volunteers and can't expand.

An ad hoc group applied for and was awarded a \$40K Root Cause Solution grant from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (Rural Vaccine Equity Initiative) – they worked closely with Monica Keel from CHAPA to develop their proposal. Partners include affordable housing advocates from Hampden and Hampshire Counties, including Lower Valley Community Land Trust, a Springfield-based start-up that is connected to Neighbor2Neighbor and Wellspring. The goal for the project, which will wrap up by May 2024, is to share legal documents, skillsets, and data and to lay the groundwork and build relationships necessary to coordinate on a more regional basis. Burlington Associates will be the consultant.

The FCCLT is not developing properties yet. They have considered several and are looking at a potential opportunity on Hope St in Greenfield, but haven't settled on anything yet.

Updates from around Franklin County and Massachusetts

- Jerry Lund recommends “Homelessness is a Housing Problem” book – it explains structural factors that got us here.
- Rick Chandler reports that Ashfield is looking at cluster housing. The Ashfield Planning Board and ZBA asked Franklin County Cooperative Inspection Program (FCCIP) building inspector Jim Hawkins to attend a recent meeting because of inquiries from realtors. Some of their ideas don't fit typical development patterns. The PB wants to be proactive rather than reactive. They are looking at examples of “intentional housing” development – not always affordable, but alternative.
- Charlemont Planning Board added that they have a property owner who would like to do a cluster housing arrangement, but their bylaws aren't clear and subdivision regs are draconian. Alyssa Larose recommended reaching out to FRCOG – look at Shelburne, which updated their [subdivision regulations](#) recently and used best practices.
- Sheffield – Kathy Orlando said they have an interest in package treatment for small septic where there is no sewer in village center. Could there be a public/private partnership? Megan Rhodes recommended [Community One-Stop For Growth](#) grants, but may not work for rural housing. Towns can opt to earmark their lodging tax revenue for things like this. Alyssa Larose mentioned USDA Rural Development funding programs for infrastructure.
- Jerry Lund wrote in the chat that Leyden has a back-lot bylaw (with or without a set-aside) for up to four houses that saves frontage.

Next meeting and meetings in 2024

The next meeting will be held on Thursday, February 1 at 6:00-7:30 on Zoom.

The results of the 2024 meeting time survey indicated that the first Thursdays of the month from 6-7:30 PM worked for many participants. In order to avoid a meeting right after the New Year, we'll shift to meeting the first Thursdays in February, April, June, September, and November in 2024. Our in-person meeting will happen in late July/early August depending on availability of wherever we end up having the meeting.