

Town of Westbrook, CT
Affordable Housing Plan Subcommittee
Special Meeting
Thursday, August 5, 2021, 7:00 p.m.
VIA REMOTE ACCESS – ZOOM Meeting only

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Marilyn Ozols, Chair; Elizabeth Carpenter, James Crawford, Bill Neale and Linda Nolf

ALSO PRESENT:

Tony Cozza, John Hall and Andy Schatz

Eric Knapp, Planning, Zoning and Development Coordinator and
Glenn Chalder, Consultant from Planimetrics

1. Call to Order

M. Ozols called the meeting to order at 7:15 p.m.

2. Westbrook Housing Survey Results

G. Chalder said they received one hundred sixty-eight (168) responses to the survey which ran in June and July.

Half of the survey participants have lived in Westbrook for twenty (20) years or more.

Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the participants own their property, and it is their primary residence. Eleven percent (11%) are renters.

For the purposes of the survey, Westbrook was divided into four (4) geographical areas. The survey participants are from all four (4) parts of Westbrook.

Ninety-three percent (93%) of the participants expect to be living in Westbrook in five (5) years.

There was a question which asked what types of housing the survey participants have lived in. Eighty-eight percent (88%) responded in a single-family house.

Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents thought their next housing choice may be smaller than it is today.

Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents would prefer to own their next housing option. Most of the respondents own their home now.

E. Knapp said that almost none of the respondents have lived in an accessory apartment nor are they considering an accessory apartment as their next housing option.

There was discussion about how the respondents all live in single family homes now. They are not able to live in Westbrook due to a lack of affordable housing.

Some of the survey results are difficult to interpret. For example people who live in single family homes now may not feel that more diverse housing is needed because they currently have housing.

The Committee discussed the need for education about affordable housing. The respondents are not people who are in need of affordable housing. It would have been beneficial to have had a more diverse sampling of respondents.

G. Chalder indicated that a sample size of one hundred sixty-eight (168) people who select themselves to participate may give a margin of error. The degree of agreeable or disagreeable is how some of the survey results should be interpreted, looking at the where the majority of responses land. Many of the survey questions garnered results where the numbers were too close to call, so they did not show support or opposition in either direction.

Effective January 1, 2022, the Connecticut State Legislature passed a Public Act (P.A. 21-29) so accessory apartments will be allowed on any property with a single-family house. This new law would supersede contrary language in local zoning regulations unless the town opts out. Opting out requires an affirmative vote from the Zoning Commission and the Board of Selectmen. The Zoning Regulations will be subject to revision due to the Public Act.

There were not many respondents in the aged 25-34 category. Most of the respondents were female. Most were white. The Committee discussed whether it would have made a difference if there were more male respondents and if there was more diversity in ethnicity and income of survey participants.

B. Neale brought up the fact that only one hundred sixty-eight (168) people participated in the survey out of six thousand (6,000), which is only three percent (3%) of the population, and they were self-selected. He indicated that this is not a good cross section of town residents.

J. Crawford said despite the small sample, the results, particularly the comments section, were reflective of a large number of people in the town. Crawford stated that many in the Town are happy to see the issue of affordable housing is being reviewed and addressed.

G. Chalder said that assisted housing and deed restricted housing are the two categories that fit under the umbrella of affordable housing developments. This is the minimum requirement for the statutorily compliant affordable housing plan.

3. Possible Affordable Housing Strategies

G. Chalder reviewed possible alternatives. Assisted housing receives public funding. Examples are the Housing Authority and non-profit groups that receive State grants. Westbrook has several developments that fall under this category. It seems that the focus has been on elderly housing. In order to increase this number, there needs to be staff available to help. This is not something a volunteer commission can handle on its own.

G. Chalder suggested that it is important to encourage developers to investigate possible assisted housing projects, but there is competition for the funding and the funding is very technical in nature. These projects require technical assistance and professional expertise so the profit margin is low.

There are density incentives in the Zoning Regulations. Deed restricted units are required to have a minimum affordability period of 40 years. The units have to be affordable to those making 80% or less of the area median income.

G. Chalder discussed a recommendation for a housing trust fund. This would offer the opportunity for the town to acquire naturally occurring affordable housing and put a deed restriction on it. For example, if an elderly person was looking to sell their home, it could be purchased with this housing trust fund, and a deed restriction could be placed on it.

The statutory minimum for a deed restriction is forty (40) years. G. Chalder indicated that there could be an opportunity to investigate modifying these restrictions. Maybe the town or a housing group such as HOPE Partnership or Habitat for Humanity should have the opportunity to acquire the unit, sell it, keep the wind fall and use that money to create more affordable housing. Another idea is to extend the number of years

for the deed restriction. As the units go off of the deed restriction list, there needs to be something in place to ensure that there will continue to be the same number of affordable housing units in Town.

There is a section in the Affordable Housing Plan which addresses Public Act 21-29. M. Ozols suggested this be discussed when the Subcommittee has more information. The definition of “family” has changed over the years. The definition may require some consideration.

G. Chalder explained universal design housing, which is housing which is available to people of all abilities. It makes housing suitable for generations to come. The Plan can encourage it. It is not applicable to single-family housing but for multi-family housing.

There was discussion about manufactured homes, mobile home parks, and the wording in the Affordable Housing Plan. In Westbrook, naturally occurring affordable housing includes the mobile home parks.

There are several programs that give the Town credit when tenants receive rental assistance and choose to rent an apartment in Westbrook. The Town may want to consider ways to encourage potential tenants to choose apartments in Westbrook. Currently, there are five (5) tenants who receive this type of rental assistance. E. Knapp said if there was more staffing, there would be someone to assist people in pursuing these opportunities.

The town gets credit for the homes with CHFA mortgages. Currently there are thirty (30) units that the Town gets credit for towards the 8-30g list.

Tiny homes can provide affordable housing options, but they are mobile, not permanent structures.

The Subcommittee may want to consider micro assisted living facilities for seniors, up to twenty (20) beds, as an affordable housing option.

4. Draft Report Schedule

G. Chalder suggested that at their September 2, 2021 meeting, the Subcommittee begin their discussion picking up on page three (3). He said his goal is to start to create a document that reflects the discussions but is not voluminous. He would like the document to be as strategic as possible. He’s hoping to have a draft for the October 7, 2021 Affordable Housing Subcommittee meeting.

5. Approval of Minutes – June 3, 2021 and July 1, 2021

The minutes were tabled due to lack of quorum.

For the September meeting, E. Knapp will send out the minutes from the June 3, 2021, July 1, 2021 and August 5, 2021 meetings. The September meeting will be virtual.

6. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen S. King, Recording Clerk