

APPROVED
MINUTES
Durham Housing Task Force
July 10, 2023
10:00 am – Council Chambers

Housing Task Force

Sally Tobias, chair
Charlotte Hitchcock
Chuck Hotchkiss, Town Council representative
Al Howland
Eileen Murphy
Paul Rasmussen, Planning Board representative
Michael Saputo (“Michael S”)
Judith Spang

Others Present

Nick Taylor, advisor, Workforce Housing Coalition
Michael Behrendt, Town Planner (“Michael B”)

Sally called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.

All of the members were present. Mimi Kell could not make the meeting. Paul attended on Zoom. The agenda was approved. There were no public comments. Approval of the minutes was postponed to the next meeting.

Nick said the state budget passed. It included \$5 million funding for Housing Champions. **Sally** mentioned 603 Forward held an event on Saturday at a home on Rocky Lane. **Al** said the Randolphs have another proposed project in Dover. It is for 32 units located off Olive Meadow Lane, off Sixth Street, behind the day care center. **Michael B** said that Temple Israel developed this site for a synagogue years ago but the synagogue sold the property to the day care center. This is back land for the property. He said the project at 74 Main Street was approved by the planning board but abutters have appealed it to court.

Sally said we assume that all UNH students have family support and resources but that is not true for all students. Some have a difficult time finding and paying for housing.

Discussion with Robin LeBlanc of RHL Strategies

Michael B introduced Robin LeBlanc of RHL Strategies. Robin was the executive director of Plan New Hampshire, which hosts design charrettes for cities and towns, for many years. **Robin** said she has seen over and over how good ideas get shot down. People ask, “Where is

this coming from?” You need political will and public will. There needs to be a common understanding of the situation. What is the housing story in Durham? People should say, “I had no idea that...” She handed out a sheet about getting to Yes. It is attached here.

She said we should not lead with solutions. Little stories add up. We also need the data as well as the stories. Each by itself only goes so far. NH Housing Finance Agency has a great toolbox. It tells why it is very difficult everywhere to develop housing. It explores myths about housing. We often think because we live in a house that we know about housing. That is not the case. Ask who is not at the table that needs to be there. Employees, students, families, professionals, seniors.

Al said the Task Force met a lot of resistance [with proposed changes to the Zoning Ordinance]. We were aware of the problem and went straight to the solution. The reaction was that there was no problem. **Charlotte** said we tried to get the information out there but not enough was done. **Robin** said there are many ways to reach out. Molly Donovan talks about “key informants.” Who are they? Clergy, social service people, real estate people. You need to interview the key people.

Relying on one big meeting is not helpful. People are very busy. You have to go to them. You can have more than one “survey.” **Judith** asked if a survey is needed to get broad input to counteract the effects of a community meeting where a small group can dominate. **Robin** said we can certainly do a survey. Often wealthy people with influence don’t want any change. You want to be able to say, “This is what we are hearing...” **Judith** said that a skilled facilitator can draw out people.

Robin said there are lots of things that people just don’t know. Old student debt holds people back. Many people who have a home need to be in a different kind of home. New Hampshire is among the 5% of oldest states. Figure out what information we want to learn.

Do not say, “Housing.” This makes people think of student housing, senior housing, low-income housing. Talk about “a place to live.” Language is important. Emphasize “we” not “we and you separately.”

What kinds of places will fit the needs that are out there? There are lots of housing types being used in other places that can be adapted to New England.

Al said there is a difference between an inventory and a needs assessment. Somebody with a house is in a very different situation from somebody without one.

Chuck asked what timeframe were need. **Robin** said it can range from 3 months to 6 months or more. It depends on the urgency; for example in towns where they have a town meeting deadline. But give yourselves the time that you need. Going up to 18 months is not terrible. People you talk with will guide the flow.

Robin said there is power in small group discussion. With 6-8 people everybody talks. **Eileen** asked how you counter people who say they did not know about the meeting. **Robin** said to get the word out any way that you can, such as with mailings for water bills. **Charlotte** said we want to also get information from people who don't live in Durham.

Robin said PTA meetings can be good. There are many ways of communicating. Somebody objective should present the data at a meeting, like Nick, or somebody from NHHFA. We could put together a one page sheet with key facts.

Nick said we hear that Durham is an outlier because of UNH. It is important to get data for people separate from UNH. We should get that with the housing needs assessment.

Paul said a big concern in Durham is how to keep students out of the housing that is created. People don't want students in their neighborhoods. Some parents buy a house for their kids while they attend UNH. The intent of zoning amendments over the past 5 years has been to separate students.

Sally said we have to find ways to address this concern. It stops the construction of any multifamily project. **Michael B** said that other towns resist multifamily housing because they don't want "those people" living nearby. In Durham it is all about keeping students away from other residents. **Michael S** said progress gets derailed because of concerns over students, taxes, and the cost of educating children.

Michael S asked which should come first the quantitative or the qualitative information. **Nick** said there is no magic formula. It all has to be there. **Robin** asked how Keene, Plymouth, and Hanover do this. She asked what it would look like if students were welcomed. The vision should be positive. Because this is sensitive we have to approach it carefully.

Nick stressed the importance of trust and transparency. **Robin** said "*Change happens at the speed of trust.*"

Robin said we need to do one on one interviews. Talk with a dozen people who represent various constituencies. Having small groups and one on one meetings is where good communication happens. You have to take your time. Identify the groups you want to talk with and the contacts for those groups.

Robin said that 40% of households are renters. Talk with them and with students. She said the vision might be that everyone who wants to live in Durham can find a place to meet their needs in Durham. The vision should be supported by the Master Plan.

Judith said she is concerned about jumping to the vision. There are such divergent ideas in town. It is hard to decide which vision to follow. People in rural areas think the housing should go in core areas of the town. People in core areas in town think housing should go in the rural areas. **Michael B** said that both are right. Planning says that density should go in the core areas but there is little land there. The land is in the rural areas. **Judith** said that conservation subdivisions have been problematic because people in rural areas have to live close to each other and that isn't what everybody wants. **Sally** said that it is critical to understand what land is buildable. Why is developable land not being developed? We need to talk to landowners and abutters. It can't be only developers' rights or abutters' rights. What can be built in Durham that will work?

Sally said that the median price for a house that sold in June 2023 was \$495,000. 61% of the population can afford that. 100% could afford the median price earlier. **Paul** said you might have a good housing situation now but something can happen suddenly and your situation changes.

Al said we did not determine where people were dissatisfied with the current housing situation. We know the barriers pretty well. **Charlotte** said we tried. We presented a powerpoint of the problems. **Al** said we explained the situation a number of times but there was not a broad enough base of support. **Sally** said we followed the model for large zoning changes that had been used successfully for significant zoning amendments for solar, agriculture, and short term rentals. We thought the concerns would be worked out at the Planning Board as they were with earlier amendments. **Michael B** said that Sally was correct about this. Why did it not work this time? **Al** said that housing is a very visceral issue. We underestimated the concerns. **Michael S** said there are various landmines along the way. **Robin** said that understanding the landmines is valuable. You find out what the issues are.

Robin said that public hearings are not the answer. You need to have a discussion and you don't get that with a public hearing. Many are intimidated to come to Town Hall for public hearings. You have to go to where people are. **Robin** thanked the task force and left the meeting.

Additional discussion about community outreach

Michael S said the Community Outreach Committee was thinking of influencers. Asking the Fire Chief if it was hard to recruit people. Talk to the police union and the PTA and others who work in Durham. Another important group is seniors who want a different housing situation.

Eileen said we need to talk to people who don't live here and restaurant owners who are trying to hire people. **Sally** said this is a regional problem. Portsmouth is having trouble hiring waitstaff. How does this affect us? Businesses in Durham shut down in the summer partly because it is hard to hire people. **Paul** said more year-round housing would help.

Al said the Oyster River Parents of Preschoolers (ORPP) would be worth talking with. And Growing Places. For young families the cost of child care is prohibitive. We could go to a pickle ball game and talk with people while they are waiting to play.

Michael S said that the committee put together a few key questions for employers:

- Where do your employees live?
- Has housing been a challenge for your employees?
- Has this been a challenge for hiring?
- What stories do you hear?
- Who else should we talk with?

Michael B asked about logistics. We could have one page with a half dozen questions. You could write down notes or record the conversation whichever you prefer. Should we write down their names? **Michael S** said it is helpful to have two people: 1 to facilitate and 1 to write notes. **Chuck** said there should be just one person for interviews with one person, as opposed to a group. **Judith** said we could have a code # referring to a name on a different list so we know who spoke to us. **Eileen** said we need separate questions for different groups. **Charlotte** said one could sit in the break room at Riverwoods and interview people as they come in.

Chuck said the information we get now would help inform the larger survey that we do later. One benefit is we will find out who has passion about this issue. **Eileen** asked if we should ask the questions to a broad population now. **Nick** said we could include the basic questions in Friday Updates. It was suggested that we use Survey Monkey. **Sally** said there is a silent majority out there. **Judith** asked who reads Friday Updates. **Michael B** said it probably tends to be those who are more engaged in the issues.

Sally said we could have somebody come and talk about obstacles to building housing. **Judith** suggested Ben Frost of NHHFA. She said the report that was issued recently about housing needs was excellent. It profiled various communities. She mentioned Twin Pines. **Nick** said Marty Chapman, the director of The Housing Partnership, would be good. Twin Pines is the nonprofit developer in the Upper Valley. **Michael B.** mentioned the Five L's, the components of housing affordability: *Land, Labor, Laws (local zoning), Loans, and Lumber (materials)*.

There was some discussion about cooperatively owned manufactured housing parks (i.e. mobile home parks). **Michael B** said Sarah Wrightsman is looking into whether it would be legal for a town to allow them (but not conventional parks owned by a landlord). He wondered if people in Durham might be receptive to this.

Al suggested people send in names and we could go over this at the August meeting.

Sally asked everyone to think of groups and individuals they have a connection with that we should interview and send the information to Michael B. We can work on a list and then make appointments.

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael Behrendt