

# Housing in Durham: Housing and the Economy

*Housing in Durham is a multi-part series exploring the issue of affordable and workforce housing in Durham. "Housing and the Economy" is part two of the series. If you missed part one, you can catch up [here](#).*

In part one of this series, *Housing in Durham: Who's Missing?*, we begin to talk about the impact that housing has on our businesses. In a survey recently conducted by the Durham Business Association, this theme emerges as a top concern among Durham business owners.



## **About the Survey**

The Durham Business Association conducted a survey to find out from Durham business owners what Durham's challenges and strengths are and what the town could be doing to better support and attract business. Forty-two business owners responded to this survey. The vast majority (85.7 percent) of respondents represent locally owned businesses and many have been in Durham for greater than 20 years.

## **Survey Results**

Several themes emerged from the survey. Respondents identified Durham's seasonality as an obstacle. Not only does Durham's population fluctuate significantly due to the ebb and flow of University students, but

Durham doesn't draw customers from surrounding communities like Exeter and Portsmouth do. One respondent said, "there is a permanent limit to the number of available customers that creates a 'glass ceiling' limiting growth". The town's seasonality and inconsistency of staff and patrons is a challenge to business owners.

Survey respondents (and I) attribute this in part to the town's lack of housing diversity. Durham-based businesses do well with students, but many students are gone four months out of the year. Year-round business is, of course, better than seasonal. In order to capture year-round business, you need year-round residents.

Durham has year-round residents, who primarily occupy single-family housing, but business owners are hardly tapping into the young professional/young family demographic. When asked what Durham's greatest asset is, zero respondents identified affordable housing, and 33.3 percent of respondents identified housing options as a challenge to growth and development. Several respondents commented that Durham needs more non-student apartments for post-college young adults, University staff, or graduate students. A larger permanent population will support commercial and retail development.

In fact, housing came up *a lot* when respondents were asked about the challenges to economic development in Durham.

*There is a lack of affordable housing for young professionals and graduate students with young families.*

*There seems to be a lack of lower middle income housing for young people who aren't students.*

*There is a lack of housing for young to middle-aged adults, like apartments or condominiums.*

When we talk about who is served by workforce housing and how housing impacts our economy, we rarely highlight the role of these individuals as consumers. We never fail to mention staffing shortages caused by a limited housing supply and this is a critical part of the equation, but people who live in workforce housing also patron your locally-owned business. Research suggests that young families are the best consumers, so this is who we need to attract to keep our businesses booming year-round.

Survey respondents were also asked what types of housing are most needed in Durham. More than half (54.1 percent) identified residential, non-student apartments as the housing type most needed in Durham. So, what now? Survey respondents suggested the town's leadership needs to promote housing options to attract young individuals to live in Durham and shop in Durham year-round. Among the Town Council's 2019-2020 goals, adopted in early June, is to create a workforce housing committee to "investigate opportunities, challenges, and options for affordable, quality housing in Durham."

Find out more about the survey [here](#).