

Community Housing on MDI: What We've Got vs. What We Need

Imagine living in a place where the new teacher in your child's classroom cannot afford to live in your community, where the person who delivers your mail or drives your firetruck cannot afford to raise a family. Consider a community of homes and businesses that rely on painters and heating specialists and plumbers and retail workers and technicians who cannot afford to live where they work. Picture young people raised in an area where they cannot afford to settle as adults. Welcome to the housing market on beautiful Mt. Desert Island.

Many year-round and seasonal employees who work on MDI must live off the Island. Local employers attest to a shortage of labor. They can't get the workers they need, and the most cited reason is lack of housing. MDI needs housing within the reach of average people if it is to sustain a year-round community.

Participants in the MDI Tomorrow process are committed to fostering and protecting an economically viable and healthy community on our Island. Such a community must have housing that is available and affordable for the people who provide essential services—the teachers, nurses, police, firefighters, town employees, tradespeople, Coast Guard personnel, employees of local businesses and nonprofits.

Statistics are sobering. According to the Maine State Housing Authority, in 2001 the Bar Harbor housing market had a housing affordability index of 0.67. In other words, average incomes are only 67% of what is needed to purchase the median-priced house here. In both Mt. Desert and Tremont, the affordability index was 0.66. Southwest Harbor's affordability index was 0.50.

Household income in the Ellsworth/Bar Harbor housing market (which encompasses all MDI towns) is only 92% of the state average income (8 percentage points lower than the state average income), yet the price of a first-time home here is 27% above the state average.

People who must live far from work spend significant parts of their days in their cars, away from their families. The average commuting time in Hancock County increased from 18 minutes in 1990 to 22.4 minutes in 2002.

When young families cannot afford to live in a place, the community becomes less diverse in the age of its residents. Between 1990 and 2000, the median age in Bar Harbor increased from 36.8 to 40.6. More older people and fewer younger people mean school populations decline, so the cost per pupil of providing a first-rate education rises.

Without reasonably priced community housing opportunities, the Island will continue to become more of a summer community. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of *year-round* homes on MDI increased from 4,618 to 4,956—a 7.5% increase. In that same period, the number of *second* homes on MDI increased from 1,881 to 2,103—a 12% increase.

Factors contributing to the community housing shortage include cost of land; limited vacant land with public water and sewer; competition for existing houses and land by retirees, second-home owners, and commercial interests; and land use zoning ordinances that increase development costs.

Other communities have addressed similar housing problems in various ways. Some changed zoning ordinances to encourage building homes near town centers where municipal water and sewer already exist. Another solution is to offer financial incentives that encourage certain types of development or assist identified community workers in finding housing. Public/private partnerships and groups like the Mt. Desert Community Trust and the MDI/Ellsworth Housing Authorities provide another avenue for creative solutions.

The MDI Community Trust, re-established in spring 2002 after a dormant period, is a nonprofit community-based organization that will focus on providing community, reasonably priced housing to residents of Mount Desert Island. The Trust will not compete with the traditional private sector of the housing market; rather, the organization will seek to fill the void not presently met by the private sector.

Two years ago the Bar Harbor Housing Authority sold its last lot in the West Eden Meadows subdivision. The West Eden Meadows project was one solution created by the Housing Authority to the high cost of land on MDI. This successful endeavor consisted of a 21-lot, shared-equity, community housing subdivision for families who live or work in Bar Harbor.

While each town on Mount Desert Island is distinct, the towns share common housing issues. The needs and actions of one town directly affect the market in surrounding towns. Given that this shortage of year-round community housing is an Island-wide issue, the wisest response for us as neighbors sharing a common problem is to work together on solutions.

Because providing new housing requires major public and private investments—such as roads, water and sewers, and waste disposal—it is essential to weigh the benefits of development against the costs. Of equal importance is the reality that once development of any kind takes place, be it residential or commercial, it typically becomes part of the permanent landscape. Development is rarely *undone*.

On our Island rich with natural beauty, development will certainly continue to take place. If we want our Island to develop in a certain way, meeting the housing needs of particular people, we need to proactively and collaboratively manage that development so it proceeds toward the future we want.

The market is not providing sufficient housing for the diverse people who contribute to our community's wellbeing. The MDI Tomorrow process is an opportunity to develop a shared vision for future housing on this Island. We can act collaboratively to guide the development on our Island so that people can work here—and live here. Our goal related to housing is to increase the rental and home-buying options for the folks who comprise the year-round, core community workforce on the Island. Join us in looking at housing needs and possibilities at the MDI Tomorrow Island-wide conference on Saturday, November 16.

Who are the people that make it possible for us to live here? Shouldn't they be able to live here, too?

--Janet Hamel, Bar Harbor resident, writer/editor/training instructor. Member, MDI Tomorrow Housing Working Group