

Housing Working Group  
Notes from March 13 meeting

***Next meeting of the group will be on Wednesday, March 27, from 8-9:30 at MDI Housing Authority, 80 Mt Desert Street, Bar Harbor***

Attending (and check in comments) were:

- Marla Major, Friends of Acadia; checking out similar issues on Cape Cod
- Keating Pepper, The Knowles Company; ongoing work on a cross-island trail, which will involve cooperation from land owners, including Shep Harris
- Sam Coplan, Landscape Architect; noted the tie in of the housing issue to the land-use and community design and transportation working groups
- Hook Wheeler, The Jackson Laboratory; asked the framing question if we are talking about making housing more affordable, “who is the housing for?”
- Stan MacDonald, retired from Bar Harbor Banking and Trust; noted the existence of a community land trust established to assist with housing in the town of Mount Desert;
- Terrance Kelley, MDI Housing Authorities; noted the over 700 housing units owned or managed by the combined MDI and Ellsworth Housing Authorities, under various housing programs of Housing and Urban Development (300 elder units, 375 rental assistance units, 30 family units and 50 units in private ownership, involving some form of assistance
- Sydney Roberts Rockefeller, Northeast Harbor Improvement Project and Mount Desert Ordinance Review Committee; noted her interest in having local ordinances reflect the need for higher density housing to reduce land and development costs, thereby making housing more affordable
- Tom Martin, Hancock County Planning Commission; noted projects in other Hancock County towns of Surry, Blue Hill, Castine and Gouldsboro, noting that commuter patterns take workers from all parts of Hancock County to MDI, and to a lesser extent, vice versa, each day
- Janet Hamel, new MDI resident; noted the need for housing for adults with disabilities, beyond what is being provided by Downeast Horizons;
- Ron Beard, University of Maine Cooperative Extension; noted the work of Rhode Island Sea Grant on a project and publications called Shared Vision, utilizing a similar process to MDI Tomorrow on Aquidneck Island, near Newport, Rhode Island, and distributed that groups “housing goals”.

Terry Kelley outlined the successful West Eden Meadows housing project: lots in the project were sold to applicants who completed applications noting both community connections and detailed financial and construction plans. Applications were rated by an anonymous panel of community members. The land was sold at less than market rate, allowing applicants to use the difference between sale price and appraised value as part of their down-payment for construction loans or mortgages. Both the housing authority and homeowners retain original investment, so if and when property is sold, both get a return, based on the original split; the housing authority would use their portion of any return to

help future projects remain affordable. One or two lots were sold at market rates. All applicants had houses under construction shortly after the sale, and the project is completely utilized.

To reinforce the notion that the housing is for the people who play critical roles in helping our communities function, Terry noted some of the employment of current owners of houses within the project: nurse, park ranger, architect, hospital employee, police dispatcher, college professor, school teacher, carpenter, town employee, non-profit employee. (Scribe's apologies for any errors in this thumbnail sketch)

Other discussion followed:

Because of concerns about sprawl, the loss of farm and open space, and fragmentation of habitat and rural landscape, the group noted a desire to locate additional housing in areas already served by community utilities, the group would like to emphasize "in-fill" projects, and those with higher density and shared infrastructure within designated "growth areas" of local towns. These approaches may require changes to land use ordinances and strategic extension of utilities. However, few federal grants for sewer and water utilities are available for any "plan-ful" approach—usually all funds are allocated for "emergency" situations.

Hook Wheeler volunteered to check with some of the island's major employers to determine a rough forecast of housing needs over the next five years; based on salaries paid for projected new employees, we can determine some sense of whether housing demand is likely to be for purchase or rental units.

Sam Coplan (and two or three others) volunteered to draft some broad outcomes for consideration by the group, to help focus our work.

Basically, our approaches will be to expand the options on MDI for rental or purchased homes for a range of employees who are important to the smooth function of our communities, public safety, schools and local business. The general approach for families of middle income (see list of professions of owners of houses in West Eden Meadows for examples) will be to encourage public-private partnerships and land use policies that will reduce land and development costs. The housing authority will be a key partner in any planned expansion of rental properties and purchase options for families with lower income.

MDI Tomorrow will need to help with education to local elected and appointed town officials and residents about the issues and solutions. Terry noted the critical importance of working directly with neighbors in the design and details of any adjacent housing project such as the successful West Eden Meadows. He noted that support by planning board and town selectboards or councils is also of key importance.

We will need to emphasize regional approaches, due to the employment and traffic patterns affecting MDI communities. Some of that work may involve studying some of

the short and long term costs and benefits of developing housing in towns and village centers when compared with development in the more rural portions of our communities. Other work will be to study what strategies have worked elsewhere and might be adapted for MDI and the region.

The suggestion was made to use Geographic Information Systems (maps and data) of College of the Atlantic to track changes in subdivision lots, and housing stock and inventory for rent or purchase.

The role of modular housing was discussed as one way to reduce construction costs of new housing, noting that high quality units are now available, often at less cost than “stick built” homes.

The conversion of year-round to seasonal rental housing was noted, and we wondered if there are any successful “disincentive” programs that discourage that trend.