

Notes from 4/3 Working Group meeting on affordable housing

Next meeting is new time 10-11:30 am, Wednesday, May 1 at MDI Housing Authority, 80 Mt Desert Street, Bar Harbor

Attending: Clare Wood, Executive Director, Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce, Bobby Williams, Planner, Town of Mt. Desert; Gary DeLong, Maine Sea Coast Mission; Tom Martin, Hancock County Planning Commission; Marla Major, Friends of Acadia; Janet Hamel, soon to be board member of Downeast Horizons; Terry Kelley, MDI Housing Authority; Ron Beard, University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Terry provided some data showing that though there are approximately 230 vouchers available for applicants for housing in the MDI towns, only 82 eligible families were able to find rental housing in MDI towns, due to lack of rental housing, rental costs above what the federal guidelines allow or housing not up to safety standards, including lead paint. Many applicants who apply to the MDI Housing Authority have to find rental housing in other mainland towns. All applicants pay 30% of their income toward rentals, with housing authority vouchers paying any remainder, up to a market ceiling set by the federal government for Hancock County.

Clare Wood outlined a number of housing concerns for island business owners, including lack of affordable housing as a key deterrent to attracting good year round workers, and difficulties in securing housing for seasonal employees.

Tom Martin indicated that Mike Finnegan, head of the Maine State Housing Authority, would be addressing the public and the annual meeting of the Hancock County Planning Commission, at 7 pm on May 28, at the Ellsworth Public Library.

The group discussed the preamble above.

Why aren't we concerned about members of the workforce who have lower income?

In general, we recognize that providing subsidy or housing assistance for members of the workforce who live in families of less than \$23,000 per year has been through MDI Housing Authorities and other programs using federal resources. Those programs generally work well for those who can actually find qualified rental housing. To expand those programs will require greater federal investments. However, we recognize that the great majority of people receiving federal housing assistance are working, and are needed by year-round employers. While we will educate our state and federal legislators about the critical needs for housing for people who have lower income, we see that MDI Tomorrow is most effective working at the island level. And, we believe that working on local policies, in order to reduce overall housing development costs, will benefit workforce members regardless of income.

What are some of the implications for our communities when rental and purchase costs for housing are beyond the reach of the core workforce?

We are mostly concerned about the status of our island towns as year-round communities. We fear a variety of trends are hidden from view:

High housing costs translate into fewer people living in our communities. Fewer people means that costs of schools and municipal services are born by fewer taxpayers. Those taxpayers will be less tolerant of school and municipal budget increases; over time voters will force reduction in staffing and quality of programs.

Fewer people living year-round in our towns means that there are fewer economically viable year-round businesses and services. Bar Harbor has lost its only car dealership and a year-round florist. Mount Desert has lost a number of key businesses. Island residents will not be able to purchase locally to meet family needs for clothing and other goods. (Can you buy underwear on MDI?)

Labor shortages will reduce the number of viable year-round family owned businesses. As it is now, many family-owned business members are forced to work 70-80 hours per week, working for little profit. They are 'burning out', with increased stress on their families.

Fewer year-round families mean that critical community organizations are competing for volunteers who provide valuable services.

High housing costs puts even more pressure on families to maintain two adults working full time, with resulting stress on families, on children.

When two parent families and one parent families are working full time, they have less time with children, resulting in decrease in school performance and increase reliance on "structured" recreational opportunities, child care, etc. Less parental involvement results in higher problems for children.

Increased financial pressures on MDI families mean that fewer Swans, Frenchboro and Cranberry Isles high school students can find families with which to board, as has often been the case. Off-island families and students have increased stress, poorer quality of life.

Families who live on the mainland and commute to MDI have a divided life, especially if they have children in schools. They have long commute times and spend less time with their families, have less time for healthy exercise and other aspects of a healthy life.

Possible questions we would like to ask in an island-wide survey—

How would people feel if zoning allowed for increased housing density (number of houses per acre) if it made housing more affordable for core community workforce?

How many people need to find more affordable housing in order for them to remain in the community?

How many renters are forced out of year-round houses and apartments due to summer market demands? (How many landlords find it necessary to rent houses/apartments in the two seasons?)