



Westchester County Association real estate playbook addresses affordable housing | Opinion

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Westchester County is in the midst of a housing crisis which, if not addressed, will threaten the long-term health of our regional economy.

County Executive George Latimer's office recently completed a housing needs assessment that identified an immediate need for greater than 11,700 units of working-class housing. It's not simply that there isn't enough residential real estate. It's that the cost of housing — rental housing in particular — is fast becoming out of reach for middle-class families. Accordingly, more than 20% of Westchester County households are identified as severely cost burdened — spending more than half their income on a place to live. Many of these families have lost their homes to foreclosure. The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to magnify this pre-existing problem.

The business and nonprofit community, led by the Westchester County Association's Real Estate and Housing Task Force, is developing solutions to this massive problem. A multi-faceted assemblage of real estate, planning, land use, financial, legal, academic and government stakeholders are working collaboratively to generate multi-disciplinary solutions.

It starts with an equitable financial model that promotes the delivery of sustainable housing stock. Development incentives and fair wages each play an important role. Infrastructure investment in roads, utilities and high-speed broadband should be accretive. Zoning and land use regulations should satisfy the requirements of the local communities while also achieving broader housing policy goals.

These issues, and more, are addressed in the newly released affordable housing chapter of the WCA's Real Estate Policy Playbook developed in coordination with the Pace University Land Use Law Center. The newly revised Policy Playbook now includes practical solutions and best practices for local municipalities who are serious about advancing affordable housing initiatives. It is both a community road map and resource guide.

Our state legislators also are actively seeking solutions to the problem. At a recent legislative forum sponsored by the Westchester County Association, Sen. Shelly Mayer spoke for many of her colleagues when she identified the systemic issue of affordable housing as one of Westchester's most pressing needs.



Viewed through the lens of economic development, it is easy to justify this concern. Adequate housing impacts directly the availability of a skilled workforce. Where housing is inaccessible due to cost or location, businesses, government, schools, hospitals and other nonprofit institutions struggle to attract and retain talent. Jobs go unfilled. The economy stagnates.

You can't maintain a healthy economy if teachers, first responders, nurses, accountants, engineers, and other working-class folks can't afford to live in your community. And you can't cultivate a real community if young professionals, the elderly and those with special needs go underserved.

Our workforce is the backbone of the regional economy. We need a sustainable housing policy to keep that economy strong.

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