

Viewpoint- Monadnock Ledger Transcript  
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The Peterborough Community Task Force on Housing met for the 5th time on January 25th at the Peterborough Community Center. Of the 36 people in attendance, there were several joining the conversation for the first time, but a majority have been to at least one of the other meetings. With a 4+ hour time commitment on Saturdays, this is an impressive number of people willing to make a hefty commitment to work through an emotionally charged yet very complex issue.

Per the Guiding Document of the group, "The focus of the work of the Peterborough Community Task Force on Housing is to design and carry out a community-based process for gathering input from a majority of residents and stakeholders of Peterborough about their concerns, hopes, needs and wants for short and long term housing policy. It is expected that this input will ultimately be used to inform the process of updating the town's Master Plan chapter on housing which will ultimately provide guidance to the town's Planning Board, as it works to revise the town's zoning ordinances to meet future needs." The group is open to all residents and stakeholders in Peterborough and does not require any upfront knowledge of housing regulations as the purpose of the group is to gather data from the rest of the community to inform the Master Plan Steering Committee, not to create or adopt any housing policies.

The meeting on January 25th offered residents the opportunity to reflect in small groups and discuss what they would like to see happen in Peterborough based on the changing needs of our evolving population. One of the invited facilitators of the session was Molly Donovan, Community Economic Development State Specialist for the UNH Cooperative Extension. Molly first shared her housing story with us and then gave us the opportunity to break into groups of three to share our individual stories with others in the group.

Our small groups were asked to think about how to increase housing options available for all types of different community members. As the cost of housing continues to rise and Peterborough continues to grow and attract business development, what will happen to those who want to call Peterborough their home?

We wondered what will happen to all members of our population and their ability to secure housing. For a plethora of reasons, we are worried about each member of the socio-economically diverse population, ranging from single and coupled adults who may or may not have children, to adults approaching retirement and then our aging population. We worry about those who are hourly and those who are salaried. As a group, we are worried for our whole community and how a lack of housing will affect what we value most: the people of our community.

It is through this lens of care and concern that we explored the data around the housing market in New Hampshire and the surrounding Monadnock Region. George Reagan, Community Engagement Manager with the NH Housing Finance Authority, joined the conversation to discuss relevant trends and statistics in the market.

Reviewing and discussing dozens of slides of data provided confirmation of what we all see in the papers and online every day here in NH: purchase prices and rents are going up and vacancy rates are virtually nonexistent. To compound the severity of this trend, wages are basically remaining steady, in some places increasing less than the cost of inflation. If anyone is interested in seeing the full presentation of data we reviewed, contact one of the Selectboard members for the Town of Peterborough for a copy.

The last segment of the session broke us into 6-7 smaller groups to begin to learn the proper definitions of some of the common terminology used in housing discussions. Many of us were new to some of these terms and some of us were already very familiar. In our small groups, we each had a topic to discuss in our "Housing 101" lesson. The topics included financial programs, zoning terms, dwelling types, housing organizations and much more. This was just an introduction and we will be revisiting these topics in more detail at future meetings.

It is evident that our group cares deeply about each and every one of the citizens we seek to serve as the market data and housing terminology was explored. The group ends each session in a large circle and each person is offered the opportunity to volunteer to share a gift that was given to them during the meeting. We have an opportunity to thank one person by name or a group of people and explain what gift they gave us during our time together. This is not the normal way that meetings end, but it really should be. These are the moments we are coming together as a community to learn about each other and to appreciate our differences. While we still have differing opinions on how to accomplish our goals, it is clear that we are finding new ways to discuss those differences and truly listen to one another so that we may move forward as one community united. Learning will take place and compromises will be made, but if we trust in each other just a little more, we can agree on the changes that must take place.

Submitted by Peterborough residents Rosemary Kelley and Mandy Sliver