

Merrimack Valley Regional Open House

Discussion Results ~ May 24, 2017

The following summarizes discussions from six breakout groups at the May 24th Merrimack Valley Regional Open House. This event focused on housing needs in the Merrimack Valley. Attendees were asked to respond to a series of questions in three categories: 1) Who Lives Here? 2) Where do they Live? 3) What is the Cost? Each of the categories was preceded by baseline data about housing units, demographics, and cost to live in the Merrimack Valley. To view that presentation, please visit: <http://mvpc.org/programs/regional-housing-plan/get-involved/>

1. Who Lives Here?

Each table was asked to discuss the following questions: Who lives in the Merrimack Valley, what are their needs now and in the future, and what obstacles are there to address those needs?

Who Lives Here?

- 55-65 year olds
- Millennials
- Residents with special needs and mental health issues
- People with all abilities
- Veterans
- Homeless, including those living in someone else's home
- Homeless youth
- Generation "Z"
- Seniors in general, and with disabilities
- Families
- Young families
- Modest/middle income that don't qualify for low-income programs
- Low Income
- College students (including those returning from outside region)
- Caregivers to aging parents/adults

What are their needs now and in the future?

- Transportation – transit, walking networks
- Access to groceries, health and community services
- Close to schools
- Close to jobs
- Flexibility and diversity of housing for all types of families
- Downsized units
- Affordable single units

What are the obstacles to addressing these needs?

- Affordable land
- Cost to renovate older housing stock – cost prohibitive
- Discrimination, segregation

Merrimack Valley Regional Open House Discussion Results ~ May 24, 2017

- Available funding (grants, loans, etc.)
- Age restricted housing is not always wanted
- Supportive zoning – no more down-zoning
- Existing perceptions about traffic and school impacts, esp from multi-family
- Perceptions of what “affordable housing” is
- Lack of housing choice
- NIMBY (not in my backyard)
- Gentrification
- Adverse tax policies – split tax rate post Proposition 2.5
- Cost of development (permitting, legal fees, time)
- Not enough good land left

2. Where are They Living?

Tables were asked to discuss the following related to where residents live: What are the issues with our current housing stock? What kind of units are we missing or need to build more of? Are there other needs related to housing units?

What are the issues with our current housing stock?

- Age and quality
- Not well-maintained
- Size – houses are so big that they can be broken into multiple units
- Large houses that are not sustainable, expensive to maintain
- We are clearcutting for forest to develop expensive units
- Car dependent: housing is in locations that are not served by public transportation
- People are stuck where they are living
- Environmental/public health issues with current stock
- Historic preservation limitations
- Enough single family housing
- Older housing needs to be upgraded for accessibility and utilities

What are we missing/need to build more of?

- Smaller homes
- Modest homes
- Smaller homes in denser neighborhoods
- Rentals in rural communities
- Diverse structures in varied locations throughout the region
- Affordable owner-occupied units
- This is going to vary by community – needs to be context sensitive
- Accessory dwelling units/in-law apartments
- Compliance with ADA (Americans with Disability Act) regulations
- Walkability factor

Merrimack Valley Regional Open House Discussion Results ~ May 24, 2017

- Units close to services and transit
- Planned Unit, Cluster and Open Space developments
- Downtown units
- Transitional housing for elderly
- Affordable assisted living
- Starter units for millennials
- Studios and one-bedrooms

3. What is the Cost?

The final round of questions the tables discussed was about housing cost: Does the data that was presented surprise you? What are the contributors to the housing costs? What are the obstacles to building more affordable housing?

Reactions to data in the [presentation](#)

- Median income decline for the region was surprising
- Did not surprise most that transportation and housing costs are so high – although the results from the Lawrence area may need to be revisited
- Age of housing stock is surprising
- Percent of people that could qualify as low-income was a shock

Contributors to housing costs

- Misconception/negative connotations about affordable housing
- High rents
- Lack of education regarding the true meaning of affordable housing
- Wages less than cost of living

What are the obstacles to building more affordable housing?

- Zoning – appropriate density
- Available financing
- Balancing the need to protect open space, environmental resources and historic places
- Political pressure
- People can't get equity
- Deeply entrenched attitudes about affordable housing related to taxes, school crowding, loss of community
- Educating the general public
- NIMBY (not in my backyard)
- Jobs are still located in and around metro-Boston (raises housing/transportation costs)
- Mismatch between partnerships – need more developer/non-profit partnerships
- Public perception that public housing would be poorly designed and constructed