



ANALYSIS

Addressing a national crisis locally: Can the Boothbay region solve its housing issues?

Part three in a series

By JOSEPH CHARPENTIER | Posted: Friday, June 15, 2018 - 7:15am



Rotarian Jon Tindal points out a 20-acre plot owned by the Rotary Club of Boothbay Harbor. JOSEPH CHARPENTIER/Boothbay Register

This article continues a series on the economic issues of Boothbay Harbor and the surrounding region, following Part one

(<https://www.boothbayregister.com/article/what-holding-region-back-economic-vibrancy/100868?source=mp>) and Part two

(<https://www.boothbayregister.com/article/why-region-losing-students/101255>).

With talk about housing circulating many of the region's boards, committees and initiatives, the definition of housing is part mystery: What does affordable housing mean? Does it mean low-income housing? If so, what do we consider low income to be?

In an interview, Lincoln County Regional Planning Commission Economic and Community Development Director Mary Ellen Barnes said a variety of housing concerns exist in the county.

"There is a crunch around seasonal workers' housing, a crunch around seniors, around people who are transitional with the risk of losing their housing or going through mental health or substance abuse issues.



There's a variety of housing needs throughout the county and how do you tackle any one or two of those," said Barnes.

The Joint Economic Development Committee began tackling the issue through a series of meetings with regional groups, including the Rotary Club of Boothbay Harbor, which previously identified an organizational interest in affordable housing. The group has grown to also include the Boothbay Region Community Resource Council (BRCRC), among other community members.

The group – temporarily chaired by JEDC co-chair Wendy Wolf – is being maintained mostly to concentrate all efforts toward a housing initiative and keep everyone informed.

In Maine, the average supplemental Social Security monthly income is \$745. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLHC) uses the conventional standard of 30 percent of income to calculate costs of housing, so this leaves the average senior with about \$224 to spend on rent every month.

The latest meeting, June 7, had Barnes, Wolf, Patricia Royall of the Boothbay Harbor Region Chamber of Commerce, Katie Spencer White and Holly Stover of the BRCRC, Boothbay Select Board Chair Chuck Cunningham, Rotarians Jon Tindal and Alice Mutch, and Steve Malcom and Jon Dunsford of the JEDC.

Stover said the concerns she hears most about, at work or in the grocery store, are about those with low income and no place to go.

"The people I am dealing with are often looking for shorter term stays ... The ideal would be permanent supported housing. It is ideal for people who are in need," said Stover.

"Supported" means some services within the community helping people maintain a practical, stable living situation, said Stover. It also means helping people transition from addiction recovery, unemployment or homelessness to something sustainable and permanent. And it would grow, within that model, to something resembling workforce housing.

White clarified, housing is not part of BRCRC's mission, but considering the base of the community it serves, housing is an issue "... simply because there's not enough of it that is affordable."

BRCRC works with people who are on low incomes and are not likely ready or able to take on a mortgage, White said. She said any housing strategy should ensure an affordable rental component under the umbrella of housing programs. That would include transitional housing for people or families in unique situations all the way to people who already have gainful employment or prospects which depend on simply having a place to live.

In the JEDC's earlier days, members met with housing expert Erin Cooperrider. Cooperrider suggested acquiring a detailed inventory of housing stock and reexamining town ordinances for possible change to maximize housing potential.

Camoin Associates' report that led to the economic master plan showed about 1,400 people who live outside the Boothbay region commute to work on the peninsula, Dunsford said.

In an interview prior to the housing group's meeting, Barnes said issues of job and wage growth and housing are all intertwined and that answers to one of these issues do not preclude the need to solve other issues.

"There's going to be dynamics around a growing workforce which leads to the demand for housing (leading) different developers to come in ... What kind of demand do you need to have to really bring the more moderate priced housing developers into the market?"

Barnes said the way to create a thriving local economy is undoubtedly job creation and, if housing is part of the equation, those jobs must be year round and must be higher salary.

"We're not advocating for livable wages ... (and) we're not judging anyone when we say that the economy does need to grow ... and to boost the salary up in order to provide the better wages that would afford rentals or buying houses," said Barnes. "But this is not a surprise."

However, cost of living has not been the region's only problem for housing. There is also availability. The availability and potential for workforce housing are not yet clear. A study could yield results to help towns review their ordinances to encourage the type of development needed to expand housing options, said Barnes.

Wolf said the JEDC's main focus is on housing for workers like teachers, fishermen, boatyard laborers, "... those that don't ... (qualify) for low income housing, but the next step above that basically." Wolf also said the JEDC has always wanted to add year round jobs leading to the social activities that attract younger families "to move to the area and help grow our population in a demographic that does not look like me."

Sperling's Best Places shows Maine's overall cost of living index is 98. Grocery, healthcare, utilities, transportation and miscellaneous (clothing, repairs, and entertainment) are all above indexes of 100. Healthcare costs 12 percent more and housing is 19 percent cheaper than the national base. To compare costs of living or to learn more about how the index is calculated, go to: <https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/> (<https://www.bestplaces.net/cost-of-living/>)

Childcare averages \$4,368 per year for after school care, \$8,320 for children four years up to school age, and \$9,360 for infant care (up to three years). That is \$84, \$160, and \$180 per week, respectively.

Boothbay Harbor police officer and school resource officer Larry Brown said he has talked to a number of people in the community who find it difficult to work and live in the area.

"I've had many conversations with teachers who would love to live here, but they can't afford to. I've also got four police officers right now that would love to be able to have

affordable housing. People in construction, too. These are the folks that we want to get into our community ... for so many reasons."

The question of availability also led the group to briefly discuss the growing market of Airbnb rentals as a barrier to establishing a comprehensive housing stock list. From Edgcomb to Southport, there are over 300 listings for units, rooms, or entire houses and cottages listed on Airbnb costing an average of \$201 per night and ranging from \$70 to \$1,100 per night. This is an issue cities like Portland and Boston have been trying to address through stricter ordinances.

The group's conversation turned toward Habitat for Humanity which has a presence in Wiscasset through a couple successful projects. White used to run Habitat for Humanity's affiliate Family and Community Development team and warned, there are many issues to consider and there is not a one size fits all solution.

"One of the things that I have found over the years that leads to the most successful projects is not starting with the need and trying to fill a gap, but starting with the vision of where it is that we want this community to go and who we want to welcome here and who we want to attend our schools and to be a part of this peninsula ... I think the solution really is going to start with 'Where do we want to go?' and then assemble the resources that we need to achieve that very positive vision that we have for the future."

White said nonprofits like Habitat for Humanity likely have their place in future housing projects, but large projects, as Cunningham said, demand immense organizational structure, strategic planning and funding.

"When we talk about affordability, we talk about ability to pay. Everything is rooted in ability to pay and so you have to look at area median income," White said.

White said ability to pay is loosely determined to be the area's median income – \$38,000. One-third of the income is the number a person should be spending on housing, whether mortgage or rent. That works out to be about \$1,000 per month.

Habitat for Humanity serves those who make between 25 percent and 60 percent of median area income. White said other market rate builders will usually target the 80 percent to 120 percent median area income. Cunningham asked the group to consider the likelihood of attracting a large-scale developer. "You're going to have to entice them with so much to get them down here on the peninsula."

Cunningham added, that is one of the peninsula's biggest problems – it is a peninsula. He suggested without large-scale development, the region may need to start small with two or three units at a time and to move along slowly.

Tindal explained that due to the many local causes the club concentrates on, the issue of affordable housing has come on the club's radar. Tindal hopes when the group inevitably gets a project moving forward that it is a flexible project, to address the variety of needs in housing – transitional, workforce and senior living.

"There may not be a magic bullet, but I think that we can target one of these particular needs or hopefully we could end up with a project design that would allow us to address need across the spectrum."

Tindal said the 20 acres the club has recently acquired would have strategic value as a location for housing projects. However, Tindal said it does not have to be there and would like to see efforts to identify any better location before discussing whether or not the club would consider talking about its use in definite terms.

White said, "If you are limited by income ... if you are trying to move from a domestic violence situation or you're couch-surfing from house to house, there needs to be a range of different housing options ... to address the crisis ... There's nowhere to go. There are no affordable rentals. There's no rentals on the peninsula at all. Zero. They don't exist ... (So) you have to have a long game if we're talking about new-build construction and we're looking at a three to 10-year plan to get this turnkey-ready ... You've got to have time and money to get a shovel in the ground."

An average three-bedroom unit in Lincoln County means a salary of \$44,880 or \$21.58 per hour. At fair market rent, the average three-bedroom apartment is worth \$1,122 per month. Working at minimum wage (\$10.00 per hour), one would need to work 59 hours for a studio apartment, 63 hours for one bedroom, 75 hours for two bedrooms, 94 hours for three bedrooms, and 114 hours for four bedrooms. These figures were adjusted for an increase of minimum wage from \$9.00 per hour to \$10. To afford anything more than a two-bedroom unit at minimum wage, one would need to have two full-time jobs.

To see more information and further data, visit <http://nlihc.org/oor/maine/> (<http://nlihc.org/oor/maine/>)