

Affordable housing progress on the Seacoast

Written by Matt Kanner
Friday, 23 May 2008

With a long-awaited workforce housing bill near passage and 63 units of affordable housing in the works, the Seacoast has made significant strides in the past year. But there is still a forbidding gap between family incomes and home prices, and several obstacles stand in the way of first-time home buyers.

The Housing Partnership held its annual Celebration and Honors Reception at Sheraton Harborside Hotel in Portsmouth on May 13. The Partnership presented the Exeter Area Chamber of Commerce with the Pro Bono Publico Award, recognizing the Chamber's commitment to addressing workforce housing issues. Housing Partnership President Dick Ingram credited Exeter Chamber of Commerce President Thomas Kraus for tackling those issues head on. "Their Economic Development Committee has been working very hard to understand the issue and know how to make a difference," Ingram said.

The Partnership in Housing Excellence Award went to the Northern New England Housing Investment Fund, a nonprofit corporation that promotes housing and community development in New Hampshire and Maine. "They and their staff have been very good partners for us in terms of providing counsel and advice and really challenging us," Ingram said. "I appreciate their wisdom and their willingness to help us raise the bar."

The annual reception came at a time when the N.H. Legislature is very close to passing a bill that would require municipalities with land use ordinances to "provide reasonable and realistic opportunities for the development of workforce housing." After years of struggling for solid workforce housing legislation, House Bill 1472 glided through the House earlier this year and will go before the Senate soon. Ingram expects it to pass.

"This House Bill 1472 is the granddaddy that we wanted and have been trying to get for a decade," he said. "Like everything in this business, it takes time."

Other positive developments for **The Housing Partnership** include two workforce housing projects that will bring a combined 63 new units to the Greater Seacoast. A development project in Kennebunk, Maine, will consist of 41 units, and another in Rye will include 22 units. Ingram sees these developments as a turning point that could lead to other affordable housing projects.

"For the first time in five years, we're going to start putting shovels in the ground," he said. "As people see that we are doing that, we are getting more opportunities thrown our way. People are reaching out to us as a potential partner in housing development."

The Housing Partnership has laid out clear objectives for creating and preserving affordable housing in the near future.

"We have a goal for the organization that over the next five years we will develop 150 units of new housing and preserve 150 units of existing affordable housing," Ingram said. "We're committed to a vision of housing for everyone."

Source: http://www.wirenh.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2933&Itemid=4

But the organization still faces a number of challenges. Many communities remain hesitant to embrace affordable housing, and it is difficult for first-time homebuyers to find affordable properties. According to Ingram, the median household income for a family of four in the Seacoast is about \$75,000. If a family sets aside 30 percent of that income for housing each year, it could afford a home that costs between \$230,000 and \$250,000, he said. But the median home price in this area is about \$350,000. In Rye, the median price is \$550,000.

Part of the problem is that local municipalities have gotten away from the traditional New England community structure of having clusters of housing close to town centers, with larger tracts of agricultural or farming land on the outskirts. "Now you have homes out by themselves surrounded by land whose only purpose is to keep people away from them," Ingram said.

To make affordable housing options available for everyone, New England communities must return to their roots, enact more flexible zoning policies and maximize land use, Ingram said.