

City works on long overdue housing help

October 31, 2008 6:00 AM

We on the Seacoast all know the drill when it comes to affordable housing. We live in an area — even in these uncertain economic times — where housing and rental prices far outstrip the ability of an entry level worker to pay them.

An average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Portsmouth is more than \$1,000, for a one-bedroom, \$800 — far too high for someone making \$10 or \$11 per hour. Many workers at our schools, small shops, restaurants and offices do not live in the town or city in which they work — or even the town next door. They live 20, 30 minutes away, some of them in the far-flung reaches of Rockingham or York counties. Their cars spew carbon dioxide, day after day, adding to the rising problem of global warming. Raises of 2, perhaps 2.5 percent, are not keeping pace with inflation. Municipalities may well look to increase property tax rates as a means to cover the cost of government that is getting less and less money from the states as everyone tightens belts.

For years, workshops have been held, experts have spoken and everyone has said, "Yes, we must do something about this." But action speaks louder than words, and finally, we are pleased to report, two of our Seacoast municipalities are doing something.

Last week, the city of Portsmouth's Blue Ribbon Committee on Affordable Housing released a report that calls for a series of actions, immediate and long-term, to increase this much-needed housing. Thanks are to be extended to Mayor Tom Ferrini, who has made affordable housing a top priority of his administration, and to City Councilor Chris Dwyer, who has worked exhaustively since the committee was formed six months ago as its chairwoman.

The committee, which will present its report to the full City Council next month, recommends several immediate steps. Most intriguing is the establishment of a Workforce Housing Trust Fund that would be used to acquire land for and then build new affordable housing or rehabilitate existing buildings, and provide housing subsidies through existing city programs. At least conceptually, the committee envisions money for the fund coming from sale of tax-acquired property. The committee also recommends beefing up its first-time home buyer program through some sort of contribution from private employers. A number of zoning changes are also suggested to encourage mixed-use development.

Wisely, the committee is also recommending that a city agency be identified to work with other towns in the area to expand affordable housing opportunities all over the region.

We trust that, under Mayor Ferrini's leadership and his personal commitment to this issue, the city will move forward with an affordable housing initiative in the months to come.

North of Portsmouth, in the town of York, Maine, residents will be voting Tuesday on a work-force housing ordinance proposal. It calls for the creation of an overlay district in the town's growth area that includes York Village, York Harbor and York Beach. In this area, the York Housing Authority or other nonprofit housing organization such as **The Housing Partnership** will be able to build up to 12

affordable housing units a year. It is anticipated there will be a mix of rentals, condos and houses, targeting those making as little as \$25,000 for a single person to as much as \$88,000 for a family of four.

This is not a perfect ordinance. It does not, for example, allow private developers to build affordable housing, and it assumes a family with an income of under around \$65,000 will have to rent, not own. But it does ensure that any house that is bought as affordable will remain affordable upon resale and it further ensures that first served in any such housing is someone who works in York but has to live elsewhere.

That's welcome news to the likes of Police Chief Doug Bracy, who said fully half his officers live outside the town, volunteering and giving to towns other than York and undermining his community policing efforts. And it is the officers, the teachers, the nurses, the shop workers who enrich the fabric of all residents with their presence.

After so many years of paying lip service to the need for affordable housing in the Seacoast, it's great to see something is finally being done.