

News > Local-Regional (/News/Local-Regional/)

Talk Seeks Solution to Lebanon's Housing Woes

By Tim Camerato
Valley News Staff Writer

Monday, November 05, 2018

Lebanon — It's unlikely that Lebanon's housing shortage can be solved with a few changes to the zoning code or by simply approving more developments, according to the officials, real estate agents and city residents who gathered on Monday at the Upper Valley Senior Center to discuss the region's housing problems.

Instead, they agreed, a more comprehensive approach should be sought — one that would balance the needs of existing homeowners with those searching for a home in difficult market conditions.

"There's a name in medicine for unlimited growth. It's cancer," said Amelia Sereen, a former member of the city's Zoning Board. "We have to realize that some of these things are not going to change back. I'm never going to be able to lie in my hammock near the road anymore."

About 60 people attended Monday night's forum, which was hosted by the city, Vital Communities, the Lebanon Area Chamber of Commerce and the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission.

Organizers hoped that by bringing people of different backgrounds together, they could brainstorm ways to end the Upper Valley's housing crunch, which has resulted in rising rental prices and a shortage of homes available to middle-class families.

The median rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Lebanon, Claremont, Hanover and Hartford stands at \$1,650 a month, which is roughly \$350 more than New Hampshire's median rent, according to Lebanon real estate agents Buff McLaughry and Lynne LaBombard, who presented housing data during a different Vital Communities event last week.

The rising costs are partially due to fewer homes being listed and sold, the real estate agents found.

There were 147 houses valued less than \$300,000 sold this year in the region's core communities. That number totaled 265 five years ago.

The average price of a home is on the rise, as well, according to the agents, who reported a 15 percent increase in the price of a home listed under \$300,000.

Overall, about 5,000 housing units are needed to serve the region's needs, McLaughry and LaBombard estimated.

"I lived in D.C. and had roommates, and I paid \$1,000 a month, which is not that far off from here," said Lebanon resident Amy Sechrist, who also is a shelter and housing advocacy coordinator at WISE.

The problem isn't just a lack of housing, but what types of housing are being offered, Lebanon Human Services Director Lynne Goodwin added.

By creating housing for middle-class families, some hoped that more units would be available to lower-income residents, she said, adding that prediction has turned out false.

"Lower-cost rentals still get scooped up by people who just want to pay less," Goodwin said.

Rather than affordable housing being made available in Lebanon, people are moving to the Upper Valley's outlying towns, said Jolin Kish, who manages several properties in Lebanon.

New units don't necessarily open up low-income space in Lebanon, she said. "It makes somebody who's further out able to come a little closer in," she said.

Attendees also discussed the turnover of homes in Lebanon. About 20 percent of the city's residents make a move every year, according to Vital Communities.

"When you have people renting, they are often a different kind of citizen or resident than people who own their homes, especially if you have people who are transient," Sreen said.

But Kish countered that short-term stays are common, with both Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and Dartmouth College just a short drive away from Lebanon's neighborhoods.

"There's people who come here for even less than a year," Kish said. "I get inquiries from people who are visiting nurses who are here on a three-month contract all the time."

Aside from housing, Lebanon also faces challenges as the region's key employment center. About 15,000 people commute to the city daily, while 4,000 residents leave for jobs elsewhere, according to Vital Communities.

"I've heard of people who travel 50 or 60 miles to get to work, one way, to get here," said Lebanon resident Kevin Gould, who suggested redeveloping the area around Lebanon's commercial space for residential use.

However, solving the issues that residents and officials discussed could prove difficult.

Attendees suggested adopting zoning regulations that are more friendly to housing projects, better training for Lebanon's land-use boards and more government grants.

People also will have to shift their attitudes toward development, which often is opposed by neighbors who might not want to see their neighborhoods change, officials said.

"Action is needed for these ideas to become reality and provide the benefit that you've been thinking of," said Mike Kiess, workforce housing coordinator at Vital Communities. "And the first action is don't let (the momentum) die here."

Tim Camerato can be reached at tcamerato@vnews.com or 603-727-3223.
