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Column: The Housing Shortage Affects All of Us

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It is no secret that there is a shortage of homes to buy or rent in the Upper Valley. That shortage affects all of us.

Home ownership costs and rents are high. Vacancies are low. People have difficulty finding places to live near their jobs and services. Employers have hundreds of unfilled job openings for medical care, restaurant service, manufacturing, fuel delivery, education, home repair and other critical services because there just aren't enough places to live.

Fixing the housing shortage in our region requires ideas and action from current residents, civic leaders and organizations. One group focusing on this challenge is the Corporate Council convened by local nonprofit Vital Communities. We are a volunteer group of this region's largest and best-known institutions, businesses and nonprofits. Collectively, we employ more than 16,000 people and reach well over half the households in the Upper Valley. We are deeply committed to strengthening our region.

Chief among our concerns is making sure local people can continue to afford to live here.

Housing is important to us not only as employers and service providers, but also as residents, taxpayers, homeowners, family members, friends and neighbors. Lack of housing makes it hard to recruit and retain the people who are the heart of our organizations and every business in this area.

We worry that when employees, especially younger employees with families, have to commute long distances, they are less available to participate in school activities and local governance. They are farther from child care, health care and all of the interactions that make community and family life stronger. By acting together as neighbors and communities, we can create more places to live that support our environment, our culture and all that we value in the Upper Valley.

What might that look like? How will we get there? As residents of this region, each of us can play a part in answering these questions and others.

The first step for all of us is to talk openly about housing in our communities. We encourage you to become involved in what's happening right now in your town or city. Getting involved doesn't necessarily mean joining a committee or becoming a landlord, but it can.

There are models and success stories we can adapt to fit local needs and preferences. We have examples from around New England and the world that we can learn from. For example, sensible changes to zoning — such as increased density, higher height limitations and reduced parking requirements — can allow housing in town for young workers, retirees and everyone in between.

The solution is not about putting houses across every open field. The housing shortage can instead be addressed much closer to town and village centers and in vacant spaces or repurposed buildings. Towns and cities around the country are shifting back to a mixed commercial and residential model. Employers, municipalities and individual homeowners are working together to revitalize old buildings and incentivize renting to workers. Homeowners are modifying or adding spaces to provide rental income or a place to downsize so they don't have to move away.

These kinds of changes are being made elsewhere — successfully achieving superb quality of life while growing housing availability and choice. Let's adapt these solutions to suit the Upper Valley.

There is much work to be done to make our communities stronger. Smart solutions mean prudent community and business investments in places to live that are near work, schools and public transportation. As residents and taxpayers, Corporate Council members are working with our own town governments, local planning offices and our neighbors to hear their views and be part of actions to solve the housing shortage. We are listening to our employees to better understand their needs and preferences.

As homeowners, we are looking at our own properties and considering how we might add a unit to generate some rental income or allow us to stay in the community as we age. As neighbors, we are patronizing the local businesses and services that support our quality of life in the Upper Valley, and we are having conversations about the need for places where employees can live in our neighborhoods.

Together we can address the housing shortage that threatens the vitality and sustainability of our communities. We can create the housing we need while still respecting and enhancing the Upper Valley's landscape, communities and local culture. Together we can create and sustain communities that our families and co-workers can afford to call home.

We are eager to join together with our neighbors and communities — with you — in this work. Your perspective and experience are essential to finding the right solutions for the Upper Valley.

To share your thoughts on housing in the Upper Valley, email Mike Kiess, Vital Communities workforce housing coordinator, at mike@vitalcommunities.org.

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