

Priced out: Asheville's lack of affordable housing is squelching the American dream

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Having lived here my entire life, I know firsthand that independence, pride and hard work are the cornerstones of mountain culture. I learned by example to take care of my neighbor and to stick up for the little guy; I also learned that hard work pays off.

For generations, that approach enabled people to carve out a good life. Having a job meant having a home, and most families got by on one income. My father's salary as a railroad brakeman afforded us a three-bedroom house on a corner in West Asheville.

But those days are over. Many people now work full time yet still don't make enough to afford a safe, decent place to live — one of life's necessities. And while housing costs in Asheville rank among the highest in the state, wages remain low. Many local service-industry workers, police officers, firefighters and public-school teachers can't afford to live here.

During my 10 years as an attorney at Pisgah Legal Services, I've seen many people forced to choose between paying their rent and getting their car fixed or filling prescriptions. It's a Catch-22, as the person needs the car to get to work but needs those same funds to keep a roof over his or her head. Oftentimes these people fall behind in the rent and, facing eviction, turn to Pisgah Legal Services for help. But it's the lack of affordable housing that causes folks to fall further and further behind till they reach a crisis point.

Yet few people here really seem to comprehend the extent of the problem. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey, 44.5 percent of renters in the city are already paying more than they can afford, and given the projected population growth, we'll need an additional 14,000 affordable residential units by 2020.

Meanwhile, we're just beginning to understand the environmental impacts of a lack of affordable housing. A study by the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill concluded that workers who commute to jobs in Asheville from outlying areas spend around \$5,000 a year doing so, while contributing to ever-worsening traffic congestion and pollution problems.

This problem isn't new, and some efforts have been made to address it. Mayor Bellamy is to be applauded for convening an Affordable Housing Task Force, whose recommendations (now incorporated into the city's 2008 Affordable Housing Plan) outlined ways to encourage the construction of affordable-housing units. Task force members worked very hard to reach consensus. And we achieved it, in part, by basing our decisions on our common values, such as:

- A stable work force needs housing that's affordable by people at all wage levels.
- Affordable housing deserves aggressive, committed public-policy development and support.
- People who grew up in Asheville or who work here should be able to live here if they wish to.
- Solutions for affordable housing must be supported by the entire community: Success requires community wide investment.



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The task force's recommendations were the result of a diverse group reaching across their differences to find commonality and balance. For example, while we recommended concentrating the highest density along traffic corridors, we also called for spreading a somewhat lesser density citywide rather than concentrating it in a few areas. Historically, every neighborhood in Asheville had a mix of all housing types.

Density has become a dirty word, but the reality is that without it, there is no affordable housing. It's a basic principle of economics that the unit cost goes down the more units one produces. Currently, private, for-profit builders simply cannot produce enough truly affordable housing to meet the needs. Since 2001, private builders tapping the city's Housing Trust Fund have managed to construct only 37 rental units, according to Asheville's current housing needs assessment. Many builders say they'd love to build more affordable homes, but they can't make a living that way. Allowing increased density for developments that include some affordable units would make this more feasible.

The task force's proposals for implementing its recommendations aren't due to come before City Council until later this summer or fall, yet already people are claiming that they would eliminate single-family housing. That is simply alarmist and untrue. What is true is that the person who takes care of your child in day care, the police officer who responds to your accident and the librarian who loans you a book deserve to be able to live in the same city where they work.

It's time for Asheville to decide that housing matters more than sidewalks, Beer City USA honors or whether the fountain in the park is spewing water. As the economic downturn stretches out and gas prices continue to rise, more and more people who might make it under other circumstances are being forced to choose between food, gas for their car, rent or medications for their children. Political pressures need to take a back seat to the moral concern about placing an additional burden on the shoulders of those who should not be made to bear it.

It's not hard to imagine a day when firefighters and police officers start looking elsewhere for jobs because Asheville's cost of living is too high, and commuting from places like Mars Hill or Hendersonville simply isn't worth it. To ensure that this doesn't happen, we as a community need to take action now. If we truly believe in our espoused mountain values — including everyone's freedom to choose their path in life — we need to make some of those basic choices possible. Expanding affordable housing in Asheville will enhance everyone's quality of life.

This commentary was written by Robin Merrell, a senior staff attorney at Pisgah Legal Services. Robin specializes in housing law and has led numerous efforts to increase and improve the supply of affordable housing in local communities. For more information about Pisgah Legal Services, visit www.pisgahlegal.org.