



Tompkins County
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING

121 East Court Street
Ithaca, New York 14850

Edward C. Marx, AICP
Commissioner of Planning

Telephone (607) 274-5560
Fax (607) 274-5578

Memorandum

To: Tompkins County Legislature
From: Ed Marx, Commissioner of Planning
Subject: Affordable Housing in Tompkins County
Date: September 24, 2013

The Cayuga Townhomes community proposed for the Biggs property has led to some questions regarding the distribution of affordable housing in Tompkins County and the progress in meeting the needs identified in the Affordable Housing Needs Assessment (2006) and Tompkins County Housing Strategy (2007). This memorandum summarizes our analysis of progress to date in meeting affordable housing goals.

Background

As a result of a recommendation from the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan (2004) an Affordable Housing Needs Assessment was completed in 2006 that concluded there was an existing deficit of 875 housing units in Tompkins County in 2005 and that an additional 3,894 units would be required to meet housing demand between 2006 and 2014. Approximately 2,500 of those units would need to be affordable to households at or below the median household income for the County. The study concluded that the market would not provide those units without some assistance from the public sector, community organizations and local institutions.

As a result the Tompkins County Housing Strategy was adopted in 2007 calling for the addition of approximately 400 units per year over a ten year period and that 54% of those units would need to be affordable to households making less than 80% of median household income. These units would be in addition to any units added for undergraduate students. In 2009 the County, the City of Ithaca and Cornell University came together to create the Community Housing Fund to support the development of affordable units.

The Housing Strategy found that it was technically feasible that the 4,000 units could be developed over ten years with a focus on development in the nodes identified in the County Comprehensive Plan distributed geographically as follows:

- **City of Ithaca** - 500 to 1,000 units, including development of the Southwest neighborhood and downtown housing development.
- **Town of Ithaca** - 500 to 1,000 units, including balanced growth on East, West and South hills concentrated in a nodal pattern to be determined by the Town.
- **Town of Lansing** – 500 to 1,000 units largely concentrated in a nodal pattern in and around the planned town center in South Lansing.
- **Other Villages and Hamlets** – 500 units
- **Other Infill and Rural** – 500 units

Although we are nearing the end of the period for which the Housing Needs Assessment projected demand, and economic conditions have been variable during that period, a more recent study of the

Inclusion through Diversity

multi-family housing market by Danter Associates showed an overall vacancy rate in Tompkins County of just 0.7% and projected a demand for between 1,950 and 2,325 multi-family units (including townhomes) between 2012 and 2017. That is between 390 and 465 units per year, even more than the total units of multi- and single-family demand projected by the 2006 Needs Assessment. Of those units between 1,200 and 1,350 were projected for the urban area consisting of the City and Town of Ithaca.

Progress

In 2012 the Planning Department conducted a preliminary analysis of progress in meeting the projected demand. Due to the recession actual employment and population growth did not keep pace with the projections for employment and population in the Needs Assessment. Development also lagged behind the 400 units per year that would be needed to meet the goal of the Housing Strategy. Based on an analysis of housing permit and assessment data from 2005 to 2010, 1771 housing units were added or about 295 per year and of those 25% were affordable to the households at 80% of median income. We were not able to determine which of these units might have been developed specifically for undergraduate student housing.

We have also analyzed major housing projects since 2010 and 1112 units have either been built or are under construction. However, of those 725 are expected to be primarily undergraduate student units. Of the remaining 387, 161 are deemed affordable units. Another 1224 units are in projects that have been publicly announced and many have completed some portion of the review process. Of those about 44 are expected to be student units. 220 of the remaining 1180 units may be affordable to households at 80% of median income. Six more projects totaling 471 units have been proposed and subsequently abandoned. Those projects would have included 145 affordable units.

Counting all completed and currently under construction non-student units, total units built by 2014 would total 3,338 units. Of those units 850, or about 25%, would be affordable. This does not include single family units built since 2010. These totals also likely include some units built between 2005 and 2010 to serve the undergraduate student market. The Affordable Housing Needs Assessment and Housing Strategy did not address undergraduate student housing demand. The total without single family units since 2010 but including student units prior to 2010 does not precisely represent the housing development that addresses the Housing Strategy goal but does offer a useful approximation of the relevant housing units. Further analysis of building permits since 2010 is pending and will provide further clarity when completed in the coming years.

Overall Housing Affordability

For comparison purposes we also attempted to assess the affordability of the existing housing stock based on assessment data and real estate sales. Approximately 28% of existing housing units in the county, including single family and multi-family, ownership and rental units were estimated to be affordable to households at 80% of median income. While the housing construction since 2005 has resulted in some progress toward overall housing unit goals, considering the economic downturn during the middle of this period, the affordable units added have not significantly increased the overall proportion of housing that is affordable. Without the community efforts by affordable housing organizations and the partnership that created the Housing Fund the situation would most certainly be deteriorating.

Housing Location

It is instructive to examine the location of affordable housing and of new housing generally in the County. The most affordable housing on a percentage basis is in some of the rural towns and villages such as the Towns of Enfield, Groton and Newfield and the Village of Groton where affordability rates

are estimated at above 40%. The lowest rates of affordability are in the City, Town of Ithaca, and Town of Ulysses where overall affordability is around 20%. Other communities range between 20 and 40%. Some communities such as the villages of Cayuga Heights and Lansing and the Town of Ithaca exhibit a very low affordability rate for single family housing. In the cases of Cayuga Heights and Lansing that is offset somewhat by the number of apartment units that are affordable.

Most new affordable housing development has been centered in the City and Town of Ithaca which are among the locations where the need is greatest. However, major new affordable housing projects have also been developed over the last decade in the Villages of Trumansburg and Dryden.

In terms of the distribution of new housing the total of built and proposed units, excluding units designed to appeal primarily to undergraduate students, is as follows:

- City of Ithaca – 889
- Town of Ithaca – 781
- Town of Lansing (outside village) – 578
- Villages – 239
- Other – 836
- Total – 3,323

Of these units the affordable units break down as follows:

- City of Ithaca – 239
- Town of Ithaca – 403
- Town of Lansing (outside village) – 12
- Villages - 82
- Other - 114
- Total – 850

The fact that more new affordable housing has been built in the Town of Ithaca is not surprising. That is where remaining developable land can be found with appropriate zoning, available public water and sewer infrastructure and proximity to employment and public transit. Although there were periods of affordable housing development concentrated on the west side of the City of Ithaca and on West Hill, the most recent large affordable rental housing developments have been in the Village of Dryden and downtown Ithaca and the largest affordable ownership project has been developed on South Hill. Currently proposed projects are largely in the City and on West Hill. Proposed larger projects are nearly evenly divided between the City (381), the Town of Ithaca (334) and the Town of Lansing including the Village (324). None of the proposed project in the City are on West Hill.

Conclusion

Tompkins County and most of the municipalities in the County have recognized that housing is a serious issue for residents and for businesses and organizations seeking to attract employees to jobs in the County. The current Economic Development Strategy developed by TCAD and endorsed by the Legislature listed housing as one of the three top economic development priorities. To best serve the needs of residents, new housing should be located proximate to employment, transit, public water and sewer infrastructure, and services. Available sites that meet these criteria are limited and many of them happen to be on West Hill. Infill development is increasing in the City and sites throughout the urbanized area and beyond are being actively considered for new housing.