

Sussex County Today and Tomorrow Conference

Workforce Housing:

Addressing the Crisis, Identifying Solutions, and Implementing Strategies

The 2023 Sussex County Today and Tomorrow Conference was held on Thursday, October 26, with a focus on Workforce Housing: Addressing the Crisis, Identifying Solutions, and Implementing Strategies. To achieve the conference goal of stimulating action, information gathered during the conference has been compiled and shared in this report. This report is organized by the eight areas that were discussed during the Framing the Solutions and Developing the Blueprint segment of the conference with an appendix that includes any individuals who shared they are interested in implementing strategies to combat the workforce housing crisis in Sussex County. That appendix includes their names, email addresses, and areas of interest/expertise. The eight areas of discussion were derived from the following questions:

- What scares you the most?
- What problems do we need to solve?
- How will we solve those problems?
- What is the plan?
- Who is going to implement the plan?
- What can be accomplished to implement the plan 30 days from now?
- What can be accomplished to implement the plan 60 days from now?
- What can be accomplished to implement the plan 90 days from now?

Framing the Solutions

During the conference, there were two times for discussion, and the first timeframe focused on framing the solutions and provided time to discuss two questions.

What Scares You the Most?

The responses gathered for what scares people most are listed below.

- Timing for approvals for affordable housing
- Homelessness
- Expectations of the homebuyer
- Salary expectations
- Supply cost
- Largest gap in the socio-economic status
- Political instability
- Resistance
- Lack of employees to meet the needs of the community
- Speed of growth
- Lack of resources
- Teaching shortage
- Polarization
- Lack of awareness and education
- Lack of housing for younger generation and elderly population
- Housing crisis continues to get worse
- Exposure/vulnerability
- Lack of education for public to understand the problem
- Not knowing how to work together
- Cost of living rising
- Seasonal workforce

- Healthcare crisis
- Housing and infrastructure
- Lack of communication regarding available tax credits and other programs

From those fears, problems are prominent, and conference attendees spent some identifying those problems.

What Problems Do We Need to Solve?

The problems that need to be solved are divided into different themes that include education equity, funding/costs, government, resistance, services, timing, and workforce population. Additionally, there were some general problems as well.

Equity. Equity was a major theme. Some key points that were shared indicated an increasing gap in socio-economic status with the median income not being accurate across the entire county. Additionally, concerns were raised about processes and policies being created without inclusivity of all demographics. Some attendees shared their concern about regulating workforce homes to prevent them from becoming investment properties. Lastly, salary expectations are not fair.

Funding/Costs. Identifying funding and the cost associated with building houses in Sussex County was another theme. Attendees questioned whether there are enough financial resources for quality housing and are concerned about supply costs.

Government. Different facets of the government posed problems for attendees as well. Government regulations, costs, and funds associated with building a home prohibits progress and creates administrative burdens. Everyone is looking to the government to solve the problem; furthermore, programs and zoning codes need to be revised to allow for more affordable workforce housing.

Resistance. Resistance was another theme that surfaced during the discussion at the conference. Overall, NIMBY was the number one problem for resistance. However, attendees also shared their concerns about nothing being done and nothing changing as the workforce housing crisis is too complex to do anything. People need to be more open minded and make connections for better understanding

Services. If the workforce housing crisis is not solved, conference attendees are concerned about the lack of services available to Sussex Countians. These services include healthcare, food, and services in general that may not be able to meet the needs of the community.

Timing. Conference attendees included timing as a major problem as well. There is just no way to keep up with growth, and affordable housing is a moving target. Furthermore, the timing to get approvals from the municipalities, County, and State to turnaround and build is not sustainable for the builder or the home buyer.

Workforce Population. Workforce population was mentioned in a variety of ways when conference attendees discussed the problems. Finding a solution for the seasonal workforce, retaining skilled labor and professionals, combating the teacher shortage, and maintaining competitive and sustainable wages are problems. Again, the building process for workforce housing needs to be a quicker process as well. There also needs to be more opportunities for people to earn wages comparable to other locations, and childcare opportunities need to be expanded.

Younger Generation/Elderly Parents. There needs to be more affordable housing opportunities for the younger generation starting their career and aging parents who are retiring.

In addition to the themes that were identified above, conference attendees also identified a few other problem areas. Those areas include managing the environmental impact; lack of awareness, education, and communication on this issue; fear of exposure and vulnerability; and the absolute magnitude of the issue. Furthermore, attendees wondered where the point of no return lies. Educating the community is also an important issue. Financial literacy is lacking. These problem areas set the stage for discussion on identifying solutions.

How Will We Solve those Problems?

To begin the discussion of solving those problems, conference attendees shared the following. These solutions are grouped together with common interests.

Collaboration/Inclusion. Many solutions included collaboration and including all demographics in the solution.

- Target all audiences as everyone is impacted.
- Be willing to compromise. Compromise is good and will reap benefits for all.
- Research collaborative funding from private and public sector and governmental spending and review.
- Bring together the stakeholders to create an intentional plan for each community.
- Create a toolbox/toolkit for each community to use in order to best manage their unique demographics.
- Create smaller boards/groups that work alongside officials to create in-depth plans - A workforce administration/corporation of sorts.
- Work to find common ground.
- Provide ways for various departments, officials, and the community to collaborate and focus on breaking down obstacles.

Education/Communication. Being informed and communicating were also deemed as part of the solution.

- Be informed and open to hear from diverse people in the community.
- Follow-up from these conferences.
- Educate by telling the story.
- Advocate by contacting your legislator, planning and zoning, county council etc. with personalized communication versus a form.
- Use the local media to tell the story.
- Campaign to let people know what assistance is available.
- Develop a course to educate on subsidy opportunities.

Planning. A certain level of planning needs to be accomplished to begin solving the workforce housing crisis.

- Create more options for public transportation.
- Work toward master planning and create short-term and long-term planning.
- Up zone to high density residential along the Route 1 corridor from Milford to Lewes to create inexpensive housing opportunities.
- Repurpose current real estate (industrial, retail).
- Use existing structures to create multi-use properties.
- Provide more transitional housing opportunities so families can stay together.

Programs/Policies. Programs should be created and/or revised, and policies need to be implemented that provide easier access to build affordable homes for the workforce population.

- Regulate zoning and institute rent ceilings.

- Eliminate income barriers to being able to even affordable rent, for example, 3x the monthly income, background checks, credit checks, etc.
- Change the SCRP program to set rents to 65% of AMI using 30% of income.
- Implement additional tax on second home purchases to go towards workforce housing.
- Advocate for streamlined permitting process, seeking collaboration between County and State.
- Allow higher density more often.
- Encourage mixed use, such as ground floor commercial and apartments above.
- Offer incentives or fast tracks for workforce housing and nonprofits at planning and zoning.
- Speed up the approval process from the County, municipalities, and State.
- Implement a reinvestment fee for developers that is earmarked for infrastructure.
- Review regulations that increase housing costs.

Developing the Plan

The second part of the discussion at the conference allowed attendees to start developing the plan with 30-day, 60-day, and 90-day recommendations.

What Is the Plan?

Facing the obstacle is the best plan moving forward. There is a monumental boulder in the path, and many do not have to face this boulder. Others who face it may walk away. While one person cannot address the boulder, with enough collaboration, the path will become clear. Everyone has something to contribute. Listed below are some ideas to consider moving forward to develop a plan.

- Create a working group with a multiple reporting structure (county, state, community) which helps to create a master plan which each community can use to create a sustainable, intentional approach to manage housing.
- Solicit applications from infill property owners for a fast-track high density rezoning for workforce housing.
- Solicit free media for community engagement.
- Designate special housing districts where workforce housing is most needed.
- Develop a marketing plan to educate.
- Create and implement sustainable infrastructure to support zoning.
- Legislate for new zoning restrictions on preferred building zones.
- Rezone land along Route 1 from Milford to Lewes to high density residential.
- Create opportunities for the workforce to have first opportunity to move in.
- Support responsible rezoning in Sussex County.
- Designate special housing districts where workforce housing/affordable housing is most needed (expansion of Opportunity Zones).
- Assign target number of units in each district over time to help meet the needed supply.
- Gauge interest to determine audience.
- Guide interested people through the process starting with the Delaware State Housing Authority.
- Develop a framework for shared housing.
- Engage property owners and city officials.
- Pilot programs for transitional housing.

- Designate special housing districts where workforce/affordable housing is most needed.
- Create public and private partnerships.
- Identify potential and incentivize developers.
- Explore inclusionary zoning policies.
- Create a Sussex County Implementation Plan and tool kit with sub-master plans led by a board of representatives.
- Partner with developers, local government, and banks to create housing area for workforce.

Who Is Going to Implement the Plan?

To successfully implement a plan, stakeholders need to be appropriately identified.

Conference attendees identified the following prospects.

- The State – to mandate a streamlined process
- Stakeholders – a list of people in positions to make changes
- Developers
- Public and private partners
- Community and grass roots agencies
- Policy makers
- County officials
- City/Town officials
- Community non-profits, such as chambers, library, senior centers

What Can Be Accomplished to Implement the Plan 30 Days from Now?

Ideas for a plan and who should implement the plan have been identified above. This section will provide thoughts on what can be accomplished 30 days from now. Some of the ideas listed above may be duplicated in this timeline.

- Create buy in and identify and engage stakeholders.
- Create a structured listed of desired outcomes with a list of those with legitimate authority to push the plan forward.
- Invite grassroots agencies that are likely to have boots on the ground capacity.
- Make a list of deliverables.
- Plan a community roundtable and form focus groups on respective interests.
- Gather resources to be included in the plan.
- Develop a communication plan for the community, including social media, television (WBOC), radio.
- Contact largest employers and ask them to invest in their workforce in a tangible way.
- Organize a campaign to get as many people and organizations as possible to advocate.
- Begin the discussion with County Council about high density rezoning.
- Draft a mission statement with timelines and goals.
- Put together a coalition consisting of local representatives, developers, financial analysts, local experts.
- Follow up from the conference to create and identify focus groups and organizations to start developing an idea.

What Can Be Accomplished to Implement the Plan 60 Days from Now?

After the initial planning begins during those 30 days, additional action will need to be implemented. Below are ideas for next steps.

- Hold the first meeting of stakeholders for introductions of parties and review of the proposed plan. Determine what additional members should be present and invite. Assign working groups.
- Gather largest employers for face-to-face meeting to show large support for this crisis.
- Provide time for individual focus groups to collaborate with intents in solving problems that benefit the common good while supporting individual interests.
- Connect with Sussex County Council.
- Write letters to editor and short stories to show common ground.
- Propose revisions to the SCRP Program.
- Set key long-term milestones.
- Develop a statewide action plan to meet the milestones over 10-20 years.
- Distill the broader strategies down to specific actions for specific entities.
- Plan and offer town hall meetings.

What Can Be Accomplished to Implement the Plan 90 Days from Now?

To continue efforts to solve the workforce housing crisis, conference attendees discussed ideas to implement after 90 days.

- Continue planning and offering townhalls, face to face meetings to provide an understanding among diverse audiences.
- Schedule first meeting to establish relationship.
- Begin the process for the strategic planning and develop time frames for specific projects with follow-up meetings every six weeks or bi-monthly.

- Provide continued education to change the public perception of affordable/workforce housing (Similar to early campaigns to implement recycling programs).
- Obtain theoretical financial commitments from large employers.
- Establish employer workforce investment fund.
- Generate list of deliverables for each working/task group.
- Begin to create a structure for each group with mission, goals, and objectives.
- Start execution on the ideas.
- Set a goal to identify 10 people/businesses willing to provide ADU.
- Identify land/property to be developed or repurchased.
- Continue to education the public and offer courses.
- Allow consultant to determine issues.
- Meet with developers who may take on renovations.
- Create a list of shared housing offers.
- Initiate funding proposal.
- Gather feedback.

Additional Feedback

In addition to providing general and specific ideas of a plan, who should be involved, and ways to implement the plan, conference attendees also shared some additional thoughts below.

Ideally, a spectrum of housing opportunities would be needed to meet need that include shelter, transitional housing, rentals (short & long term, seasonal), paths to home ownership, and ownership maintenance (to prevent foreclosure).

Large multitenant apartment complexes in strategic areas may help alleviate short-term concerns. This seems to be a viable solution in high population density areas; although, it needs to remain affordable unlike metro areas.

Educating the community at large needs to be a priority to foster support and advocacy of this issue, knowing that this is one of the foundational components for our issues as a state/minority/low-income/homeless/etc.

DelDOT has an expedited review process for commercial projects based on job creation. To be expedited, the local government must endorse the application's request to be expedited. DelDOT could assist in adopting a similar process for housing <120% ami. Likewise, it would be beneficial to request Sussex County Council to expedite applications meeting this criterion.

Conclusion

The Sussex County Today and Tomorrow Conference served as a platform to generate an action plan to combat the workforce housing crisis in Sussex County. The information that was shared during tablework/discussion is summarized in this report. Additionally, names and email addresses were collected of those who are interested in being a part of the solution and taking action (See Appendix A). The interest and/or expertise areas of those who are willing to assist are also included.

Appendix A: Supporters Ready to Take Action

Name	Email	Area of Interest/Expertise
Christine M Allen	cmallen19930@gmail.com	Zoning changes for ADU's and Workforce housing
Daniel Bond	daniel.l.bond@gmail.com	development and financing of workforce housing
Sarah Bronson	sarahbpsu@gmail.com	I am interested in building awareness and potentially action among the demographics of NIMBY and YIMBY.
Becky Carney	becky@delawarebeachbook.com	Did not state area
Kenneth Christenbury	ken@axeng.com	I am a civil engineer. Reducing regulatory delays and burdens on new construction can positively affect the cost of housing
Joe and Joann Conaway	joanneconaway@hotmail.com	Affordability
Mary Ann Cronin	maryann.cronin@wsfsmortgage.com	Financing to clients in low/mod income levels.
Susan M. Davis	sdavis@housingalliance.org	Opportunity to share my lived experience of living in the Sussex County Affordable Rental Program at Coastal Tide Apts
Jeanne DiAmico	jdiamico@dtcc.edu	providing affordable housing options to all income levels
Brianna Drummond	brianna.drummond49@gmail.com	What piques my interest is coming up with a solution for those who work at what are considered to be good careers but still have trouble finding affordable housing. I am in the process of trying to buy a home by next year and it seems hard for me to buy a house in Sussex County due to the raised prices on homes. Homes that are in my price range seem to be either fixer uppers or rundown.
Tyesia DuPont-Palmer	tyesia.dupontpalmer@sussexcountyde.gov	Increasing Awareness
Kate Gemma	kgemma@cmfa.com	Providing support for projects and advocacy
Katie Gillis	kgillis@brad-de.org	Zoning reform
Kevin Gilmore	kevin@sussexcountyhabitat.org	Affordable Housing Creation and advocacy about the issue

Name	Email	Area of Interest/Expertise
Sarah L Gilmour	sgilmour@pathways-2-success.org	Affordable Housing for Youth that graduate from high school or college
Marlow Hicks	mhicks@demep.org	Creation of higher density zoning regulations. Small home creation.
Susan Kent	director@betterhomesofseaford.org	Continuum of Care, working together to provide wholistic help.
Toro Luby	tluby@dtcc.edu	The step-by-step process currently makes it possible for non-taxable properties (that are vacant, abandoned and a dangerous blight on communities) to be transformed by helpful organizations or citizens into affordable workforce housing.
Judson Malone	judson@the-springboard.org	Streamlining the zoning and agency approval process
Laurie Matthews	Laurie@LMMarketingDC.com	I own a marketing firm in the DC metro area and was there as a guest. I can assist with marketing campaigns/messaging.
Rachel May	rachelgenemay@gmail.com	Funding Research; funding a scholarship; seeing Great Outdoor Cottages succeed in providing more affordable homes for more people
Lisa McDonald	lewesnectar@gmail.com	Hospitality Housing for Seasonal Staff
Madison Moses	Madie.beth29@gmail.com	Data Specialist
Ziulin K Moreno Pereira	ziulinmp@gmail.com	Economic Development – I'm an Economist
Linda Price	director@georgetowncoc.com	As a chamber & part of SEDAC I am interested in ways to help make/find affordable housing available
Nicole N Riddick	nriddick44@outlook.com	affordable housing, homelessness
Wm. Jack Riddle	jack.riddle@communitybankdelaware.com	Looking at how we can finance some of these projects
Khalil G. Saliba	Khalil@salibastrategies.com	Discussion on countering NIMBYism
Nancy Spencer	Nspence9@dtcc.edu	The whole agenda
Tyler Stetz	Tyler.stetz@communitybankdelaware.com	Solutions to workforce housing
Tarraye Sturgis	tsturgis4@dtcc.edu	Low-income housing/work-force housing

Name	Email	Area of Interest/Expertise
Mandy T	Mandie2332@gmail.com	Utilizing social workers for pilot programs for transition housing for families
Scott Thomas	Scottt@visitsoutherndelaware.com	Seasonal Workforce Housing
Tiffany Walter	tiffanywalter@countybankmail.com	Did not state area
Michele Warch	w690@dtcc.edu	planning and organizing
Sandra Lee Ware	Sandra@commercialde.com	Creating new regulations for Workforce Housing
Lauren Weaver	lauren@thequietresorts.com	Elections, A specific project, messaging
Bill West	Bwest@georgetowndel.com	Education by tv, radio, newspaper. Teaching the public

*Report prepared by:
Delaware Technical Community College
December 2023*