

Affordable housing for elders discussed

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Bedford, Mass. – From the lack of affordable housing for elders, downsizing their homes to daycare and transportation needs, and from hoarding to the cost of energy and the need for an increase in fuel assistance, factors that impact housing in Bedford were discussed at a Jan. 27 community housing conversation at the Bedford Housing Authority.

The meeting, sponsored by Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, hosted by the Bedford Housing Authority (BHA) and co-sponsored by Sen. Susan C. Fargo and Rep. Charles A. Murphy, examined the state of affordable housing in Bedford.

Bedford Housing Authority Board Member Susan Ellis discussed a recent study of elderly housing issues that indicated older residents who want to downsize their homes have few options because smaller homes are too expensive. “Elders don’t want to just sell their houses and then have everything go to (pay for new) housing. They are uncertain about their futures.”

Ellis said the lack of affordable smaller homes is due in part to people buying smaller, older homes, tearing them down, and then building larger homes on the lot. She also noted that children raised in Bedford cannot afford to buy homes in Bedford once they become adults.

“We need to think about repurposing housing, it needs to be a community conversation,” she added.

Betty Tenwalde, of Bedford Village’s S-C Management Corp., voiced concerns about the increased amounts tenants with subsidies must pay. With their part of the rent at 40 percent of their income, they are struggling to afford even the subsidized housing. “If anything else goes wrong in their lives, they risk losing their housing,” she said.

BHA Executive Director Brenda Peacock noted that affordable rental units are scarce: BHA’s state-subsidized units have a waiting list of two years or more. She also said her residents describe how daycare and transportation costs further burden their budgets – affordable daycare is hard to find, and many lack transportation to and from daycare options that are affordable.

Tom Fiander, property manager at the Bedford Veterans Quarters, said his 60-bed facility also has a lengthy waiting list. He anticipates the need for veterans’ housing will continue to increase as veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pat LeVan, of Bedford’s Council on Aging, described Bedford’s grant-funded Safe at Home program, in which elders receive “visits” from city staff members who check on them periodically. The program also helps elders with small safety-related repairs and improvements to help them remain safely in their homes. Funding for the program is provided by Carleton-Willard Village.

Sen. Susan Fargo attended the meeting, and said “I encourage all my communities to take the initiative and do housing on their own terms.” She also noted that, regarding state budget cuts, “the most vulnerable groups are the ones who are really going to be affected.”

MBHP staff used part of the meeting to share information about the agency’s range of housing programs, highlighting current efforts in rental assistance and other supports that enable an individual or family in crisis to keep their home. Additionally, an overview of MBHP’s Housing Consumer Information Center, which is open to the public and helps with thousands of housing inquiries each year, was presented. MBHP Executive Director Chris Norris noted that the mission of MBHP – to ensure that the region’s individuals and families of low and moderate income have choice and mobility in finding and retaining decent, affordable housing – means that the organization needs to keep finding effective ways of partnering with communities in the region on housing issues.

The Jan. 27 Bedford housing conversation was part of a series of community meetings that MBHP is having in celebration of its 25th anniversary. MBHP staff members are meeting in each of the communities in MBHP’s region, learning about unique issues within the communities, and discussing MBHP’s range of housing programs.

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