

Losing Affordable Housing

Area's economic growth causes higher housing costs and less available affordable units.

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Rising home values in Fairfax County are making the jobs of affordable-housing advocates hard. Those who fight for the rights of low-income residents to live in Fairfax County are finding it increasingly more difficult to fight land developers in the booming real estate market in Northern Virginia.

Preservation of affordable housing is threatened, said Michelle Krocker, the director of housing at Reston Interfaith, because large national and regional developers are buying the affordable units, upgrading them and selling them at market value. Krocker cites the purchase of Carter Lake property in Reston as an example of an affordable housing community being bought by a for-profit developer and now sold at market rate prices.

In the early 1990s Reston Interfaith engaged in a program where it bought townhouses with its own money, and with some money from Fairfax County, federal money granted to the county through the Housing Choice Voucher Program — formerly known as Section 8. The townhouses bought by Reston Interfaith would then be preserved as affordable housing and would be inhabited by persons with disabilities and low incomes. The skyrocketing prices, however, have impacted Reston Interfaith's program. "[The prices] have limited our ability to purchase and preserve [affordable] units," said Krocker. Neighborhoods where Reston Interfaith bought units in 2000 almost doubled in price by 2003. "It has really impacted our ability to buy," she said.

Krocker said the interest rates are historically low and that is driving the rental market to be "softer." Because of the low interest rates, those looking for housing are more likely to buy than to rent. "It certainly impacts first-time home buyers' ability to buy," said Krocker.

Another issue driving up the prices of housing is the rapid job growth in the area. The private sector is meeting the demand for market housing, she said, but affordable housing is not able to keep up. The upward economy is driving the price of land up, making it impossible for nonprofit developers to compete with for-profit developers, who are often able to offer more money for the land than the previous owner asks for.

A SUCCESS STORY in preserving affordable housing is the Island Walk Cooperative in Reston. Not only was Island Walk able to retain 102 units of affordable housing, but also it was able to finance a complete renovation of the property to better its residents' lives. Island Walk was able to retain its status as an affordable housing community by joining in a sales agreement with a nonprofit developer, Community Preservation Development Corporation (CPDC). The agreement gives Island Walk an option to buy the property in 15 years. "It took a financial partnership with

someone willing to invest for tax credit purposes," said Les Duvall, Island Walk's property manager.

There are two ways to look at the problem of the lack of affordable housing in the area, said Krocker. One is to look at preserving the existing units affordable housing, and the other is to look at it building new units of affordable housing. Since preservation is becoming unbearable, advocates of affordable housing are turning to ways of securing the building on new affordable units. The current Fairfax County Affordable Dwelling Units (ADU) ordinance requires that when 50 or more units of housing are built, there be affordable units built. However, the ordinance, said Krocker, does not apply to buildings with more than four floors or to buildings with elevators in them. As the density of Reston and its surrounding areas grows, the number of residential high rises will grow, too. "There are hundreds of units going up at Reston Town Center," said Krocker, "and none are affordable."

Another way to get around the ADU ordinance is for the developers to proffer funds to go into county's Housing Trust Fund. The money from the fund could then be used to build the affordable units, but two problems exist with the fund. One is there is not enough money in the fund to build the units and the other is that the available land to build on is being lost. "It is nice to have money in the fund," said Krocker, "but you can't replace the creation of the units at the site."

Supervisor Catherine Hudgins (D-Hunter Mill) said the affordable housing situation is getting worse. She said Fairfax County has to figure out how much affordable housing can be created, in terms of both home ownership and renting. A crisis, she said, pushes one to work harder and the lack of affordable housing is nearing a crisis.

The issue, she said, does not make economic sense to Reston and Fairfax County. "It doesn't serve us well," she said, "when people live further away they spend their money away." She added that diversity in housing equals diversity in people, which is beneficial to the whole population.

As Reston builds higher, said Hudgins, it would be good to incorporate the building of affordable units into the new buildings, especially around the transit station and proposed Metrorail stop at Wiehle Avenue. And Reston will build higher. Reston is sure to be one of the main centers to attract the new population to the Hunter Mill District, as new jobs come to the area. The 2004 population of Hunter Mill was 127,426 and it is estimated to grow in 2010 to 141,406 and by 2025 to 145,972, according to statistics from Fairfax County Department of Systems Management for Human Services.

Solutions for the lack of affordable housing are not easy to come by. The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors has appointed a Preservation Action Committee, whose mission is to come up with recommendations on how to do a better job of preserving affordable housing in the county.

WHILE THE WORK on recommendations continues, Krocker receives phone calls from people who are in danger of being evicted because they can no longer afford to pay the rent. The problem then becomes one of a rising number of homeless people in the area, while the homeless shelters are filled to capacity. Reston Interfaith's "Strategies for Addressing Homelessness Locally" states high cost of living and lack of affordable housing in the region as the most important external factors contributing to homelessness. The document also states that in January of 2004 there were 2,000 homeless persons in Fairfax County, while the five county-owned homeless shelters have 261 beds available, 60 of which are in Reston's Embury Rucker Shelter.

Mike Corrigan, the president of the Reston Citizens Association (RCA) Board of Directors, said there is a great deal of danger that Reston will lose more affordable housing. The RCA has decided to become active in the preservation of affordable housing and will look to partner up with Reston Interfaith to determine how to get involved. One of the ways to advocate for the issue is to discuss with Fairfax County the possibility of rezoning the commercial space to mixed use, adding a provision that affordable housing units be included. Another possibility is advocating that the county's affordable housing guidelines include multi-story, elevator buildings.

Krocker said it is important to recognize, and eliminate, the stereotype associated with those who are in need of affordable housing. Some tend to think of those in need as poor and unemployed, which is not necessarily true. "The people we are talking about are important populations in our community," she said. Among other populations Krocker mentioned college students who have lived in the area their entire lives, elderly on fixed incomes, teachers, firefighters, grocery store employees and day-care providers who will be forced to move out of the area because they would not be able to afford to live here. It is important, she said, to get rid of the "Not In My Back Yard" notion. The notion some residents may have is that affordable housing is at a lower grade and that it will devalue their own properties if it is near them.

"People have to understand whom affordable housing serves," she added. The poor and the unemployed are a small segment of the population in need of it.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2003 American Community Survey, 26.6 percent of the county's households have an income of less than \$50,000. Fairfax County says a household needs to have an income of \$48,000 to rent a two-bedroom apartment in the county, which means that around a quarter of the county's households cannot afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment in it. The \$48,000 necessary is calculated on the basis that the average monthly rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Fairfax County is \$1,197, and if one were to pay no more than 30 percent of one's income towards housing, in this case renting a two-bedroom apartment, that income would have to be \$48,000. Households that receive assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher Program are those with incomes at or below 30 percent of the median income, thus the 30 percent figure in the formula. The median household income in Fairfax County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2003 American Community Survey, is \$80,753. Thirty percent of the median income is \$24,226. The gap between the \$48,000 needed to rent a two-bedroom apartment and those who are served by the Housing Choice Voucher Program is \$23,774. According to the 2003 American Community Survey, 8.9 percent of households in Fairfax County have an income of less than \$25,000.

In order to address the problems and issues presented by the affordable housing situation, a group of community activists was formed in August of 2004. Members of community based organizations, affordable housing developers, human service providers, faith communities, financial institutions, and others formed the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, with a mission to advocate for the preservation and production of all types of affordable housing. The Alliance will hold a meeting Thursday, March 10, from 9 a.m. to noon, entitled "Empowering the Advocate: Affordable Housing and You," at St. Mary of Sorrows Church, 5222 Sideburn Road, Fairfax. On the agenda, among other things, are discussions on the problems regarding affordable housing in Northern Virginia.