

Business



BUSINESS VIEW

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Chamber backs workforce housing projects

No place to lay their heads

Which comes first — a job or a home? The answer is both. It's hard to have one without the other.

In the last five years, housing costs in Columbia County have exploded, far-outstripping wage increases. Unable to afford a place to lay their heads, workers are forced to leave the area — or don't come to begin with — shrinking an already tight labor market.

In a new spirit of activism, the Columbia County Chamber of Commerce is tackling the housing problem, announcing itself in strong support of affordable workforce housing. "The position comes out of a thoughtful decision process by several Chamber committees that took a close look at the issue," said Chamber President David Colby.

"If you work in Columbia County," said Rick Bianchi, chairman of the Chamber, "you should be able to buy a house here."

Yet that dream of home ownership is out of reach for more and more people as housing costs accelerate upwards, at least partly the result of continuing northward migration after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

In 2000, the median sale price of a home in Columbia County was \$110,000. In January of this year, that median price had surged to \$254,000.

Building costs of \$150 to \$200 per square foot are only part of the problem. More of the county's workers are moving out of the area. Employers are faced with

Who's affected?

W.P. has been looking for a three-bedroom house for less than \$150,000 since last summer. The 32-year-old single parent with two children makes \$46,000 a year with overtime pay working as an LPN at one of the county nursing homes. She's been employed there since 1998.

"It's terrible out there," she said. "Finding a house for \$130,000 is impossible. Anything at that price needs a lot of work." W.P. makes just a little too much money to qualify for a housing grant program that could provide some help.

She has rented all her life, currently at an apartment complex in Greenport. She went through the First-Time Homebuyers program and found it very helpful, but says she is growing desperate, watching prices continue to climb.

She expanded her search area — Hudson, Greenport, Stockport, Claverack — but still has not found anything that she can afford. "Everything decent is \$200,000 and change," she said.

acre zoning. The purchase of a building lot, plus providing well and septic, can easily approach \$100,000 — before a foundation is even poured. This puts even more price pressure on village and city properties where infrastructure is provided.

Rentals in the county are hardly better.

It is hard to find a decent two-bedroom rental for less than \$775. A household with an income of \$35,000 per year is taking home about \$2,400 a month. Spending the standard one-third of their income on housing translates to \$800 a month. That pays for either a very modest rental or, if they can manage the down payment, a mortgage on about a \$100,000 house. But those are simply no longer available in Columbia County.

This critical housing shortage has a cascade effect for local employers. Without places to live, workers are moving out of the area. Employers are faced with

recruiting from a shrinking labor pool or reaching well outside county borders.



Contributed photo

Chamber chairman Rick Bianchi of Shallo, Gallusio, Bianchi & Fucito, CPAs; PC and Chamber vice chairman John Maiuri of Dunn Builders Supply at a new home site in Columbia County.

Other voices

"There is a complete disconnect between the local economy and the local housing market." ... Kevin O'Neill, Housing Resources of Columbia County.

"Basically, it is impossible for an average young family to buy a house here. There simply is no workforce housing." ... Mary Bartolotta, Coldwell Banker Bartolotta Associates.

"Bottom line, the lack of affordable housing diminishes the pool from which we have to draw employees. It is a very limited pool." ... Jane Ehrlich; Columbia Memorial Hospital.

"We need to support housing in Columbia County at all levels if we are going to have a vibrant economy." ... James Galvin, Columbia Hudson Partnership.

"In Ancram, it now costs \$1,200 a month for an apartment. Who can afford it?" ... Gerry Simons, Columbia County Board of Supervisors.

Even if a business recruits workers from out of the area, there is not enough rental stock to

provide temporary housing while people search for a long-term place to live.

The one immediately available answer is to support the creation of affordable workforce housing in the county, as seen in the Copake Commons and the Hudson/Greenport Crosswinds projects.

"We're not talking about subsidized housing," said John Maiuri, vice chairman of the Chamber. "We're talking about housing that meets the needs of our average wage earners, a decent place to buy or rent."

Most define "affordable" in Columbia County as less than \$150,000. This is not subsidized housing or mobile home parks; essentially, it is much needed middle-income housing.

Copake Commons proposes 103 homeowner units, including 69 single-family two- and three-bedroom "starter" homes that will sell for around \$160,000. It

will also have 12 family rental apartments as well as several housing options for senior citizens.

Virtually half of Hudson would qualify to live in Crosswinds on Harry Howard Avenue. The housing units are townhouses and apartments, mixed senior and family units with two and three bedrooms.

Supporting affordable housing also means supporting PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) programs. Without a PILOT, for example, Crosswinds will need to charge \$125 more a month for rent.

The Columbia Hudson Partnership has already committed \$100,000 to Crosswinds, convinced of the tight connection between housing availability and economic development.

The Columbia County Chamber of Commerce urges businesses and individuals to support these projects as a first step in addressing the issue of workforce housing, currently a significant choke on the health of the local economy.

The Columbia County Chamber of Commerce is the leading voice of business in Columbia County, providing advocacy, promotional and benefit solutions for its 850 members. The Chamber encourages all developers to utilize local businesses to provide products and services for their projects.

If you would like more information on this column, call the Chamber at 518-828-4217 or visit www.columbia-county-chamber-ny.com.