

Status Update for Affordable Housing in Lyme Where Have We Come From? Where Are We Going?

Background

One hundred years ago Lyme was hardscrabble Connecticut farms - thin soils, logged over a couple of times, ledgy hillsides, wetlands - bringing in a few artists and Eastern European farmers who wanted the cheapest land in the area. The small mills outdated, most economic activity related to Lyme's access to the Connecticut River. Inland were farms along roads that didn't lead much of anywhere - and still don't.

By the 1960s the interstates allowed some commuting to New London (15 miles) or Hartford (40 miles) as well as shopping that put the small general stores in Lyme mostly out of business. Many of the old inactive farms became retirement homes for well-off families leaving places like Fairfield County that, in their eyes, had become overdeveloped.

Determined to keep Lyme from the same fate, they and local families formed the Lyme Land Conservation Trust. In addition, longtime farmers were also selling their land's development rights to the State. As a result, today over 50% of its land is in conservation owned by the Town or other groups, including the Nehantic State Forest, Becket Hill State Park, Selden Island State Park, the Lyme Land Conservation Trust, the Nature Conservancy, The Connecticut Audubon Society, and held as private land under conservation easement.

The Clean Water Act and the growing environmental movement brought into sharper focus Lyme's natural resource assets. A large portion of Lyme lies in the Eight Mile River watershed, one of the state's cleanest rivers which receives federal Wild and Scenic protection. With this designation, there is in place a land preservation plan under local stewardship in conjunction with the National Parks Service. In addition, many properties have some wetlands restrictions and zoning was designed to maintain water quality.

Today, Lyme is a rural community with 1,028 Households and a total population of 2,366 (per Hometown Locator). Consistent with its rural profile, Lyme has no dense population center, no downtown shopping area, and no municipal water or sewerage. What Lyme does offer includes easy access to its many well-maintained trails, permitted hunting on a number of preserves, and a habitat that, along with Old Lyme, has won CT Audubon's Christmas bird count because of the variety of habitats in the two towns.

Affordable Housing in Lyme

Lyme recognized the need for more affordable housing for young families and its all-volunteer fire and ambulance services in 1990 when the Town created the Affordable Housing Commission (AHC). After a series of Town Meetings, funding was provided to enable the Town over time to build six houses that conformed in all respects to Town zoning and regs. This Affordable Housing (AH) model provides ownership of the house to the qualifying household but the Town retained ownership of the land and limited the capital appreciation households could realize when they sold to another AH qualified owner. This housing gave first preference to households with Lyme connections but allowed for possible New London County purchasers. A Lyme non-profit also used the land lease model to work with Habitat for Humanity of New London County to build two houses with no Lyme preference.

This model satisfied Lyme voters and the AHC's intended goal of creating a pool of perpetually available affordable housing that meets the state's definition. However, it hasn't been fully successful. The houses have not turned over as the AHC expected: only two of the eight have turned over at all, so new qualified families have not been helped. And the model has become unjustifiably expensive, as land and building costs have increased substantially. Site work alone can easily exceed \$50,000 on Lyme's predominately ledgy hillsides. No AH houses have been added since 2009, partly because none of the lots we have explored have worked out and partly because area-housing prices remained low between 2009 and 2020.

There is affordable housing in Lyme that does not meet the state's definition. Lyme has been encouraging rentals of accessory apartments for years through its zoning regulations. Unfortunately without a deed restriction, these affordable rental units don't count in the state's eyes. Further, based on the lack of interest expressed by qualified homeowners in a program that would compensate them for putting such a deed restriction in place, this situation seems unlikely to change.

Many of our residents appreciate the need for more affordable rental housing in Lyme for young families, its all-volunteer fire and ambulance services, its elderly residents preparing to downsize, local service workers and professionals (e.g. teachers) on whom our community relies, as well as others who want to live in Lyme but find housing here unaffordable. In this respect, some residents view affordable housing as particularly intertwined with the benefits of an inclusive community. Even so, demand for affordable housing in Lyme is probably relatively small. With no population center or transport hub, minimal public transportation, no grocery store or gas station, only two private employers with more than five employees, living in Lyme demands a reliable car for most adults. Nevertheless, the AHC is convinced through anecdotal evidence and survey results that there is a shortage of affordable housing in Lyme.

To address this shortage, the Commission is continuing to explore housing options that are sensitive to the stewardship of our natural resources, as well as regulatory demands, market economics, social change and the needs of our community. The Commission's current consensus is around a plan involving the purchase by the Town of a buildable property that will allow a number of residences, providing that the average amount of land attributable to each residence conforms to what is required by the Town of Lyme in its Zoning and Sub-division Regulations. Ideally this should be close to the Town's main thoroughfare, Route 156. The AHC would encourage private donations or actively seek to raise private money to build sustainable housing that would not exceed existing density requirements and would be owned by the Town and managed by a non-profit rental management group.

Pursuant to the state mandated Affordable Housing Plan due to the state by June, 2022, which "shall specify how the municipality intends to increase the number of affordable housing developments in the municipality", the AHC will continue to explore ways to grow affordable housing in our community. Most importantly, the AHC will work to persuade voters that our proposals are beneficial for Lyme and worthy of their support for the necessary changes in the Town's zoning regulations.