



## Town of Woodstock

### Housing Committee

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**February 20, 2024**

**To:** Town Board

**From:** Katherine Tegen, Housing Committee Chair

**Re:** Annual Report for 2023

The housing crisis is still here – and the signs are everywhere. Here's some examples:

- Employees of our stores, restaurants, the Town, and services like the library cannot find housing here, and so they must commute from other towns every day, creating more traffic, more pollution, and straining our parking.
- Young families cannot move to Woodstock and so our elementary school will be closing.
- Demographics show that Woodstock's population is highly educated, but also aging. Almost 40% of our community is over 65 and many live on fixed incomes. And yet there is no housing available to seniors who choose to downsize and would like to stay in Woodstock.
- There are also very few affordable rental options. Median income in Woodstock is 92% of Ulster County's, yet rent is more than 20% higher, while owner-occupied house values are 75% higher than in Ulster County. (U.S. Census)

This is not a sustainable way to maintain the thriving and diverse community that attracted many of us here in the first place.

In 2023, the Housing Committee worked hard on several initiatives to help improve our housing situation:

Our first initiative focused on zoning: We believe that updating our zoning code to allow for more housing types and to encourage the building of new homes that are small- and medium-sized is crucial to achieving more affordable housing. With the adoption by the Town Board in 2018 of the Woodstock Comprehensive Plan, affordable housing and protecting the environment were two priority needs identified by the community. According to the state, a town's zoning regulations must be consistent with its Comprehensive Plan. Therefore, revisions to the zoning are timely. To support the zoning updates, the Housing Committee spent many months reviewing three versions of the proposed code and providing concrete suggestions to the task force for improvements.

It is now up to the Town Board to review the revisions, and with new developers coming to our Town, such as Zena Development, formerly known as Woodstock National, it is crucial that the new code gets passed. The revised code contains essential protections to our environment and limits the development of open space. The revised code also requires affordable housing in new developments. The current code does not. Woodstock National will have free reign to develop high-end homes with no provisions for open space, or affordable housing, under the current code.

The Housing Committee also drafted non-zoning policy recommendations to accompany the code. This policy document was sent to the Town Board in November and included suggestions for the Town Board to review, and we hope, to act upon. We are critically in need of a Town grant writer, for example, as well as the establishment of a Housing Fund.

To help the community understand the updated code, the Housing Committee hosted two community-wide informational meetings, the first on May 30, and the second on November 11. We continued education and outreach through numerous newsletters and social media posts.

Our second initiative focused on Short-Term Rentals. The Housing Committee formed a subcommittee to research enforcement issues regarding STRs, because we believe the number of STRs in Woodstock is impacting available affordable housing. Meetings with the Building Department and Granicus were useful, and our findings were given to the Zoning Revisions Committee to aid in their assessment of current STR regulations.

Another initiative focused on zombie properties, which are abandoned or neglected properties that could be converted into housing. The Zoning Enforcement officer informed us that there are no properties being taken to court at this time, but we will continue to monitor this sector.

The Housing Committee also took the time to review each parcel of Town-owned land, considering environmental features and buildable acreage. We hope to move forward with one of these parcels in 2024.

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The Housing Committee has worked hard over the past four years to lay the foundation for our next phase of work, which is to come up with a concrete strategy to create more affordable housing in Woodstock. In 2024 we'll be focused on ways to engage the community around this issue that is so crucial to encouraging our town's diversity and sustainable economic growth.

Because of the Housing Committee's early action in 2023, Woodstock was the first rural community to join Ulster County's Housing Smart Communities Initiative, which encourages communities to implement a series of actions to achieve more affordable housing.

The Housing Committee was also an early responder to the County's offer to provide a consultant to help us with our housing goals. The consultant, HR&A Advisors, will be working with the Housing Committee this year, and we hope to learn as much as we can from these experts in housing strategy. We are grateful to the County for funding the consultant whose professional expertise will help us find a way forward.

Our first task with the consultant will be to set up focus groups to find out more regarding what our community is looking for in affordable housing. How do we maintain the rural nature of our town while at the same time creating new housing? Will new housing create issues with our water, sewer, and traffic? How will our community be served by new homes for our workforce and middle-income community members? The focus groups will be held in March. Then, in April, we will be holding a community-wide meeting to address the same issues in a larger forum. I hope that we, as a community, can work together to answer these questions.

To help with transparency and accessibility of information, the consultant will also build a website where housing resources can be easily accessed.

Our second task with the consultant is to assess the financial feasibility of building new housing in Woodstock. Using the available Town properties and the housing types that could be created on them, the consultant will build an assessment based on a review of market conditions, including rents, land sales, construction costs, financing, tax credits, and pricing. The assessment will include a survey of local developers. Following this, we'll have a much better picture of what is financially achievable for housing.

Once this work is completed, the Housing Committee would like to make a recommendation to the Town Board regarding the best use of the ARPA funds that were slated last year for the development of infrastructure to a site to make it construction-ready for a developer, such as RUPCO, to come in.

We have five new committee members this year: Sabina Barach, Rebekah Brooks, John Huber, Lisa Kirk, and Tanesha Skinner. These members are already bringing a huge infusion of energy to the committee, and with them, we'll be able to focus on a larger strategy for creating housing in Woodstock, as well as creating a broader consensus.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the work of two founding committee members, Susan Goldman and Urana Kinlen, who departed in December.

Urana's belief that affordable housing is a necessary part of the equation for a thriving and inclusive community spurred the committee on for the past four years. We are grateful for her creativity and dedication.

Susan's commitment, vision, determination, and strength are inspirational. I am personally thankful for Susan's mentorship and leadership over the three years that I have served on this committee.

And finally, I would like to add a note of appreciation for Deborah DeWan. Deborah has devoted countless hours to the cause of affordable housing in our town, and I am grateful for her wisdom and depth of experience. Fortunately, Deborah has agreed to stay on the Housing Committee as an alternate member.

I would also like to thank our Supervisor and the Town Board for supporting the Housing Committee's ongoing work.