

Questions on affordable housing for Anna

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing March 31, 2021

 *Latest post in a series on Affordable Housing* 

Although she's lived in Bethlehem for almost 20 years, Carol Burns' new career as a freelance marketer is giving her an opportunity to "discover" her hometown. She volunteers for several arts-related organizations, and her newest adventure is dipping her toe into local politics and community organizations.

ref: **Affordable Housing, part 1: What does housing affordability look like in Bethlehem?**

Anna:

Thanks for **this**, and for putting a face on the issue. Question: When you calculate "housing costs," is that the rent or mortgage payment only? Or all costs associated, like utilities too?

And although you did note the figures might be higher post-Covid – which they most definitely will be – I think it's important to acknowledge the eviction moratorium and how its after-effects could further impact this situation. For example, how many landlords will increase their prices even more, to make up for their losses this past year? And how many will terminate their tenants at the end of their current lease (especially if they've had problems paying).

Finally, do you have any sense of the migration into Bethlehem by non-residents who are attracted by lower prices than they are used to?

Carol

Hi Carol, Thanks for your thoughtful comments!

The data that the Census uses for "housing costs" includes average utilities (water, sewer, electricity, gas) and fuel (oil, kerosene, wood, coal, etc.) for renters if it is paid by the renter in addition to rent (the survey is

designed this way to standardize numbers when rental price may or may not include the above). For homeowners, the calculation includes all mortgage payments with interest, fees, taxes, homeowners insurance, and utilities (excluding telephone and cable).

I absolutely agree about the potential consequences of the eviction moratorium. While our local counties are receiving a significant amount of rental assistance funds through the latest stimulus bill, I am sure that plenty of tenants and/or their landlords will not be able to access the funds for a wide variety of reasons (paperwork, communication issues, fear/mistrust of government, etc.). One of the challenges I regularly saw while working with folks in the community on housing issues was the prevalence of month-to-month leases, which allow landlords to evict a tenant quite quickly pretty much any time that they want. I am concerned about the end of the eviction moratorium, but I also wonder how many folks are being “evicted” without going through the formal court process right now. I’m not working on the ground on this issue to know how frequently this is occurring, but based on my past experience, the majority of families begin looking for housing elsewhere before eviction papers are even filed if their landlord indicates that they want them out (with legal standing or not). I’ve seen quite a lot of movement in my neighborhood throughout the pandemic, and I suspect it was not all voluntary. I imagine it will be a lot worse once the moratorium is lifted.

You ask a great question about migration to Bethlehem. The latest Census data (from 2019) indicates that 82% of Bethlehem residents lived in the same house from one year to the next, while about 9% moved to Bethlehem from somewhere else within the same county. 5% moved from another county in PA (could be moving between Lehigh and Northampton counties), and 3% moved from out of state (a significant portion of which are Lehigh’s freshman class). Less than 1% moved to Bethlehem from abroad. These numbers do not vary significantly from other cities in the area, and Bethlehem has actually seen a decrease of 25% over the last five years in folks moving in from out of state each year. Many of the surrounding suburban townships have seen significant increases in folks moving in from out of state over the last five years, but I suspect that is driven by new construction in places like Nazareth, etc. So, the short answer that I’m seeing from the data would be that there

isn't a significant influx of people moving from other states nor from elsewhere in the region, and, in fact, the rates of pretty much all migration to Bethlehem have decreased since 2014. This is an interesting question, and I'm curious to hear if the data backs up any anecdotal trends.

Thanks for reading

Anna

Part 2 of Anna's essay on affordable housing coming next.