

Taller buildings a key to affordable housing says developer

The Bethlehem Gadfly Affordable Housing April 2, 2021

 *Latest post in a series on Affordable Housing* 

The comments here favoring approval of taller buildings by developer Dennis Benner add to what we have reported earlier on the Affordable Housing Task Force and the March 23 Community Development meeting. Gadfly will report later on a meeting with City Planning about the Southside core last night in which building height was a key issue — majority response from the public favoring limiting the height.

selections from [*“With 1 in 3 households ‘cost burdened,’ Lehigh Valley cities try to tackle the affordable housing crisis.” Morning Call, April 1, 2021.*](#)

As Bethlehem Steel took off in the mid-1900s, so did affordable housing, with thousands of modest twin homes and the occasional brick single popping up throughout the city to accommodate the plant’s employees.

There was once more than enough affordable housing for Bethlehem’s working class, but in recent years, not so much. Even as more apartment buildings are developed throughout the Lehigh Valley, many of those units are out of reach for low- to middle-income workers.

A new affordable housing task force in Bethlehem is hoping to change the trend by offering incentives to developers who incorporate affordable housing into their plans. The task force plans to make recommendations to City Council in the next couple of months on how to accomplish that goal.

Renters make up nearly 1 in 3 households in the Lehigh Valley, yet 57% of new rental units cost \$1,000 or more per month, [according to the latest statistics](#) from the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission.

Additionally, 1 in 3 area households are cost burdened, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on housing every month.

More specifically, 51% of renters and 24% of homeowners in the Lehigh Valley are cost burdened, according to the statistics.

Since 2014, projects encompassing 887 apartment units have gone through Bethlehem's approval process, but none is considered affordable housing, city officials said. Some of those units have yet to be constructed.

"We can't deny there is a crisis in Bethlehem, in the state and in the country," said Bethlehem City Councilmember Grace Crampsie Smith, who started the task force.

Crampsie Smith, who works as a counselor for Easton Area School District, noticed more of her students over the last five years becoming homeless and transient. That's when she began reading about the lack of affordable housing for middle-class workers in America and decided to see what the city could do for its residents.

Bethlehem's task force started meeting in November. The group includes 10 members, with representatives from the city, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley and two local developers.

Local developer Dennis Benner, who sits on the Bethlehem Affordable Housing Task Force, said rising costs have presented a particular challenge to him.

Benner is working on Skyline West, a [\\$15 million, 50-unit luxury apartment complex at 143 W. Broad St.](#) No affordable units are planned for the development.

One way to incorporate affordable housing would be to allow for taller buildings with more units so that it's economically feasible, Benner said.

He owns multiple properties in Bethlehem's South Side, but grapples with how to develop them because he said the city's Historic Commission, an advisory board, routinely recommends against approving taller buildings.

“Government has to come to grips with density. That's not just in Bethlehem, that's everywhere,” Benner said. “Government wants everyone else to fix the problem, but they don't want to face the reality of what's needed to be able to do that.”