

Affordable housing praised

Speakers at forum tout its benefit to Cornwall

BY RUTH EPSTEIN
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CORNWALL — Melani King said she is grateful Kugeman Village, the affordable housing complex on Route 7, allowed her family to stay in the town they loved.

She recounted her experience Monday during a housing forum organized by the Board of Selectmen.

The availability of affordable housing has long been a concern, but more recently with the influx of out-of-state and out-of-town residents seeking to move to the area to escape crowded metropolitan areas during the pandemic, the problem has been exacerbated. Prices have been driven up and the amount of available housing stock has diminished.

This leaves young people who want to remain in their hometowns, or seniors who wish to downsize, scrambling to find suitable living arrangements.

Many town officials, acutely aware of the situation, have made affordable housing a priority.

"More and more, the function of towns is to look after its residents," First Selectman Gordon M. Ridgway said.

King said she and her family moved to Cornwall when she was 8 years old. Her mother later found they couldn't afford to rent here, but they wanted to stay in town.

"Thankfully we had Kugeman Village," she said. "That ended up being very important to us."



Ridgway



Vanicky

Now married, King said she and her husband are fortunate to have been able to buy a home because many of those in their early 30s are finding homeownership in the Northwest Corner unattainable.

Patricia Vanicky also expressed gratitude for being able to live in Cornwall for the past 10 years. A native of Brazil, she is an art teacher at Housatonic Valley Regional High School in Falls Village and the wife of town crew foreman Jim Vanicky.

"Our house is a piece of heaven where we feel safe and secure," she said. "Having a house helps a person achieve his goals. It's a building block of stability."

Vanicky said towns benefit from having affordable housing by "bringing in fresh blood and young working families who can serve as volunteers for the fire and ambulance services," as well as students to fill the schools.

Heather Dinneen, the town's social services director, said her office in 2020 spent \$25,000 to assist residents with rent and mortgage payments. She is concerned about what will happen when the eviction moratorium is lifted.

Maggie Cooley, president of Cornwall Housing Corp., gave a brief history of affordable housing efforts in town, including Kugeman Village, the parcel program that provides for homeownership and Bonney Brook, an apartment complex in Cornwall Bridge for seniors that opened in 2009 and has been full since then. She lauded the generosity of Cornwall residents to help make these projects a reality.

Planning consultant Janell Mullen gave an overview of the workings of the Affordable Housing Committee, which has been charged with coming up with an affordable housing plan, and Planning and Zoning Commission Chairwoman Anna Timell talked about that group's efforts to ease up on certain regulations to allow for more affordable housing.

Beth O'Donnell, who was raised in Cornwall and now works on affordable housing projects in Boston, showed examples of several of them.

Ron Goldstein, who also grew up in town and is now manager of the local branch of National Iron Bank, spoke of a proposal he's working on that would involve a regenerative type of account to help local citizens with various housing costs.

The program ended with a film that showed many of the affordable housing projects in the Northwest Corner.

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