

Background for the Proposed Housing Amendments to be Considered at the June 11 Public Hearing

Based on the historic persistence of complaints from people that they didn't know about a discussion or a meeting that was going on or that there was inadequate public input, it is clearly almost impossible to communicate adequately with each and every Cornwall citizen. This is despite the presence of www.Cornwallct.org, where all meeting agendas and minutes are posted, the fact of open attendance at the meetings of all Boards and Commissions in town, periodic Public Forums to discuss topical issues and extremely elaborate processes to ensure public input into the state-mandated ten-year Plan of Conservation and Development and the five-year Affordable Housing Plan. In the end, I can only state that there is no intention amongst the hard-working volunteers who run the many Boards and Commissions in town to deprive citizens of their right to know what is happening and to have input. If you have questions about what the Planning and Zoning Commission is doing, e-mail the land-use office (landuse@cornwallct.gov) or walk-in during office hours, Tues and Thursday 9-12 or call 860-672-4957.

As far as Affordable Housing goes, it has been a recognized problem in Cornwall since the mid-1980's. As more and more of our homes were bought by people with income levels prevalent in New York City, as opposed to CT, there was a steady increase in the inflation of home values, which was greatly exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. As per the 2020 US Census, Cornwall has 732 households living here full-time. Of those, anyone earning less than 80% of the "Area Median Family Income" (as calculated by HUD, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development) who is spending more than 30% of their monthly income on housing qualifies for Affordable Housing. Per HUD, there are 251 families in Cornwall earning less than 80% of the area median household income who might very well qualify for assistance in the form of mortgage or rental assistance or housing subsidized by government funding and donations to housing not-for-profits. The "area" in "Area Median Family Income" is Litchfield County.

In the early 1980's a year-long study of the "Cornwall Housing Task Force" concluded: "Cornwall has a serious shortage of affordable housing for those of modest income, particularly young men and women." The situation has clearly not changed.

Both the 2010 and 2020 Town Plans talked a lot about housing needs. The process involved in creating a Town Plan of Conservation and Development includes a town-wide forum at which volunteers are solicited for sub-committees addressing various sections of the Town Plan, eg. Economic Development, Housing, Conservation etc. The subcommittees meet monthly over many months and finally present their suggestions to the Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z) and the final document then becomes the subject of a public hearing. In 2019, the P&Z Commission held a town-wide survey which received 321 responses, adequate for statistical accuracy. 66% of respondents agreed that the town should "develop flexible zoning regs to allow for a greater variety of housing opportunities including co-housing, cottage style housing and small homes". 50-60% of respondents felt the top housing priorities were: increasing rental options for a family of 4 earning less than 80% of the area median income, housing options that allow senior citizens to downsize, and more

opportunities for smaller homes on less expensive lots. The Town Plan of Conservation and Development can be considered the P&Z Commission's marching orders for regulatory change because they reflect the input of all concerned citizens.

In 2019, again in response to a state mandated Five-Year Affordable Housing Plan, a Cornwall Housing Taskforce was created with volunteers, which included the chair and another member of the P&Z. They met monthly for a year, in meetings that were open to the public, held a Public Forum in May of 2021 and also a public hearing on December 8, 2021. The Plan was ultimately approved. Several of the plan's suggestions for zoning regulation change are reflected in the current amendment. The Plan's recommendation that a Cornwall Housing Commission be created was approved at a town meeting on December 8, 2023. Both the Town Plan of Conservation and Development and the Affordable Housing Plan are available at <https://cornwallct.org/government/town-regulations/> and <https://cornwallct.org/housing/>, respectively. For people who do not use computers, print copies are available by request from the land use office. In addition, state law mandates that the Land Use official maintain an e-mail list of people who wish to receive all meeting materials by e-mail. Again, contact the Land Use Office in the Town Office Building behind Town Hall.

In 2021, the state law regarding Planning and Zoning (The "Zoning Enabling Act") created several new mandates for CT municipalities. These concerned accessory dwelling units, which were to be "by right", multifamily housing (which must be allowed in at least some parts of town), the use of the phrase "rural character" in zoning regulations, which must now be described using purely physical characteristics, any limitation on the number of units in a multifamily housing project, which was banned, and the Federal Fair Housing Act which must be "affirmatively supported by Zoning regulations". These changes were made in response to the growing awareness that all of the state of CT has a housing problem, that discrimination lies behind some of it and that historic zoning regulations have contributed to it.

Cornwall is highly unlikely to change drastically as a result of the housing amendments the P&Z is proposing. We are profoundly constrained by our geography (lots and steep slopes and lots of protected wetlands and watercourses) and also by our lack of a town-wide septic system and water supply. We have had a zoning regulation allowing increased density of housing development for many years (the "Planned Conservation Zone") and there has never been a single application. Because the Planning component of the P&Z Commission's mandate includes thinking about trends of many kinds and planning for the future, we are concerned about the town's ability to attract full-time residents who will fill the many volunteer slots in the Fire Department, the Ambulance Squad, the Boards, Committees, Commissions and libraries, not to mention the people upon whose services everyone in Cornwall depends: contractors, plumbers, electricians, teachers, health-care personnel like home-health aides and nurses, wait-staff, cashiers, cooks, gas station attendants, the list is long. Furthermore, if none of our children can

afford to move here, we will soon lose the strong sense of continuity and history our community has enjoyed since 1740.

For people who express fear that the P&Z intends to bring in “projects” such as the high-rises that grace the Bronx, fear not. Photos of what modern affordable housing in our area are available:



This is what affordable housing looks like in Litchfield County



The Center for Housing Opportunity works to produce and preserve housing for people of all incomes, ages, and backgrounds in multiple regions of Connecticut. Each Center operates as a place-based strategic partnership that offers housing practice, policy, advocacy, and resources to address regional housing affordability.