

Decision worth a Second Look

At its December 17, 2008 meeting, the Planning & Zoning Commission voted against a resolution that would allow the Town of Durham to apply for a technical assistance grant of up to \$50,000 to study the feasibility of higher density residential projects to provide affordable housing in Durham. I truly believe this is a missed opportunity to enrich our town. I will respectfully ask the Commission to reconsider, and if you agree with me, I urge you to contact the Planning & Zoning Commission through my office or attend their next meeting on January 21st. The grant is for planning and study purposes only. Most recently, grants have been awarded to Goshen, Norfolk, Salisbury, Sharon, and Tolland. Other towns that have received grants, ranging from \$35,000 to the typical \$50,000, are: Beacon Falls, Bridgeport, Colchester, Darien, East Lyme, Ledyard, New Britain, New London, Old Saybrook, Oxford, Plainville, Plymouth, Simsbury, Wallingford, Westbrook and Windham. Those awaiting word are Canaan, Canterbury, East Hampton, East Hartford, and Newtown. To my knowledge there has not been any town whose planning board has voted against making an application.

In 2007, the ST of CT legislature recognized that *“housing affordability is a crucial element in Connecticut's efforts to remain economically competitive and preserve the quality of life that has drawn population and businesses to the state”*. This debate led to passage of a legislative proposal – the Connecticut Housing Program for Economic Growth designed to foster housing and economic growth based on responsible planning and local control.

The definition of affordable for this program is 80% of the median income of the town, clearly designed to attract young professionals, teachers, firefighters, police officers, nurses and others vital to a healthy community. Under this program, the town would have design control. Housing units can be limited to one or two bedrooms that would not over burden town services. Statistics prove that 1-2 bedroom housing does not increase student population as 3-4 bedroom housing would. Instead this type of mixed-income housing provides for a steady customer base to our commercial community; helps grandparents stay near their grandchildren; allows adult children to return to their hometown; provides downsizing options for anyone going through a life-altering event such as divorce, death of spouse or loss of second income; provides affordable housing for our young fire and EMS volunteers, saving the town thousands of dollars.

Do we have challenges as to what we can do? Absolutely. We are very limited to what our property can yield because we are a soil based zoned town. However, there are several parcels worth studying including the Silver Eagle property, Merriam Manufacturing property and several others identified as possibly suitable for higher density, especially if we consider mixed use options. I also suspect that as towns complete their technical assessments, there will be an effort to change the legislation to lower the density requirements for soil-based towns. If that happens, more parcels in Durham would be eligible.

Is this a panacea for the affordability of housing in Durham? No, however, if we can add just a few more mixed-income units, we would be a richer community. At the very least, we can use the grant money to collect data that can be used to update our Plan of Conservation and Development, a costly and required activity that will begin in 2009.

