

Opinion > Editorials (/Opinion/Editorials/)

Editorial: Big Institutions Must Take the Lead in Solving Housing Shortage

Saturday, January 26, 2019

News that Dartmouth College is considering developing housing for graduate students on 53 acres in Lebanon is welcome indeed, not only because of the scale — potentially hundreds of units — but also because it represents an acknowledgment that the Upper Valley's major institutions have a big role to play in solving one of the region's most pressing problems: a chronic, acute shortage of affordable and mixed-income housing.

Fully two-thirds of Dartmouth's more than 2,000 graduate students live off campus, putting them in direct competition for housing with young families and professionals, according to Rick Mills, Dartmouth's executive vice president. So a large-scale initiative by the college stands to benefit everyone looking for what Mills described as "reasonably priced, reasonable quality, apartment-style units."

The site in question, at 401 Mount Support Road, is less than a mile from Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, making a possible collaboration with the region's largest employer a real possibility. Dartmouth-Hitchcock, which is planning a \$130 million expansion that will require recruiting 300 new employees, has previously expressed interest in making an effort to boost the housing supply. A site within walking distance of the hospital and Centerra Marketplace has much to recommend it as a way to limit congestion along the heavily traveled Route 120 corridor.

Twin Pines Housing Trust, a nonprofit based in White River Junction, is the largest provider of affordable housing in the Upper Valley, managing more than 400 rental units and currently developing nearly 125 more. Despite its heroic efforts, much more needs to be done, and that will require the resources and commitment that only the region's largest employers, including both nonprofits and businesses, can bring to bear on the task.

There is ample motivation. All these key players know that their ability to attract the employees they require depends to a large degree on the availability of housing that is affordable and attractive. In turn, the economic and social vitality of the whole region depends on a steady in-flow of talented people, especially young people and young families.

And, if undertaken thoughtfully, increasing the supply of affordable housing need not fundamentally alter the traditional culture of the Upper Valley or overburden its physical and social infrastructure.

A commentary that appears on this page from Vital Communities' Corporate Council, on which leading Upper Valley institutions, businesses and nonprofits are represented, strikes the right note in emphasizing how the development of more affordable housing would, among other things, prevent people who already live here from being priced out of the market. And the authors appropriately noted that the solution is not to spread houses across every open field, but to locate them close to existing population centers — near work, schools, health care and public transportation.

This might require communities to rethink certain development regulations such as density, building height and parking requirements. Of course, that probably would spur objections from some residents who like things just the way they are. For better or for worse, though, things never stay just the way they are, although some communities in Vermont and New Hampshire make a valiant effort to resist the inevitable.

Channeling change in the right direction requires the efforts of all, but the region's leading institutions of higher education, health care and commerce have a special responsibility to help solve this problem. We trust that they will step up and do the right thing.