

Housing Options

One of the main reasons people move is for housing: for a dwelling that is bigger or smaller, more modest or more luxurious, newer or older, secluded or part of a bustling scene. This is a rather recent phenomenon. Gone are the days when the typical home buyer was a white male in his late-20s with a wife and two kids.

Today's typical housing market includes families with school-age children, but also young couples, singles just out of college, empty nesters, and senior citizens. Thirty years ago, to give another example, seniors were the smallest population group; today they represent the region's fastest-growing population segment and are increasingly likely to prefer a condo within an easy walk to services.

Homebuyers within each market segment are looking for single-family homes with back yards, condos with low maintenance, and rehabbed historic buildings that retain their character. Moreover, housing is closely tied to lifestyle. Buyers may want neighborhoods close to schools, vibrant downtowns or downtown-like areas, or waterfronts.

Competition

Communities compete with one another for residents, and those that are able to attract residents of all age, social, and incomes groups are generally successful. Thriving communities recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach to development fails to meet the real estate market's demand for housing options.

Competing successfully for people in the 21st century means planning for a variety of housing types, including apartments, condominiums, town houses, patio homes,

and detached single-family homes. It means allowing for appropriate densities and diversity to meet the needs of residents of a range of groups.

Density

As communities work towards providing more housing options, the issue of density often comes up. Many housing options require the integration of higher density development into existing communities. For some people, the word "density" conjures images of soulless public housing projects and high crime. However, well-designed compact development can help preserve farmland and open space, support better air quality by creating more opportunities to walk or bike, and be attractive additions to the landscape.

Often people who oppose higher density developments are not really opposed to density, but to the possible outcomes of density — increased traffic, inadequate parking, lack of green space, and lack of privacy — all of which can be eliminated or mitigated through appropriate design.

Communities must understand these concerns and work to address them when considering housing options. Therefore, a community that wishes to compete in many segments of the real estate market must go beyond changing the bulk and use provisions of its zoning code. Design standards, landscaping, and early citizen participation are essential tools to integrate into the regulatory framework. Many design elements that have passed the test of time, such as front porches, pedestrian orientation, narrow streets, and mixed uses, can help create more housing options for residents and contribute to the quality of the built environment.

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Other Tools for Increasing Housing Options

Accessory Apartments

Accessory apartments can provide options for non-traditional households, especially seniors and singles. In historic neighborhoods, they are often used in conjunction with adaptive reuse provisions to provide new life for carriage houses and other outbuildings or within historic homes.

New York state law allows accessory apartments; however, many municipalities prohibit them by local zoning bylaws, especially in neighborhoods comprised of single-family homes. Where accessory units are permitted, communities must ensure that regulations, such as those regarding setbacks and tenancy, do not make it impractical to modify a single-family home or garage to include a complete, private apartment with its own entrance.

Inclusionary Zoning

Sometimes, seniors, workers, students, single parents, and others would like to remain in a community but can't find adequate housing at a price they can afford. Inclusionary zoning is a tool that can help provide quality, safe housing that local residents can afford.

Essentially, a developer is required to build or finance a certain proportion of the total number of units in a development as affordable units. The Village of Trumansburg, for example, stipulates that 20 percent of all for-sale or rental units in a new development

of 10 or more units must be affordable. The affordable units must match the appearance of the market-rate units and must remain affordable for at least five years. Trumansburg's inclusionary zoning provisions contain incentives for developers, including allowances for smaller lot and home sizes.



Responding to changing demographics means enabling more housing options

Universal Design

Universal design is the design of living and working spaces and products in a manner that benefits the broadest possible range of people — young or old, physically able or disabled, tall or short, and so on. Products such as faucets, door handles, counter tops, and electrical outlets are positioned so the greatest possible number of people can use them. Design features such as door and hall widths, entrances, and reinforced walls for grab bars are incorporated to accommodate all users. Buildings are sited so that walking and bicycling are convenient, as is access to public transportation.

- Genesee Transportation Council, October 2012