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Here's what new housing data says about Berkshire County's affordable housing crisis

By Nate Harrington, The Berkshire Eagle
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Several members of the Western Massachusetts Housing Coalition speak at a panel announcing and dissecting the housing data.

Nate Harrington -- The Berkshire Eagle

SPRINGFIELD — Newly released data on the housing crisis in Western Massachusetts reveals that Berkshire County faces significant hurdles to alleviating it.

In the county, 12 percent of housing units are seasonally vacant, 2.5 percent of units are short-term rentals listed on sites like Vrbo and Airbnb and the county is short nearly 2,000 housing units in total.

This data is part of a 132-page report released by Way Finders and the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute during an event in Springfield. The report dives deep into the housing challenges Western Massachusetts faces that are much different than those in the eastern part of the state.

From the report, the research team formed a housing data tool that has information for each municipality in Western Massachusetts. Some hope that this tool and the data report in general could bring developers and offer insight into potential solutions to help ease the housing shortage.

A need for data

The differences in housing needs compared to Eastern Massachusetts prompted the creation of a report strictly covering the westernmost counties in the state, said Keith Fairey, the president and CEO of Way Finders.

"Our differences and needs are based upon our geography, we have lots of rural communities, we have five gateway cities [that] are way disconnected from greater Boston and the economy there," Fairey said.

It's not only geography that changes the housing needs, but the economic drivers too.

"We have a lot of our economies that are driven by universities and hospitals, and we're seeing changes in that regard as well," he said.

Another thing Fairey pointed out was the age of the housing stock, which needs heavy reinvestment to bring up to code. In Berkshire County, for example, more than two-thirds of housing units were built before 1970.

State's new housing plan says the Berkshires' housing crisis won't necessarily be solved by building more houses

These differences means state-wide tactics often aren't as effective as localized efforts and initiatives. During a panel at the release event, Fairey mentioned the neighborhood stabilization program, which aims to restore dilapidated and blighted housing units.

Although it is a "great program," he said, "it's only got \$50 million. We get \$7 million."

"If you go to any one of our Gateway Cities, we could spend that \$50 million there," Fairey said.

Besides needing different resources than the rest of the state, another reason for specific Western Massachusetts housing data is it helps unify the area, said Nate Joyner, Pittsfield's community development and housing program manager.

Fairey also mentioned a combined effort, as "it helps us be in conversation with each other about both the challenges and what the solutions are. Solutions that might work in Pittsfield might also work in Holyoke, or they might work here in Springfield or in North Adams."

Making a local impact with the data

The data covering Western Massachusetts is broken down by municipality in a tool the research team created, something Joyner thinks can help people and developers make better decisions.

"Developers who might not know this information is accessible can use this to kind of help identify projects. either on a community basis or on a granular, partial-by-part basis," he said.

Can manufactured and mobile homes help solve the Berkshires' affordable housing crisis?

The availability of specific data for individual towns is crucial, Joyner said, as it can help people become more informed.

That's vital for helping residents better understand the housing needs of their community.

"When you say, we need to build more of this housing, but you don't say why or who it's going to benefit, it can get muddled," Joyner said. "Using this type of data and these tools, we can clearly articulate that, yes, we're building more subsidized housing, but that's going to benefit all renters, or all homeowners across the spectrum."

Big takeaways

Among the deluge of data, a few pieces of data are important for Berkshire County.

Housing experts provided advice to the state for possible funding and policy tools for seasonal communities

For Joyner, one of the most damning numbers was how many housing units Berkshire County needs.

There is still a "need to build more housing, despite the fact that we're losing population, because we're not replacing the housing that we're using, and we can't attract new residents without more housing," Joyner said.

Some other notable takeaways from Way Finders and the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute's report are:

- Berkshire County has a deficit of 1,910 housing units.
- The county needs both affordable housing options and higher-end housing options, as having a deficit of both leads to everyone competing for the middle range of housing, driving up prices.
- Berkshire County has the second-highest rate of successful evictions.
- Over two-thirds of housing units in the county were built before 1970.
- In the county, 12.1 percent of housing units are seasonally vacant. 3 percent are short-term rentals.
- More than half of the renters in Berkshire County spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent.
- The research team calculated that building the housing needed to meet the demand would create more than 4,000 jobs and add over \$400-million to the county's monetary production.

The Western Massachusetts Housing Coalition will host a Berkshire County-focused review of their data on Oct. 23 at Berkshire Community College.

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