

The Montague Reporter

New Report Reiterates: Not Enough Homes Here

By SARAH ROBERTSON

FRANKLIN COUNTY – To address the recent spike in housing costs and new demand in western Massachusetts, the region needs 16,766 new housing units by 2035, according to a recent report.

Building Homes, Building Futures, published in August by the UMass Amherst Donahue Institute and the Springfield-based nonprofit housing agency Way Finders, found that in the state’s four westernmost counties, over half of all renters and nearly a third of homeowners struggle to afford housing because there is not enough to go around.

“This shortage helps explain why housing prices have gone up so much – and why many families are having a hard time finding a place they can afford,” a summary of the report by Way Finders states. “Communities across western Massachusetts are building new housing – but

not fast enough to meet needs.... [W]ithout more public and private investment and planning, we won’t build at the scale or speed needed to close the gap.”

The median cost to buy a home see **HOMES** page A5

HOMES from page A1 in western Massachusetts has increased by about 37% since 2014, even adjusting for inflation, the institute found, using real estate data from the Warren Group. At the same time, the owner vacancy rate decreased significantly in Franklin, Hampshire, and Berkshire counties, to well below what is considered healthy for the market – most notably in Franklin County, where it fell from 1.1% to 0.3%.

Rental vacancies mirrored this trend, again most notably in Franklin County, where they fell from 4.4% to 1.3% between 2018 and 2023.

Rents have risen quickly – an average increase of 35% across the four counties from 2021 to 2024, according to the report, and about half the renters in western Massachusetts are now considered “cost-burdened,” meaning that they spend more than one-third of their income on housing.

Evictions are also on the increase. In Franklin County, 15 evictions were executed in 2021, and 74 were carried out in 2023. Region-wide, the eviction rate per 1,000 households increased from 3.77 in 2021 to 11.45 in 2023.

The authors attribute this to rising rents, as well as the end of the pandemic eviction filing moratorium in October 2020 and the subsequent weakening of other state rental protection programs. They note that data on court-ordered evictions likely underrepresent actual loss of housing by tenants who can’t afford rent.

“The eviction process can be time-consuming and costly for both tenants and landlords,” the report states, “and often landlords, especially smaller landlords, may use other tactics to avoid eviction... Thus, filings and formal evictions often understate the true number of forced moves.”

Shrinking Households

Research for the *Building Homes, Building Futures* report was conducted with the help of dozens of banks, municipalities, hospital systems, and housing agencies throughout western Massachusetts. The report is a follow-up to a collaborative study that began in 2020.

A major goal of the project is to calculate the region’s *housing supply gap*, which the report defines as the difference between the number of households and the number of housing units available. The total estimated gap in western Massachusetts today is 23,420 units. At the current rate of construction, the report projects this will shrink to about 17,000 units over the next decade as the population decreases and ages.

Two previous Donahue Institute reports issued in 2021 and 2022, which looked only at Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin counties, had projected a 2025 housing gap in Franklin County of 2,296. The new report corrects this figure to 3,370, but projects it will shrink over the next decade to 2,229.

Franklin County’s population could decrease by as much as 6% by 2035, the researchers believe, by which time one in three residents is expected to be over the age of 65. Seniors’ increasing tendency to “age in place” also affects the housing market by keeping homes for growing families off the market, according to the study.

“Many older households are *over-housed*, occupying housing units with more bedrooms than needed,” they write, citing data that indicates that statewide, “only 38 percent of homes with three or more bedrooms are occupied by families with children...”

“Population decline also affects local economies,” the Way Finders summary adds. “A shrinking tax base can limit funding for schools and public services. Meanwhile, slower growth in the working-age population can create labor shortages that strain local employers and hinder economic development.”

Pipelines and Cornerstones

Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority (FCRHRA) director Gina Govoni said that new housing development is especially challenging in rural areas that lack the resources and infrastructure to support it.

“Western Mass has a weaker economy than eastern Mass, which correlates to lower incomes, lower rents, and lower property values,” Govoni told the *Reporter* in an email. “The cost of building materials has increased everywhere. With stringent local zoning regulations, it is typically not as profitable to build here in western Mass. Projects just do not pencil out.”

The number of building permits issued per 1,000 western Massachusetts residents in recent years is less than half the statewide average, according to the UMass-Way Finders report.

And while Franklin County has some of the highest residential tax rates in the state, Govoni explained, few municipalities have sufficient planning staff needed to coordinate large-scale housing projects. The region’s low population density and limited water, sewer, and transportation services make it less attractive to developers who rely on grant programs and tax credits, she said.

“Other states that have a mix of

urban and rural communities tailor development criteria so that both types will find resources,” she added. “Massachusetts is not there yet.”

Govoni said she believes housing development of all types – affordable, market-rate, and built with accessibility in mind – will be needed to close the housing gap. The FCRHRA and other agencies have been pushing the state to recognize market-constrained communities in western Massachusetts as “Cornerstone Communities” and create a new pool of funding to address their unique needs.

However, she said, chaos and cuts to housing programs at the federal level, including to Section 8, housing vouchers, and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) could hinder future developments.

“The LIHTC program depends on investors, who have already expressed their reticence about Trump’s exuberance by lowering what they are willing to pay for the credits,” she wrote. “That means the dollars won’t stretch as far, particularly in weak markets... The wild swings with tariffs have also caused panic pricing in the construction materials.”

Despite the financial headwinds, a number of housing projects are in the pipeline in western Massachusetts. Citing the Western Mass Housing Coalition, Way Finders estimates that 1,150 affordable housing units are in development across the four counties.

Rural Development, Inc., the nonprofit developer affiliated with the FCRHRA, is applying for state funding to help build 26 units of mostly senior housing on Care Drive in Erving, and 32 units of mixed-income housing in downtown Greenfield. The FCRHRA is requesting the state consider the Greenfield project for “Transit-Oriented Development” funding and incentives.

“This raised questions from eastern Mass. staff who are primarily looking for MBTA access, but we have argued that downtown Greenfield is as transit-oriented as you get in Franklin County,” Govoni said.

If all goes according to plan, Govoni said the Erving and Greenfield developments could open to new residents as early as 2028.

“Our greatest hope is for the data and tools to inspire local action,” Way Finders CEO Keith Fairey wrote in a preface to the organization’s summary. “Because while the state can make funding available and drive policy changes, housing action also happens at the local level – at town meetings, planning board meetings, public hearings for zoning changes, and more.”



Into Which People Stumble By Accident

A Pot Left Unattended.....	A1	Trundle the Split Oak and Ash.....	B1
Requests for Disassembling.....	A2	Closing for Turkey Train.....	B2
Someone Living On This Earth.....	A3	Slumped Over Wheel.....	B3
Some Boards Are Rotting.....	A4	Will the Wrecking Ball Hit.....	B4
The True Number of Forced Moves.....	A5	Museum of Nuts and Bolts.....	B5
What It Means to Give Back.....	A6	Soup Dreams, Sound Pools, Seed Saving.....	B6
Swept Inexorably Downstream.....	A7	Mending Circle, Wall Ball, Domino Toppling.....	B7
Bulk Tank Chills and Agitates.....	A8	Found a Seam and Scampered.....	B8

