Augusta housing study shows changes needed to address lack of affordable housing

By Keith Edwards   February 15, 2021

AUGUSTA — A study of housing in Augusta shows action and policy changes are needed to help many city residents who struggle and pay a burdensome portion of their income to have a place to live.

Commissioned by the Augusta Housing Authority and written by an expert who used to oversee planning and urban development for the city of Portland, the study found about 40% of Augusta's households make less than the annual income — almost $33,000 — needed to pay the median rent of $721 a month, without it placing a large financial burden on them.

Study author Jeff Levine of Levine Planning Strategies of Portland, who is on the urban facilities and planning faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said 3,500 Augusta households earn less than the amount required to pay the median rent in Augusta without it becoming burdensome.

He said when someone must pay more than 30% of his or her income for housing, it is generally considered overly burdensome.

Levine's study also found:

• Insufficient housing inventory exists for small, studio and one-bedroom units and large, four bed-or-more, units to serve people who live alone or with large families.

• Much of the region's housing stock is in areas that require residents to have their own car, which further increases their costs.

• Augusta's housing stock is older than most in Maine and in need of investment to ensure units are safe, energy efficient and up to code.

• There is an imbalance of jobs and housing in Augusta, limiting the ability of some who work in the city to live in the city, and the ability of some who live in the city to work in the city.

"The reality is it is going to take more than a couple of affordable housing developers in the city to meet the huge needs we have," Amanda Olson, executive director of the quasi-municipal Augusta Housing Authority, told city councilors recently when the study was

presented to them. "What we have here is an opportunity to look at some innovative ways, through policy, to help tackle the need for housing in a different way.

"My hope is (city officials) will really take the time to think about those policy recommendations and my hope is, as a city, if we could move some of those forward, I think it would make a huge difference, as they have in other communities, to address housing needs in Augusta."

The study recommends city officials take some of several recommended actions to help create more affordable housing in the city, with options that Levine noted are not "all or nothing," including:

• Adopting land-use policies to encourage mixed-income housing in areas that are within walking distances of downtown Augusta and major employment centers, including loosening minimum lot size and parking requirements.

• Exploring "inclusionary" zoning that would require some units in larger developments be reserved for low- and moderate-income tenants.

• Establishing a housing trust fund that could be funded by development fees and be used to help provide financing for low-income housing.

• Surveying existing buildings, specifically underutilized Catholic church properties, in the city that could provide housing or emergency shelter.

Levine said inclusionary zoning and rent stabilization measures can be used to help ensure a mix of income levels will be able to find housing they can afford in the city. He said the city of Portland's recently-in-the-news rent control ordinance is perhaps a more extreme example of municipal rent stabilization efforts, but "softer" approaches can include restricting how much a landlord can increase rents each year.

He said requiring developers of housing projects grater than a certain size — say, 10 units — to provide some units affordable to people with low or moderate incomes could help increase the amount of available housing.

He also said developers who do not want to include affordable units in their developments could be allowed to pay a fee that could be used to create a housing trust to provide financing to help low-income residents find housing.

At-Large Councilor Heather Pouliot, who with her husband has developed rental properties in Augusta, said the city should also explore ways to give developers incentives, such as changes to help them finance projects, to develop housing without requiring them to pay a fee or include low-income units in their development.

"A lot of people are not able to do that," Pouliot said, "because of the cost of building, which is absolutely insane right now."

Councilors expressed interest in the study's recommendations, but did not commit to enacting any of them. They noted the city's new comprehensive plan is nearing completion, and suggested the housing study's recommendations be included with the comprehensive plan's recommendations to form a plan to improve housing in Augusta, and that city staff members review both of those documents and make recommendations for policy changes for councilors to consider.

A United Way task force, which has city officials among its membership, is also studying Augusta's housing challenges.

The study, based in large part on U.S. Census Bureau data, found one in six Augusta households does not have access to a vehicle, forcing those residents to rely on ride-sharing, the area's limited public transportation, bicycling or walking, and delivery services to access basic services and get to and from work.

Some residents, Levine said, are forced to get a vehicle because of where they live, increasing their living expenses due to the added cost of buying and maintaining a vehicle.

Levine said the city could address that by encouraging construction of housing in areas where services and workplaces exist within walking distance.

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