



Welcome Home Westchester Campaign Issue Brief

The Problem: Quality, affordable housing in Westchester is at a crisis point.

Westchester County has been an increasingly unaffordable region to buy or rent a home or an apartment for decades. It is now clear that it is not just a simple question of supply and demand or the desirability of the region and especially its school districts – it is several major problems intersecting at once to ferment a true regional crisis.

A drag on the economy for the region: The 2019 Westchester County Housing Needs Assessment bluntly stated how dire the situation has become. This report states that county wide there are 846 homeless families, 4,523 severely overburdened households, another 11,703 new housing units needed to keep up with demand and 199,328 people commuting into Westchester for work¹

At a time when average home prices have skyrocketed by 10%² and demand has similarly increased through a possibly temporary pandemic-related exodus from New York City, the affordability concern has only gotten worse in the two years since the Housing Needs Assessment was published.

The housing shortage most significantly affects extremely low-income renters, but also people with disabilities, seniors, large families and the homeless. In particular, families and individuals who face intellectual and developmental disabilities, who need specialized housing with services, have completely inadequate options³.

At the same time, we also know from both local experience and national models that zoning and regulatory burdens that constrain the amount of housing and development in a community both exacerbate the affordability concerns and also cause that community to miss out on economic development. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) states a \$1,000 increase in the price of a median-priced new home will further price 153,967 U.S. households out of the market⁴. Simultaneously, studies have confirmed the economic benefits of creating 1,500 new units of housing, let alone the 12,000+ the county will require to meet its present-day needs, would create 3,198 jobs, \$39.8 million in local and state revenue and provide \$271.2 million in incomes for just a 1-year impact. The continued annual impact of 1,500 units of new housing would be 921 permanent jobs and \$16.4 million for local and state governments⁵.

From any vantage point, our failure to address fundamental questions of affordable housing are serving as a drag on Westchester and its communities.

Making progress on racial justice. Safe, secure, and affordable housing for both owners and renters is one of the key ingredients for family and personal stability. It has been linked to financial stability, better school attendance, higher educational attainment, and

improved mental and physical health. Some of those linkages to health were made even more obvious during the pandemic.

But there is clearly not equal opportunity to affordable housing within Westchester County. Some of this is a relic of a red-lining past, but some of it continues to be a result of present-day choices to continue with processes the way they are. As rigorous political science studies have determined through cross-referencing racial demographics, land use restriction data, and fair housing lawsuits to show that even purportedly race-neutral local land use policies result in increased segregation.

At a time when institutions across the board are coming to terms with the sometimes invisible and sometimes implicit bias that shapes their outcomes', increased housing is part of the solution for bridging the persistent racial economic gaps in our county.

Increasing the difficulties in tackling climate resiliency. Westchester is already on the frontlines of adapting to a new reality being driven by the response to climate change. For the past two years, Westchester has been in a natural gas-constrained area. Although advances have been made in adapting clean and green energy technologies, the age of our housing stock and the over-emphasis on the less energy-efficient single-family home model, we face tremendous challenges in meeting the moment. Some communities remain hostile to common-sense solutions like the widespread adoption of solar panels. Others have a bias against transit-oriented multifamily developments, despite the benefits in terms of increased use of public transportation, revitalized downtown areas, and more energy-efficiency. Given that homes and buildings account for 40% of carbon emissions nationwide, tackling our climate crisis has to involve tackling our housing crisis.

With so many mutually reinforcing problems intersecting with the central issue of the difficulties in producing the housing we need; residents of Westchester have to look ourselves squarely in the mirror and realize that the “way things have always been done” will yield the same disappointing results that will only hold us back.

The solution: The “Welcome Home Westchester” campaign

This is truly an "all hands-on deck" moment for everyone with an interest in housing and development in our County. We believe that a multi-stakeholder campaign can shine a spotlight on the everyday barriers to providing the housing we need, and encourage communities to make different, better choices to secure a Westchester that is welcoming to all who wish to live and work here – to our shared prosperity!

Through education of local officials and land use board members, the sparking of public debate, local organizing around valuable projects, providing data and rejecting misinformed rhetoric, and bringing sunlight to the processes and the choices that leads us to inequality and segregation, we will work with our local communities on building a better future together.

Our campaign will focus on two key areas:

Reforming the way our volunteer land use boards work. Every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results that it gets. Each city, town, and village within the county has established land use boards to review site plan reviews, subdivisions, variances and special use permits. Wide and uneven variation between how boards function in different communities, both because the municipal code requirements are different and because of the personalities and interests of the board members, including the chair. This variation can warp the financial incentives for developments under consideration and how they stack the deck economically against the creation of affordable housing. Oftentimes unexamined assumptions and inefficiencies result in substantial costs throughout the process which are often invisible to the public – until now.

Through research, anecdote, and dialogue, our campaign will examine how policies and processes at these land use boards impact the housing that can get built in a community, and what better results are possible for communities willing to update and reform how their boards operate.

Reexamining zoning to produce stronger, more resilient, and more economically dynamic communities. The White House has announced a plan to devote \$5 billion in funding to localities to support the building of more affordable housing on a national scale. But that federal largesse will be the carrot to entice communities to come to terms with their zoning policies. Several communities in Westchester are already a model for tackling zoning policies in a thoughtful way that anticipates the concerns of the community, unlocks both short-term and long-term jobs that fuel economic growth, while avoiding putting into peril what residents love about their Westchester hometowns. These communities can be lifted up as models and best practices to show what's possible.

Through public education of the low-hanging fruit of revitalizing underutilized downtown areas and the “new Rust Belt” of unused office parks and commercial spaces, inspiration and education of grassroots activists and volunteers, and dialogue around the extensive policy recommendations made by the Westchester County Association’s Policy Playbook, the Westchester County Housing Needs Assessments and others, our campaign will put Westchester in the center of the discussion on affordable housing and zoning reform.

Citations

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