

Panel: Innovation needed to keep housing affordable

By **Andrew Rice, Staff Writer** - January 25, 2018

LEWISTON — Housing is the basis for solving many of the social issues this country faces, and perhaps it deserves more attention.

That was the consensus among a diverse panel of Maine housing professionals during a Great Falls Forum on Thursday on innovations in housing.

Both nonprofit and for-profit organizations were represented at the forum at the Lewiston Public Library, but all face similar hardships in securing the necessary funding to keep rental housing affordable and accessible for people with varying needs.

“I hope housing as a public issue becomes a centerpiece of our public discourse,” Craig Saddlemire, coordinator of the Raise-Op Housing Cooperative in Lewiston, said.

In Lewiston especially, the conversation on housing has been focused heavily on its aging housing stock, particularly the large amount of rental housing in the downtown and prevalence of lead paint.

But statewide, organizations are working to create housing models that can address affordability, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

Cooperative housing was among the innovations discussed Thursday in front of a few dozen in the audience. Raise-Op operates three buildings in downtown Lewiston that are collectively owned and maintained by the tenants. The residents share stock in the corporation, and at 15 units, the organization has plans to grow.

Saddlemire said cooperative housing, especially in an urban area with low levels of home ownership, gives tenants more control over their property and an incentive to make it better.

As far as he knows, they're the only group doing cooperative housing in an urban setting such as Lewiston.

When the panelists were asked by moderator Shanna Cox to give a quick response about the biggest obstacle facing their housing work, the common answer was "money."

It's often a celebratory affair when new affordable housing projects take shape in Lewiston, which was the case last year when a ribbon-cutting was held at Pierce Place, the site of devastating fires.

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, which operates 77 properties throughout the state serving low-income, homeless and disabled tenants, said he agreed that financing was the biggest issue, but he said, "we have the money," it's just not being directed in ways that support affordable housing.

Ryan pointed to the recent GOP tax bill, which he said does not help to "level the playing field" for organizations hoping to secure federal tax credits used in the development of affordable housing.

The low-income housing and historic tax credits are among the most popular credits funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Ryan said organizations need the credits to make the financing work, and make rents affordable to offset gentrification.

Amy Cullen, development officer for the Szanton Co., a for-profit developer of mixed income housing throughout Maine, said Szanton's properties provide a mix of moderate and low-income units. Among projects being planned now are the Hartley Block on Lisbon Street and the Troy Street project in Auburn. Szanton also developed The Lofts at Bates Mill.

Cullen said it's difficult to balance affordability with sustainability, meaning buildings and units that will withstand the test of time.

For the Lewiston-Auburn area, Ryan said the market-rate rent for an average two-bedroom unit is \$1,100. Two different classes of affordable or low-income units range from \$850 to \$765 for a two-bedroom.

Cox said low-income eligibility is often determined by whether a family has an income at or below 60 percent of the area's median income.

Saddlemire said in 2016, 60 percent of renters in Lewiston-Auburn could not afford an average market-rate two-bedroom apartment. He said there are some 2,000 people on waiting lists for mobile or project-based Section 8 vouchers — rent subsidies either provided to individual renters or owners of multifamily buildings.

Other housing issues discussed Thursday were the aging population, particularly in Maine, and addressing homelessness.

Another guest invited to speak on housing innovations was Klara Tammany, executive director of the Center for Wisdom's Women in Lewiston.

Tammany's organization, off Bates Street, operates a day shelter for women, but is also in the process of developing Sophia's House, a residential recovery center for women survivors of prostitution, trafficking, prison and addiction.

Plans include specific units for renters, which would cover the operating costs of the center. She said she expects the center, at a former convent on the corner of Blake and Walnut streets, to open in late 2019.

Tammany said the overall goal of the center is to provide "holistic healing" while also building a sense of community. She said she's been looking at a co-housing model used in Scandinavia, where various age groups share housing.

A self-described baby boomer, Tammany said, "I don't want to live with all old people," in response to an audience question about the aging population.

Following the panel discussion, Saddlemire said the hourlong conversation simply "scratched the surface" of the issue of housing, but that the talk featured a good "diversity of approaches" to keeping housing safe and affordable.

Asked to come up with a common theme during the forum, Saddlemire said, "There's either not enough funding, or funding has been cut or blocked."

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Craig Saddlemire, left, coordinator of the Raise-Op Housing Cooperative, addresses the Great Falls Forum in the Lewiston Public Library on Thursday afternoon. Listening, from left, are Amy Cullen, development officer for the Szanton Co., Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, and Klara Tammany, executive director of the Center for Wisdom's Women. (Andree Kehn/Sun Journal) [Buy a Print](#)

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