

Affordable housing need may intensify

Brian McNeill, The (Charlottesville, VA) Daily Progress
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Based on the Albemarle County school system's starting teacher salary of \$37,695, the 150 new hires expected over the next few months will be able, barely, to afford a \$150,000 home.

The problem: only 31 properties are available for \$150,000 or less in the Charlottesville region.

"As you can imagine, they're going to have a very difficult time finding a place to live," said Kimberly Suyes, director of human resources for the county. As housing prices have soared in the past five years, it has become increasingly difficult for Charlottesville-area public employees - teachers, police officers, firefighters and others - to afford a home within the community they serve. "Our folks that work for you cannot afford to live here," Suyes said. In Albemarle alone, 40 percent of all county and school employees live outside Albemarle and Charlottesville, with affordability being cited as the chief reason, Suyes said.

Of all new Albemarle police officers and firefighters hired since 2001, one of two does not live in Albemarle or Charlottesville.

The region's lack of affordable housing was highlighted Monday at the Central Virginia Workforce Housing Forum at the University of Virginia.

Issue brought up

Sponsored by the Charlottesville Area Association of Realtors, the forum brought together public officials, real estate developers, housing advocates and others to find ways to increase the stock of housing affordable to the average Charlottesville-area worker.

William Lucy, a UVa professor of urban and environmental planning, said the problem of employees unable to live near their workplace is likely to grow both locally and nationally.

"If you think the workforce housing problem is bad now, just wait. It's going to get worse," said Lucy, who also sits on the Charlottesville Planning Commission and Board of Architectural Review.

Prices rising too quickly

The problem, Lucy said, is that housing prices have skyrocketed while wages have not.

In 2000, it took approximately two-and-a-half years of income for a family in the Charlottesville Metropolitan Statistical Area to afford a median-priced home. In 2005, it took three-and-a-half years of income for a family to afford the median-priced home, Lucy said. The MSA is made up of Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene and Nelson.

For things to change, Lucy said, attitudes might need to shift about housing density, so long as it places affordable homes near places of employment. "More density is not a terrible thing or even a bad thing in some cases," he said.

Jamie Spence of Church Hill Homes told the crowd Monday that the private sector can help find a solution through market forces. His company is building Avon Park, a development in Albemarle of 44 attached homes, with several designated as affordable, costing \$175,000. "This is something that can work," Spence said. "You can [sell affordable housing] and still make a profit."