

Adirondack Daily Enterprise

Lake Placid workforce housing provides blueprint for the state

Too often, the debate over solving the affordable housing crisis that has gripped our state and nation overlooks rural communities, which are blessed with ample space and a lower cost of living — at least compared to urban centers.

But the truth is that nowhere is fully immune from the affordability challenges facing low-to-middle-income individuals and families. That is certainly true here in the North Country, which is facing a severe workforce housing shortage borne in part by a labor shortage, a steady rise in median rent and housing prices, and an increase in seasonal housing.

As a result, long-term residents are being pushed out of their communities, while young families and single professionals are looking elsewhere to put down roots. This threatens our region's economic viability and creates significant inequities that will be difficult to undo.

Perhaps nowhere is this problem as evident as in Lake Placid, which has been setting records when it comes to attracting visitors from around the world but struggles to meet the housing needs of the workers who support the hospitality industry — along with other year-round residents who make the community run.

There are bright spots, however. Local elected officials and nonprofits have recognized the need to work collaboratively and creatively to address the affordable housing crisis, and their work is starting to bear fruit.

One great example: MacKenzie Overlook, developed by Regan Development Corporation in the Town of North Elba on land donated by the Lussi Family. The need for workforce housing was a catalyst for bringing the 2023 FISU Winter World University Games to the region. MacKenzie Overlook offered 60 one- and two-bedroom units temporarily for game staff, contractors and officials. The units were then re-purposed as workforce housing and leased to long-term income qualified tenants who now call the property home.

This project — which was recently recognized for its innovation by the New York State Association for Affordable Housing (NYSFAFH) — provides a potential blueprint for solving the regional housing crisis both locally and

statewide, and is the result of collaboration between private developers, public officials and community leaders.

Tourism is big business for the North Country, generating millions of dollars each year in the Adirondack region alone. Whether they come to enjoy our natural beauty, experience our Olympic history, or attend and participate in cultural, sporting, or business events, these visitors help keep our communities running.

But without a strong and supported workforce, our region will not be able to sustain that kind of growth in the long term. For years, skyrocketing housing costs have contributed to a high cost of living that many local workers simply cannot afford. Too many residents, including nurses, firefighters, teachers and small business owners — the backbone of our local economy — are being priced out of the very community they serve.

The shortage of affordable housing has led to longer commutes, financial strain and a diminishing quality of life for many workers. Moreover, it threatens the future of our local economy, as businesses struggle to retain employees who cannot afford to live nearby. Offering one- and two-bedroom apartments for households earning at or below 80% of the area median income (AMI), MacKenzie Overlook ensures that local workers have access to housing they can afford.

MacKenzie Overlook is a success story, but it is just the beginning. Lake Placid, and upstate more broadly, need more affordable housing projects to meet the growing demand. A 2020 housing assessment determined that to reach a goal of 50% of the local workforce living in Lake Placid, the town would need about 1,500 workforce and affordable housing units.

It will not be easy. Public investment is crucial. But we also need to incentivize private developers to incorporate affordable units into new projects and ensure that housing developments remain affordable in the long term, so future generations will stay in the region for decades to come.

MacKenzie Overlook was named for the late Ronald Mackenzie — the former president of the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee, who is

credited with bringing the 1980 Olympic Games to the area. Given all that Ron did to put this community on the map, I believe he would be proud to know that efforts are underway to keep it growing and vibrant.

As a longtime advocate for, and resident of, the North Country, I also want the best for this community. By working to break down the barriers that make affordable housing development a challenge, we are showing the rest of the state what is possible and getting long-overdue recognition for those efforts.

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Betty Little served in the state Legislature for 25 years. She won a special election to the Assembly in 1995 and was elected to the Senate in 2002, where she served through 2020 and chaired the Standing Committee on Housing, Construction and Community Development. She currently serves as a member of the Olympic Regional Development Authority board and is slated to be inducted into the Lake Placid Hall of Fame on Nov. 13.

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