

Land-use plan is approved, forwarded to City Council

Land-use

NEWPORT

By Sean Flynn

Staff writer

The **planning** Board voted unanimously Monday night to approve the city's comprehensive land-use plan and forward it to the City Council for action at its Oct. 26 meeting.

"It's been long," said Kim Salerno, the board's chairwoman, after the vote.

More than a year ago, the city hired the Matrix Design Group, a national consulting firm with expertise in **planning** and urban design, to oversee development of the comprehensive plan. The plan is considered to be the basis of all city **planning** and approval procedures, and municipal zoning must conform with the plan by state law.

The project kickoff and first community meeting took place in October 2015 and was followed by a workshop in December and more community meetings earlier this year.

After Matrix completed a draft plan this summer based on comments made at community meetings and interviews with many people in the city, a subcommittee of three City Council members, three **planning** Board members, City Planner Christine A. O'Grady, City Manager Joseph J. Nicholson Jr. and Zoning Officer Guy Weston went through the plan at several meetings, making changes in details.

The **planning** Board opened a public hearing on the draft plan Oct. 3, which was continued to Monday. Several organizations such as Bike Newport and individuals such as John Hirschboeck suggested changes that were adopted.

Housing was the main topic at Wednesday's public hearing, as it was on Oct. 3, and the only one that generated any type of controversy.

The city has an inventory of 17 percent low- to moderate-income housing stock that is subsidized by the federal or state governments, which is well above the 10 percent affordable housing mandated by state law.

"Maintain an inventory of LMI housing stock sufficient to at least meet the state-mandated 10 percent threshold ..." was the wording of a goal in the plan until the board changed it Monday.

People in the community said the city should commit itself in the goal to maintaining and preserving the 17 percent affordable housing now in existence and not risk a reduction to 10 percent.

"The fact that the existing low-to-moderate income units are occupied, often with waiting lists, indicates that not maintaining the 17 percent would force low-income individuals and families currently living in those units into the private housing market, which in Newport would not be affordable and could result in increased homelessness," said a written comment submitted by Newport County Citizens to End Homelessness.

Wick Rudd, a **planning** Board member, said it was never the intention of the board to reduce affordable housing in the city.

"We want to maintain at least 10 percent, not go from 17 percent to 10 percent," he said.

Rhonda Mitchell, executive director

LAND-USE A2

Continued from [A1](#)

of the Housing Authority of Newport, told the board the goal of the plan should be “to preserve and protect existing affordable housing resources.”

She is also a board member of HousingWorks RI at Roger Williams University, considered to be an authoritative source of housing information in the state. She cited data from the 2016 Housing Fact Book of the organization showing the need for affordable housing in this city.

In Newport, the average two-bedroom apartment costs \$1,468 a month. If a family were to spend no more than 30 percent of its income on housing costs, it must have an income of \$58,720 a year or more.

The median renter household income for the state is \$30,718, according to HousingWorks RI. In the state as a whole, 52 percent of renters are cost burdened, meaning they pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing. In Newport, 43 percent of renters are cost-burdened, Mitchell said.

Frank Landry, chairman of the Housing Authority board of directors, said when he was appointed to the board in 1997, 27 percent of the housing stock in the city was considered affordable, but it has been reduced over the years.

“Housing for young families is needed,” he said. “Affordable housing is housing for my two daughters who have college degrees. We have to travel carefully. Going from 17 percent to 10 percent, I don't see how you can achieve that.”

In the end, the board decided to eliminate any reference to 17 percent or 10 percent in the goal.

The new wording of the goal is: “Maintain inventory of LMI (low- to moderate income) housing stock sufficient to meet the state mandated threshold, particularly as it relates to servicing elderly and citizens with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. The city will preserve and enhance existing affordable housing stock.”

Housing is just one chapter of the 15 chapters of the draft comprehensive plan. Some of the other chapters are titled “Community Involvement,” “Land Use,” “Economic Development,” “Community Services and Facilities,” “Transportation and Circulation,” “Open Space” and Recreation,” “Natural Resources,” “Historical and Cultural Resources,” “Energy, Water, and Natural Hazards” and “Climate Change.”

The full plan can be read at newportchartingourcourse.com Once the City Council reviews the plan, it will vote on it at an upcoming meeting and send it to Statewide Planning, which will make comments on the plan.

The state will have a 30-day public comment period on the plan and respond to Newport within 120 days, City Planner O'Grady said. The city would then have 60 more days to respond to the state's comments, she said.

That timeline and those deadlines could be adjusted by mutual agreement, she said.

All communities in the state are required submit a comprehensive land-use plan to the Statewide **planning** Program every 10 years and update it every five years, but most are not in compliance.

Newport last had a comprehensive plan approved by the state on Aug. 6, 2004, and it expired on Aug. 5, 2009, according to a chart found on Statewide **planning's** website. City officials worked on drafting a comprehensive plan in the 2012-2014 period, but it was never acted on.

Newport and other communities are working to submit new or updated comprehensive plans to Statewide **planning** by July 1, 2017, as required by a law passed in 2011. The deadline was originally June 1 this year, but it was extended.

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