

What are we going to do about workforce housing? If nothing is done what is the economic impact for the future? What is the Town of Highlands going to do to address this issue? What is Macon County going to do? What is the private sector going to do?

These questions create a complex matrix of issues and problems to be addressed. What I do know is that the town can not go it alone in addressing workforce needs. As I have said before, let Highlands pay for it is an outdated saying, we do not have the huge tax resources as some may think to solve this problem.

I was reading the local newspapers this past week and came across a real estate ad that underscored the challenges to expanding the supply of workforce housing. I like to look at the pictures of homes on the market in the many real estate ads in the newspapers. A small blue bungalow on .31 acres located near town caught my attention. I thought to myself this house would be a great place for a working couple to buy here on the plateau. Not a huge home, but a modest house for someone to live and work in Highlands. My immediate impression was it was about \$200,000 house, and even at that price a big mortgage payment for working class folks.

But I was off base, the asking price was \$689,000, a price most people can not qualify for that mortgage much less afford. If that were not enough, the picture of a large house posted below the bungalow was listed at 6.2 million dollars. I guessed that anyone buying that house had others scattered across the country or throughout the world, and that the owners would occupy this 6.2-million-dollar home only a few weeks or months out of the year. But when occupying that lugubrious, the owners will want all the local services provided by a workforce, great restaurants, access to healthcare and other amenities.

Other factors here on the Highlands Plateau create challenges for affordable housing. Construction costs far exceed those in other areas with some homes being built for \$1,000 a square foot. Also, large areas of flat land are at best in short supply, especially in the town. Topological distressed lots pose challenges in costs, meeting environmental concerns and simply addressing access to water and sewer or even septic systems.

Previous attempts to gain state and federal government support for workforce housing have not been successful. The state has many criteria for meeting housing grant requirements. With intense competition, especially from more urban areas in the state, it is especially hard for area initiatives to secure funding.

My concern is that without new supplies of workforce housing, the region will see limited economic prosperity in the future. As new hotels, restaurants, and retailers locate on the plateau, where will the workers come from and live? Also, the housing challenge is not only

centered on hourly workers. Professionals like doctors, teachers, and government workers also face the challenge of finding a place to live.

Last year a comprehensive housing study was done for all of Macon County. I hope a coalition of organizations across the county will address the housing needs of community. It is a daunting problem that will take millions of dollars to address. By that I do not mean 10 or 15 million, we are talking about 100 or 150 million dollars and a lot of hard work and creativity. But the effort needs to be made by the entire community. I am open to innovative ideas, just let me know.