

To: Housing Committee
From: BarnstableWatch (spokesperson, Heather Hunt)
Date: May 29, 2024
RE: May 2024 Draft Housing Production Plan

It is excellent that a Housing Production Plan is in the light of day. The silence since January 2023 has been curious and informs process requests. Those are followed by comments on substance.

Process

- 1) **Please present the substantive provisions of the May 2024 Housing Production plan to the public, then seek comment.** It's been since January 2023 that anyone has heard about the Housing Pan at a sparsely attended Housing Committee meeting. Even then, the 2023 version was never posted. The Town's ads about this week's meetings didn't even mention this meeting or agenda item. That people asked for a substantive presentation on the Local Comprehensive Plan Housing and Land Use says people want to hear substance.
- 2) **Please provide maps showing areas of proposed land use change, then seek comment.** Also, when recommending changing "dimensional requirements", please show 3-D presentations to enable public understanding.
- 3) **Please redline and post the January 2023 version against the March 2024 version - differences are illuminating.** For example,
 - a. The affordable housing units as a percent of housing units seems to have slipped backwards since 2023; that happens with unit adds without affordability components.
 - b. The 2024 Draft was edited to make extremely vague the recommendations to change zoning to make village centers - even those that are already dense - more dense and to change zoning to allow for multi-family by right ½ mile around village centers. The public deserves clarity and straight-talk.
- 4) **Please note recommendations' origins for transparency, understanding.** Examples:
 - a. The public said in a survey the No. 1 kind of housing they want more of is single-family homes. The Town's consultant shared her personal, very different view, including fondness for California experiments; her preferences show in the recommendations.
 - b. The plan substantially overlaps with the Cape Cod Commission (CCC) plans, which have little to no actual (i.e., people not on payrolls) public input. Indeed, it looks like the CCC issued its Housing Strategy without meeting or talking about public input.
 - c. The proposal to pay property owners not to short-term rent was attributed to one person after the Focus Groups. In years of Airbnb regulation discussion, that was never proposed. Please assure the public that the proponent was not a property owner who would benefit financially from his or her proposal.

Substance

- 1) **Use of Existing Housing Stock By Locals As Homes.** Before moving to housing production, the Town should act to prioritize locals in the use of *existing* housing stock. This plan proposes to effectively pay property owners not to Airbnb their properties, rather than to discuss and adopt any one of the myriad ways thriving tourist communities across the country and world have protected existing housing stock for use as homes by locals. The media reports that the community that implemented the proposal considers its program a flop by the way.

The plan notes that other Airbnb regulations would be appropriate to the extent Airbnb affects *affordable* housing. That completely overlooks the independent, well-studied and well-documented “Airbnb Effect” on housing stock and housing pricing for all. Studies by the Wharton School, Economic Policy Institute, Harvard Business Review, MIT and UCLA agree that the sheer number of Airbnb listings in a zip code is associated with increases in property prices and rental rates, and that housing supply shrinks as properties shift from serving local residents to serving tourists

Further, the Plan’s limiting factor on considering Airbnb regulations “to the extent they impact year-round affordable housing” pretends the Airbnb Effect doesn’t exist. Families here compete on price with people who want to Airbnb homes all the time, and Airbnb influences the price of rentals.

- 2) **Unsupported Assumptions About Extra Bedrooms to Support Someone’s Objectives.** The plan opines that people who have more bedrooms than people living in a house means homeowners do not want their extra bedroom(s) to use as an office or a guest bedroom (here in this tourist community...). It then leaps to use that unsupported speculation about what homeowners want as a basis for the need for more studios and one-bedrooms. This speculation about what homeowners want should be struck. This assumption about what others want was in the LCP Existing Conditions Draft so some author really wants to make this leap to support an end. BarnstableWatch’s informal survey found homeowners with extra bedrooms want and use them as offices, guest rooms, reading and hobby rooms.
- 3) **Pay for Sewers, But Not to Fund Density.** The Plan calls to closely coordinate implementation of the town’s comprehensive wastewater management plan and housing planning.” Great, and citizen-funded sewers should be relatively flow neutral, not for the Cape Cod Commission’s density preferences.
- 4) **Affordability matters.** The Town declined to add an affordability element to the ADU ordinance or to the form-based code that enables dense housing. If and when the Town green-lights dense zoning, it should include affordability requirements.
- 5) **Straight talk.** The 2024 Plan scrubs out prior references to changing zoning in specific village centers and ½ mile around them to allow multi-family by right. The words mean the same thing but are now vague. Blurring words just pushes public reaction down the road. Everyone has seen filled a Council chamber or high school gym on other matters; straight talk up front can prevent that.
- 6) **Proactive Housing Development.** The plan proposed to explore opportunities to add housing on town properties. The Town has seemed historically to be primarily reactive to developers’ wishes; this proposal to be proactive is a welcome directional shift provided it is executed in a way that solicits and respects community preferences.
- 7) **Who does what?** The plan proposes to clarify roles of the housing trust, boards and committees, and town staff. Excellent, particularly when some committees go dark and other committees not charged with housing take it up. Please add the role of consultants.
- 8) **The Trust Fund.** The plan proposes to support the Barnstable Affordable Housing Trust by continuing to provide funding through the community preservation act. It seems to do what the Town Council used to do through a majority voting block of town employees. That may be for good reason; what is that?

BarnstableWatch appreciates your consideration of the issues raised above and looks forward to hearing the dialogue about how the Housing Committee will address this and other public feedback.