

Coalition working on local housing crisis

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A Brevard/Transylvania Housing Coalition has been formed to address the housing crisis in Transylvania County. Made up of various stakeholders, the coalition held its first meeting last November with 12 people in attendance and has met every month since in an effort to break down the barriers of access for low- and moderate-income households, according to a news release

Shelly Webb, executive director of the Sharing House and coalition member, said the coalition has already made progress but much more work is needed.

“Our shelter system is really in crisis mode. And by that I mean the need is far, far greater than our supply,” she said. “We don’t expect that this coalition to solve all the housing issues throughout the county, but we hope that it does accelerate some solution making.”

The idea came to Webb when the Sharing House Board of Directors tasked her with partnering with local nonprofits and after hearing first-hand stories from community members struggling with housing.

Webb’s first task was to contact Angie Hunter, executive director of Transylvania Habitat for Humanity, and the Rev. Pamela Holder of Bethel “A” Baptist Church. Together with the Pisgah Health Foundation, they consulted with David Heady, a certified facilitator of Neighborhood Revitalization Coalition Building with Habitat for Humanity, who helped create a framework for the coalition.

Webb said they see their main role as the conveners of the group and will help support the coalition with what goals they try to go after, whether it be specific building or home repair projects, identifying land acquisition opportunities, fundraising or policy work.

Hunter said she jumped at the opportunity to help form the coalition. She said there was a sense of relief at the first meeting that substantive progress can occur.

The coalition's initial focus has been on the Rosenwald Community because stories of displacement and critical housing needs were discovered. It was important for the coalition to move beyond assumptions and hear directly from Rosenwald residents, the release said. A listening session, facilitated by Rev. Holder, was held on Feb. 21 with attendance of 35 concerned community members.

Diane Livingston, a coalition member, said: "We strongly believe residents should be closely involved in deciding how Rosenwald grows and we wanted to give them a platform to be heard."

During the Rosenwald listening session, attendees heard true stories of local people who had terrible housing situations like the young family whose rental home's floor is falling through, the windows do not fully close, there is no heat and air and the home is sliding down a hill; and the family of six including one special needs child living in a cramped two-bedroom home; and the young couple who is contemplating leaving Brevard because their rent continuously rises and they can not afford to purchase a home even though they both have good jobs they love.

"There is no typical person dealing with shelter insecurity. They are all different and they are all real problems," Livingston said. "One of the key objectives in addressing the housing issue is rejecting the stereotypes and recognizing the real people behind the stories."

One of the issues uncovered by the Housing Coalition is that because there is a shortage of housing, people are living in places that are not really suitable for habitation and when there is an issue or a state of disrepair or a condition that is not healthy people are reluctant to bring that to the surface and ask for something better because they are afraid they will lose the housing they have and then be homeless.

“We have some unique housing challenges regarding the lack of affordable housing,” Hunter said. “Land scarcity, lack of infrastructure, rising rental costs, and regional wage growth has not kept pace with the rise in housing prices all contribute to the perfect storm. Developers are not building homes for low-income families and individuals because they make considerably less profit. As long as demand for housing continues to outstrip the available supply, housing prices will continue to rise and our community won’t be able to provide a high quality of life for all,” said Hunter.

The coalition believes creativity, collaboration and inclusivity are what the community needs to create housing solutions. To prosper, all people and all places need housing for all income levels.

“We’re committed to collaborating with community partners to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in housing,” said Holder. “Communities that have enough housing at all price points provide greater economic stability, better health and greater access to quality education for all residents.”

The Coalition invites concerned community members to get involved. Meetings are held the third Thursday of every month at 10 a.m. at the Transylvania Habitat ReStore Board Room.

“We can all be part of the solution. We are energized and grateful for the many voices championing this cause and for those taking actions, big and small, to help make housing more affordable for all,” said Webb.

To learn how you can get involved, call (828) 884-3902.