

BY LEW MORRISSEY and MICHELLE RUMREICH

You've probably heard it a million times: We desperately need affordable housing in Charlotte County. Study after study has chronicled that. Lip service is paid time and again to the need to do something about it.

Many counties in Florida are tackling the problem, but few have been successful by any measure. Why? At a recent conference entitled "Southwest Florida Community Land Trust Summit," presented by Brightway Community Trust, Florida Housing Coalition and Lee County Housing Development Corporation, creating more affordable housing in Southwest Florida was at the forefront.

The conference was well-attended by city and county representatives from five Southwest Florida counties as well as nonprofits and for-profit representatives. All in attendance shared an interest in affordable housing creation. Members of the conference were encouraged to ask questions and share best practices in their areas. They also were able to discuss the roadblocks that stifle affordable housing development. At the top of discussion was the reality that it is not always "affordable" to build affordable housing. With utility fees, impact fees, and various regulations, many times it just doesn't pencil out financially to build affordable housing. Because of this, a number of cities and counties are creating incentives through density bonuses, waivers for parking and other regulations as well as impact fee grants.

In Manatee County, a program called "Livable Manatee" was created. The county allocated 2 million dollars to a fund that pays 100% of the impact fees for affordable housing development. Many non-profit groups have partnered with for-profit developers to allocate funds from federal grants available to address the affordable housing issue. In densely populated areas, land trusts are being established as a remedy as well.

So why is it difficult to get anything off the ground in Charlotte County? Some would say it is primarily because of the disconnect between local government, non-profit organizations and for-profit developers. There are lots of other excuses as well. We have such a large retiree presence. So many snowbirds. A seasonal economy so the restaurant servers are laid off months out of the year. We don't pay our police, EMTs and teachers

nearly enough to be able to afford decent housing on their salaries alone, so two-income households are necessary. And so on. But there are resources available to tackle this issue if local government, non-profit organizations and for-profit developers joined forces through partnerships. Each of these groups bring value to the table and the time is ripe for development.

One group of citizens has come together to tackle the problem one affordable house or rental at a time. We call ourselves the Peace River Community Housing Partners (PRCHP). We're an offshoot of the Gulf Coast Partnership. Our mission: "To advocate for the development of safe, functional, affordable, sustainable housing that meets the needs of the people in our community."

Our Board of Directors is growing not just in numbers but in influence. Our chair is Angela Hogan, director of the Gulf Coast Partnership. Also on the board are Alecia Cunningham, Charlotte County Homeless Coalition; Carrie Hussey, Charlotte County Human Services; realtor Danny Nix Jr.; David Hilston, City of Punta Gorda planner; retired realtor Fig Newton; Punta Gorda City Councilman Jaha Cummings; Kurt Pentelecuc, Punta Gorda Housing Authority; Ryan Sharp, architectural designer, and the writers of this article (Morrissey is on the Board of TEAM Punta Gorda and Michelle Rumreich is a developer and former TEAM Board member). And we are adding others representing business and government interests.

We don't have a project we can point to yet. But we are determined to "build" a successful model. We have initiated the conversation in the community and are bringing the necessary representatives together. We see the resources that are going to be allocated toward affordable housing, in the form of grants and incentives and we do not want Charlotte County to be left behind because of our lack of preparation and vision toward the future.

A great resource available to our community that looks toward the future by documenting our present situation is the "20/20 Housing Report: Focusing on Charlotte County's Housing Crisis". This comprehensive report, released in 2018, was produced by a diverse group of health and human services providers, housing authority representatives, realtors, homeless advocates, nonprofits, and community and economic development leaders.

The report notes that “affordable housing is critical to preserving Charlotte County’s economic competitiveness by offering housing for workers at all income levels...” It projects that more than 5,000 affordable housing units will be needed in the county by 2025.

What is meant by “affordable”? Our best guide is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition: living units that can realistically fit within 30% of the income range of the household. Yet in this county, the report says, so many renters are severely cost-burdened, paying more than 50% of income on housing costs – rent, electric or gas, and water.

Unless the average annual wage here rises dramatically so that more and more people who staff our restaurants, mow our grass, clerk our retail stores, and provide health care support can afford the rent/mortgage and utilities, we must provide more affordable housing.

Yes, we are a retirement community – second oldest population in the nation. Consequently, unless we always want to eat in, mow our own yards, buy all our clothes on Amazon and self-medicate, we must provide safe and affordable housing for the folks and their children who provide those services.

That’s the goal of the PRCHP. But we need help. We are but one spoke in the wheel. We need to work with other public and private entities with the same goal. We need coordination and collaboration. The abovementioned housing report calls on local governments, for instance, to create policies for vacant land disposition and transfer for affordable home ownership and rental housing developments. The county could insist that a portion of new rental developments fall into the affordable range.

We need corporate assistance. The proposed Sunseekers resort, for instance, plans on hundreds of workers. Where are they going to live?

We need to ban together to solve this crisis. The PRCHP is looking for sustainable partnerships, however small. Please contact Ms. Hogan at (941) 626-0220 or any member of the Board if you would like to join us.