

BIA Business Perspective: How workforce housing affects the economy

By THOMAS TAYLOR CEO, Foxx Life Sciences

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What if I told you that one of the most beloved Christmas movies of all time was about the community benefits of workforce housing? Before you say, “bah humbug,” hear me out.

Frank Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life” is a seasonal classic. It’s ranked No. 11 on the American Film Institute’s 100 best American movies. While there are so many recognizable things about the story – Zuzu’s petals, Clarence the angel, the gym floor opening into the swimming pool, and George’s triumphant Christmas Eve run through town – there’s a theme that’s often overlooked about sleepy Bedford Falls.

George Bailey helps the people of his town by creating housing in Bailey Park. But when our hero wishes he “was never born,” Clarence shows him what his absence would have meant to Bedford Falls. In this alternate reality, the bucolic town has transformed into seedy Pottersville. The homes for residents in Bailey Park were never built. Even the affable Mr. Martini, who now will never find an affordable place to live, has left the area for somewhere else to make his mark. When George sees the richness of his life, he rushes back to find a thriving Bedford Falls.

This may not be what you see when you watch “It’s a Wonderful Life,” but a housing crunch is a serious threat to the economic vitality of any community. That’s why New Hampshire employers have been raising the alarm about lack of available housing – both rental and owned – for their employees.

With unemployment at less than 3 percent, and even lower in some places, New Hampshire businesses are struggling to retain experienced workers and find qualified candidates to fill open positions. Interwoven with the talent recruitment issue is that the supply of housing in the state is not keeping up with demand. Business owners can offer competitive salaries, generous benefits and a welcoming workplace, but how are they supposed to convince prospective employees to work for them if they can’t find suitable housing within a reasonable commuting distance?

The outlook is troubling. Data from the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority shows new homes in the Granite State only represent 7 percent of sales, when it had been 15 percent before the Great Recession. The rental vacancy rate is a mere 1.96 percent, and the median gross rental cost has jumped 20 percent in the past five years. A report from Applied Economic Research Inc. finds an additional 3,000 rental units are needed to normalize vacancy rates, and an additional 20,000 homes and apartments are needed to meet the demand of New Hampshire’s labor market. Our limited housing supply is a challenge for recruitment and retention of employees, which will potentially impact economic growth and stability.

The good news is there are many developers willing to build new units priced for workers and alleviate some of the pressure. The bad news is many communities are putting up unnecessary roadblocks to construction of new houses and apartments. The opposition is often predicated on myths about overcrowding school systems, attracting undesirable people or urban sprawl. Statistics don’t support these myths, according to housing experts who advise the Business and Industry Association.

Advocating for housing for working people has been a top priority for BIA going back to 2008 when the group led the charge supporting New Hampshire’s first workforce housing law. This January, BIA will be working to pass legislation establishing a state-level administrative housing appeals board (similar in concept to the state land and tax appeals board) to give developers the ability to appeal local zoning decisions that unfairly restrict housing development without having to endure the time and expense of suing in Superior Court.

Businesses want great employees, and employees want affordable homes near where they work. When faced with both a workforce and housing shortage, the growth of New Hampshire businesses is severely tested. Collaboration among businesses, policy-makers, and residents is critical to maintaining New Hampshire’s economic vitality into the future.

In the end, it's not about whether heroes are ever born. It's about whether affordable housing for working people is ever built. There is a whole new generation of residents we're trying to keep in New Hampshire. Angels may not get their wings when workers find a suitable place to live, but a community grows stronger.

Thomas Taylor is president and CEO of Foxx Life Sciences in Salem. The BIA, New Hampshire's statewide chamber of commerce, produces this column monthly exclusively for the Sunday News.

Overruling local control

Dec 29, 2018

BIA would overrule local control

On 12-15-2018 BIA-NH wrote of their intention to support legislation to establish an ad-hoc appeals board to allow developers an easier path when appealing local zoning decisions.

Quote: "This January, BIA will be working to pass legislation establishing a state-level administrative housing appeals board (similar in concept to the state land and tax appeals board) to give developers the ability to appeal local zoning decisions that unfairly restrict housing development without having to endure the time and expense of suing in Superior Court."

This law would essentially seek to override local control.

The article states public opposition to high-density construction "is often predicated on myths about overcrowding school systems, attracting undesirable people or urban sprawl. Statistics don't support these myths, according to housing experts who advise the Business and Industry Association."

We suspect these "experts" are developers themselves.

Overcrowded schools and "urban sprawl" are not "myths". Statistics in Bedford show 40 more kindergarten students than can be accommodated, with BHS 300 over capacity. "Statistics" claiming there is no "urban sprawl" do now show ugly high-density construction debasing the character of a town that is decidedly rural, consisting of 97% of single family homes in residential, agricultural, and historic districts.

Developers seek profits with 'infill' in inappropriate areas.

The sad part? Three Republicans teamed with one Democrat to propose the LSR, one of whom is related to a NH HUD lawyer. Please watch to oppose this LSR as a full-fledged HB or SB Bill.

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Nix the 'appeals board': It's not the way to address housing Union Leader EDITORIAL Dec 29, 2018

In an adjoining column, we publish Bedford resident Jane Aitken's letter of concern regarding a proposed state "housing appeals board."

The proposal is aimed at addressing a workforce housing shortage. That is a noble effort, but the red flag Aitken is waving about this approach to the problem ought to be taken seriously.

The BIA (Business and Industry Association) noted in a recent column for the Sunday News that it will be working to pass legislation establishing a state-level administrative housing appeals board (similar in concept to the state land and tax appeals board).”

This board would “give developers the ability to appeal local zoning decisions that unfairly restrict housing development without having to endure the time and expense of suing in superior court.”

Hold the phone. How is it a good idea for an unelected state board to be in a position to overrule local zoning decisions made by the people in the community most affected by those decisions? This isn’t a statewide gas line or highway project, these are housing units and developments that can very much affect, and change, neighborhoods, schools, and local taxes.

As Ms. Aitken asserts, her town of Bedford is facing a lot of these challenges, and she thinks it’s Bedford’s business to decide them. The proper route of appeal, as difficult as that may be for a developer, is to take his case to the courts if he feels he has been wronged.

The BIA notes that “collaboration among businesses, policy-makers, and residents is critical to maintaining New Hampshire’s economic vitality into the future.”

We very much agree. But in this case it is the residents of a town or city who ought to be the policymakers.

Land use boards beware of Senate Bill 306

Posted May 8, 2019

May 3 -- To the Editor:

A little publicized, but powerful Senate Bill has passed the Senate and is tabled for incorporation into the Senate budget; the Senate budget will be completed by the end of May.

Had it not been a heads up from our State Senator, Tom Sherman, this most likely would have simply been ratified unnoticed.

I know Senator Sherman did vote against the bill but, nevertheless, it passed.

SB-306 will fundamentally change how municipalities are permitted to rule on applications that come before Land Use Boards. The bill will establish a “Housing Appeals Board” consisting of three (3) unelected members but will be full time employees and “shall have the power and authority to hear and affirm, reverse or modify in whole or in part, appeals of final decisions of municipal boards, and committees regarding questions of housing and housing development. This includes but is not limited to: Planning Board decisions, zoning board decisions, decisions of historic and conservation commissions”. This verbiage comes directly from SB-306, I am not making this up.

My assumption is that this means if an application is denied based on legitimate local zoning regulations but the developer for some reason doesn’t like it he can go to the Land Use Board and have the decision heard and possibly overturned. It’s as simple as that.

The purpose of the bill is to dissuade the aggrieved party the expense of moving directly to court upon denial of the application. If the application is presented in a way that limits the amount of relief necessary for its approval, the better are the odds of it getting the approvals needed. The various planning boards around the state have a clear mandate to work with all applicants and come to an equitable solution towards their projects. In Rye, where I was the Chair of the Planning Board for eight or so years, we worked hard to avoid the extra expense and labor of going to court. The simple fact is we are extremely knowledgeable of our ordinances, land use regulations and the state statutes that guide us. Not once during my tenure as chair did we end up in court.

My recollection is that we denied two applications outright, after months of negotiations. We were at loggerheads over the scope and size of the projects as they related to our Master Plan and other land use regulations. Both went to arbitration and were settled without a court battle. IF SB-306 had been in effect the builders could have appealed to these unelected, out of town individuals in an attempt to overturn the decision. This leaves municipalities no choice but to go to court ourselves. Every member of our State Legislature needs to be held accountable to answer to this overreach into home rule. And not to be overlooked, there is a \$400,000 price tag attached to this SB-306 annually. Funds we desperately need for more worthy causes.

Bill Epperson
Rye

Union Leader and Manchester Ink Link
May 9, 2019

Most of us moved to NH for peace, quiet, and semi-rural living.

Sadly there have been many bills proposed at the state level that would seek to allow special interests to interfere with a town's ability to operate according to the will of its residents.

One such bill is SB 43. Both houses of the NH legislature passed SB 43, which is a bill to "study barriers to increased density of land development in New Hampshire".

After publishing one of our letters to the editor about this subject, the Union Leader came out against creating a state level board allowing developers to appeal, and thus override, local zoning decisions. Such a board had been proposed by two bills, HB 104 and SB 306, both now "laid on table". We are pleased that the Union Leader stood with us on local control. But now, SB 43 would hand the fate of our towns over to a commission of decidedly biased, pro-urbanist special interests who would be scheming to examine even more ways to circumvent local control.

Call or write Governor Sununu and tell him that we find the makeup of the potential study commission quite outrageous and unrepresentative of the towns. It would include two random members each the Senate and House, the Director of the Office of Strategic Initiatives, the Commissioner of the NHDES, the Commissioner of the Department of Business and Economic Affairs, the Executive Director of the NH Housing and Finance Authority, the Executive Director of the NH Legal Assistance, the Executive Director of Housing Action NH, a Representative of the NH Municipal Association, a Representative of NH Home Builders Association, a Representative of the NH Association of Regional Planning Commissions, a Representative of the NH Business and Industry Association, a Representative of the Housing Subcommittee of Governor's Millennial Commission, a Representative of the Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Nature Conservancy, and member of the NH Association of Conservation Commissions, a Representative of the NH Association of Realtors, and a Member of the American Council of Engineering Companies of NH.

That is the list of unelected, unaccountable special interests that would be tasked with dreaming up more ways to interfere with local control.

The deck would be stacked against the residents of any town. In addition "two public members appointed by the Governor" would also be on this committee. How can we be sure they would represent the residents? Clearly there would be no balance of representation. When do the townspeople have a say?

Demand Governor Sununu VETO SB 43.

Monadnock Residents Beware!
Monadnock Ledger-Transcript Submission
May 9, 2019

The Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) says it will host five focus group meetings over the next month-plus to develop a "better understanding of the needs of all age groups in the Monadnock region".

The Southwest Regional Planning Commission is not telling you the full truth about where this program originated. It is a push by the UN, the World Health Association and in conjunction with the AARP (all unelected and unaccountable private groups) to "urbanize" your rural town under the guise of making it more "livable".

The bottom line is, it just means they want to build more "stack'n'pack" housing and begin "citifying" your rural areas. Many of those areas will become off limits to single-family homes.

Make no mistake... this is part of a bigger agenda known as Agenda21, revised title Agenda2030.

Question the legality of calling in these private unelected and unaccountable groups who will conduct these input sessions that very few people will attend. Make no mistake, but the conclusions gathered from the "data" will be and are already pre-determined. The UN/WHO are using the AARP, private groups like Tufts, and your RPCs to impose their control on every aspect of your lives — "housing, transportation, employment, social engagement, and civic participation" per their words. These statements simply show they want to control where you live, work, and how you travel and communicate and participate. They even want to control your social life. Very few people will take or even see their "surveys" which will be a carbon copy of what was presented in other towns.

"SWRPC would like to get another grant so they can work with some communities individually on specific strategies to implement changes". You bet they want to "help". But we doubt anyone in those towns asked for help.

"We don't want to see an unhealthy balance," Murphy said. What right do these outside organizations have to determine what is and isn't a "healthy balance" in who lives where, and how?

"...finding out how to maintain and attract the younger population" simply means financial incentives to new graduates, and low income housing, in the form of apartment buildings cluttering up your beautiful landscape. Every manufactured "need" will be used as an excuse.

Please visit our website to learn the shocking implications of this push and see how the residents of Bedford fought "new urbanism" and won.

(Additional information in an LTE sent in April about Master Plans and how they are manipulated)

Union Leader LTE
April 30, 2019

Bedford's current Master Plan, which was last revised in 2010, is rife with the goals and language of the "Congress for the New Urbanism". The CNU.org is a group of about 2,500 people nationwide which espouses the radical philosophy of "new urbanism". This philosophy is also espoused by the unelected, unaccountable, outside consultants (TPUDC.com) Bedford hired to do the 2020 Master Plan rewrite. Despite being told there was no "agenda" involved, the phrase "new urbanism" was already included in the existing plan and its goals and language were reflected.

This agenda is inappropriate for Bedford. The voters stated as much at March's town meeting. In addition, 1,074 people signed a petition against some the very same principles, and had vocally expressed their dismay with these goals at the various input sessions that were held last fall.

TPUDC's 2020 Master Plan rewrite draft version is due out this summer. We urge all Bedford residents to look over the old plan to become familiar with the goals and language and be ready to recommend changes to those goals and that language during the 30-day revision period.

Be prepared!

For more information and to see a copy of the current plan, please visit www.bedfordresidents.com
