

City's Housing Gets 'Smart' With Mixed Development

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State Official Outlines Trends To Simms Audience

By Jeff Mellott

HARRISONBURG - Trends in housing development and homeless issues were the focus of the annual luncheon on Thursday of the Harrisonburg Rockingham Core Housing Alliance Continuum of Care.

The state is encouraging plans that economically integrate communities, said J. Michael Hawkins, director of community housing for the Virginia Housing Development Authority.

The trend, he told the luncheon audience at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center, is being pushed by the demands for "smart growth" and different types of housing by the next generation of 35-year-olds and younger.

Market Demand

The younger generation is seeking more housing options that allow them to live, work and shop with less reliance on their automobiles, Hawkins said.

This type of community takes in the planning elements of smart growth, green building, mass transit and a mixture of residential and commercial uses, he said.

These concepts, he said after the luncheon, are also being considered by small towns in rural areas interested in revitalizing their communities.

Current development patterns tend to segregate people into different income levels, but integrated economic communities are possible, he said.

"That certainly can be done from a public policy standpoint," Hawkins said.

Model Project

The trend has reached Harrisonburg.

Several developers are implementing the mixed-use concept of commercial and residential space in the same structure.

The VHDA is helping finance the concept in a building planned for North Mason Street. Nearly all the apartments in the building will be rent-subsidized, but the structure also will include commercial space on its first floor.

Harrisonburg officials, said developer William Park of Charlottesville, understand that the people who work here, need to live here.

Earlier this year, City Council approved a resolution supporting VHDA funding for the project.

Homeless

The housing luncheon also addressed the plight of people who do not have homes.

According to a January census, the city had 73 adult homeless. Members of the census also had 62 homeless children, said Michael Wong, executive director of the Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

The poor economy has created more homeless as people have suffered job losses and pay cuts, Wong said.

"It's a new population we have not seen before," he said.

Mortgage failures and evictions also have played a role, said John Whitfield, executive director of Blue Ridge Legal Services.

Rockingham County court filings show that 69 mortgage failures were recorded in the past three months, Wong and Whitfield noted.

Those who were evicted also faced the prospect of becoming homeless, Whitfield said.

With the recession, the number of legal evictions rose from 867 in 2007 to 909 in 2008, he said.

Evictions, he said, destabilize families.

"It's a nightmare," Whitfield said. "It's full of human suffering."