

Woodbridge Housing Committee Regular Meeting
September 6, 2023,
Woodbridge Town Hall Meeting Room

In attendance: Kathy Hunter, Mary Dean, Donavon Lofters, Lewis Shaffer, James Graham, Miles Katz; invited guests: Amey Marella, Cathy Wick, Ben Fink

Presentation of written recommendations for Affordable Housing Plan from Cathy Wick & Amey Marella:

Amey and Cathy reviewed their written comments on the Affordable Housing Plan. After beginning with a general introduction to the state meetings and hearings with which they were familiar and a general observation about the need to break down silos between conservation and housing groups, they expressed specific concerns like no public vetting; the report was “merely a record of the thoughts of an unelected consultant with hurried input by a well-meaning but rushed ad hoc town committee”; and the use of data that may be inaccurate or inapplicable to Woodbridge which “puts into question the whole report”.

The full 5-page document of comments is attached for reference. In that this document was not received until the night before the meeting, Kathy advised Amey and Cathy that the Committee would review and will discuss more fully at the October meeting. Kathy did advise that the overriding statistic that drives the plan is that Woodbridge has only 1% of affordable housing units, which is not acceptable, and that the plan went through an extensive public vetting process. Mary also advised that the Committee spent much time and effort providing input that shaped the plan, including conducting a local survey online.

Public Comment:

Sue Torgerson provided comment on promoting the development of tiny houses as a strategy for addressing affordable housing.

Alana Rosenberg provided comments in support of affordable housing. Statements included that 37% of our town’s acreage is open space; in contrast, less than 1.2% of our housing is Affordable”. Alana’s comments are also included as part of our minutes.

Minutes of August 2nd, 2023 were reviewed and unanimously approved. Donovan motioned to approve/ Lew seconded.

Joined at the table by Ben Fink, the committee discussed upcoming community conversations. There are some pending follow-ups that need to occur from previous conversations from the senior center and the CONECT group from the library. Discussed event for October 3rd at Temple Emanuel that will take place in part in the sukkah. Notice of the event will go out through Temple Emanuel channels. Elaine, Lewis, and Jim will be the coordinators of the event. Discussed bringing refreshments. Jim suggested outreach to our email list as well.

Also discussed other future conversations that include PTA, teachers, and high school groups. Miles gave details about a promising contact, Junior State of America, which meets weekly (Wednesday 2:30-3:30) to talk about state or national issues.

Also consulted Ben about how to promote conversations, and he advised that we can't just expound the virtues or necessities of affordable housing but must couch the question as (for example) exploring how to create opportunities for everyone to have a home.

Discussed process of completing the Housing Committee's report to the BOS for their September meeting. Kathy will prepare an initial draft by Friday and circulate it for comments that will need to be completed over the weekend for town's submission on Monday.

Kathy advised that the land use training has been confirmed for October 30th at the JCC at 6:30pm. The training will be provided by Attorney Mark Branse and will be offered to all committees and commissions and other interested residents as well as land use officials from the SCRCOG area.

Meeting ended at 9:28 (Mary/Jim).

Comment 9/7/23 Affordable Housing Committee Meeting

I believe in affordable housing in Woodbridge. I believe we have a responsibility to New Haven County and the state to do our fair share to provide affordable housing opportunities to people who need it. New Haven, a place where many of us work and entertain ourselves, is facing a crisis with an extreme shortage of housing that people can afford. Across the state of Connecticut, we are lacking more than 135,0000 affordable housing units to meet our citizens' needs. Our town is currently in violation of fair housing laws, the Zoning Enabling Act CGS Sec 8-2 and Planning Mandates Sec 8-23.

My belief in affordable housing in Woodbridge is based on the knowledge that our country is segregated because of historic and continuing racist housing policy at all levels of government and business to keep people of color out of white middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. I am grateful for the educational opportunities that Beecher Road School and the Amity School District have given my children, and I want all children—ALL children—to have such opportunities. The lack of economic and racial diversity in our school systems dramatically detracts from our ability to prepare our children well for the world.

It is disheartening, then, to see so much resistance to the proposal to use a segment of the Woodbridge Country Club, while also preserving open space for town use: even in the face of a lawsuit, as we use town resources fighting the right of people from lower economic opportunities to live in our town.

Our town is already fully 25% protected open space. What is more, those arguing for protected open space may also consider themselves environmentalists. It is better for the environment for people to live in smaller housing units closer together than the large houses on multiple acres of land common across Woodbridge.

The Town Plan and Zoning Commission recognized the need for Woodbridge to provide more affordable housing and in 2021 made changes to the zoning code, including loosening restrictions on accessory dwelling units, two-family, and multi-family dwelling units. But because of the current lack of public water and sewer, we will still have a hard time reaching the additional 400 to 1000 units needed to meet our fair share of affordable housing in the next ten years. The country club property, with its sewer and water amenities, offers a great opportunity to add a modest number of affordable housing units to our town. This is a great location, as it is likely possible to extend the bus route up 243, but even without public transportation, people with cars need affordable housing too, and it is telling of the population of our town and their experience of people from different walks of life, or lack thereof, that people think the only ones that need affordable housing are those without a car. Many people that need affordable housing have cars.

While 37% of our town's acreage is open space, in contrast, 1.2% of our housing is affordable. There aren't many times in life when the ethics of a situation are as clear cut as this one. We can provide affordable housing for our state, which will lessen the overall housing burden and keep more people housed and out of poverty. We can share our excellent school system with families that will benefit from it while also diversifying the community our children and grandchildren grow up in and uniting people from different economic backgrounds. We can reciprocate the many advantages that living next to New Haven brings to us. We can keep the 25% of protected open space in town, and the 37% open space overall. All while living by the ideals of equal opportunity that we as Americans say we are so proud of.

To: Woodbridge Housing Committee

From: Cathy Wick and Amey Marrella

Date: September 5, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Town of Woodbridge Affordable Housing Plan, adopted by the Board of Selectmen on May 25, 2022. We offer these comments with the understanding that we may have further specific observations and suggestions to make at another time.

As you know, the consultant was very late in delivering the draft report. This delay forced the ad hoc volunteer committee to rush its review before delivering the draft to the Selectmen. The Town leadership then adopted the plan without any opportunity for public review and comment, despite resident pleas that the BOS take the time to present the draft to their constituents and invite comments and questions.

As a result of this history and inadequate vetting, the report is substantially flawed. In this memo, we point to some of the overarching problems, give specific examples of some of the misstatements and errors, and offer recommendations for moving forward.

Overarching flaws: First, as noted above, the draft was never presented to Woodbridge residents in a public forum with adequate opportunity for follow-up questions and comments. As a result, this is not a report supported by or endorsed by the townspeople but merely a record of the thoughts of an unelected consultant with hurried input by a well-meaning but rushed ad hoc town committee. Monthly meetings held between May 2021 and April 2022 along were Special meetings that were available for viewing.

Second, the ad hoc committee's charge (as described on page 5 of the report) includes ensuring compliance with Federal and State law, yet the report fails to describe the relevant law and whether Woodbridge is in compliance. Instead, the report contains basic errors about State law's requirements.

Third, the report assumes that Woodbridge's population, including its school population, is in decline. In fact, Beecher Road School's current projections and data, as well as recent house sales, demonstrate that the opposite is the case.

Fourth, the report falls victim to an "apples and oranges" problem, in that it often cites Woodbridge-specific housing data but draws conclusions based on national or state averages of other measures (such as the income data enumerated in #13 below).

Fifth, the report fails to fully acknowledge and analyze the sweeping zoning changes adopted by the Town Plan & Zoning Commission in summer of 2021 that vastly increase housing opportunity throughout the Town.

Sixth, the report ignores other state policies such as the Green Plan and the sewer avoidance policy within which housing policy must fit.

Seventh, the report repeatedly makes broad reference to data (“current demographic models,” “many studies and empirical evidence show”) to support its assumptions without actual citations. References should be supplied for all cited data so that the reader knows the basis for the assumptions made.

Our close reading of the report has identified many sloppy statements and specific errors. Here are some examples:

1. Page 5: The Committee states that diversified housing will bring economic advantages to the town by creating a “stabilized and diversified population.” Please explain what economic advantages will be created, what is meant by “stabilized and diversified,” and how a stabilized and diversified population creates the promised economic advantages.
2. Page 6: The top box states that “current demographic models” project 20% decline in Woodbridge’s population over the next 20 years. What models are the basis for this statement? At best, this projection seems to be based on outdated, pre-covid information. In contrast, we have observed a large influx of young families to town since March 2020. Further, the continued opportunity post-covid for remote work has increased Woodbridge’s desirability, given its proximity to New York City. This report’s relevance is diminished by its reliance on outdated, inaccurate information. For comparison, see the Woodbridge BOE July 2023 report to the Selectmen for projected enrollment increases at Beecher Road School:
chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1689783640/woodbridge/iteg5uyfkxxhu94uiod5/AdHocEnrollmentSpacePlanningCommitteeWBOE2023.pdf

According to the Beecher report, enrollment is projected to increase by 125 students over the next eight years. It is notable that these increases are based on a constant number of housing units in the Town. Just last month the Superintendent reported to the Woodbridge Board of Education that total student enrollment is 875 as of 8/21/23 compared to 845 as of 10/1/22.

3. Page 6: The bottom box makes sweeping statements about the potential impact of higher density housing with affordable set-asides. On what “studies and empirical evidence” are these statements based? In contrast, the financial analysis done by our town’s Finance Director for all previous CCW development proposals shows that residential growth produces a net loss for towns largely driven by school costs. Tax revenue cannot compensate. This report’s analysis should not rely on statewide or nationwide averages in making Woodbridge-specific enrollment projections. Moreover, given that the Amity district is regionalized, there is no such thing as marginal cost in that system – every additional student in the Amity system costs the town some \$20,000 more per year.
4. Page 6: In the second bullet regarding the use of town owned properties, the report fails to acknowledge that State law does not require, it does not even suggest, that towns should sacrifice undeveloped potential open space for housing. Rather, rival State policy such as the Green Plan promotes the opposite action – the preservation of undeveloped land as permanent

open space to address various environmental concerns including the climate crisis. The report fails to explore ways to promote housing opportunity that do not conflict with other State policy such as the Green Plan. Some towns, such as Essex, specifically exclude town owned land from consideration for affordable housing.

5. Page 6: In the third bullet, the report generally supports sewer expansion without recognizing that existing homes in the Highlands area (behind Brookside Market) should receive sewer service first due to recurring septic problems. Further, the avoidance of sewer expansion has been the official policy of the State due to the on-going challenges of existing systems in meeting Federal Clean Water Act requirements. The report should be grounded in the reality of the current Greater New Haven sewage treatment system.
6. Page 6: The fourth bullet gives scant acknowledgement of the town's sweeping, radical changes to its zoning in 2021 and fails to identify specific "additional opportunities" for zoning changes.
7. Page 7: Here the report states that Woodbridge has "over 1/3 open space." (37%) This is incorrect. As stated in our Plan of Conservation and Development (page 91) legally protected open space is at most 25% of the town. The percentage goes down to just 17% if Regional Water Authority (RWA) Class II lands, which can be sold, are removed from the tally. More broadly, this report should have recognized the distinction between legally-protected "Open Space" and undeveloped land, and the town's vital role in supplying public drinking water supply watershed for the Greater New Haven area.
8. Page 9: Income levels are determined by number of occupants. The report cites Woodbridge's 80% AMI at \$67,950 for an individual. But the limit for a family of four is much higher. The report should have looked at income level for an individual next to housing cost for a one-bedroom unit, and income level for a family of four next to housing cost for a three-bedroom unit, recognizing that income thresholds vary with household size.
9. Page 12: Again, the report is inaccurate. Woodbridge has not had a population decrease. According to the U.S. Census Bureau website, the population of Woodbridge in 2010 was 8,990 and in 2020 was 9,089.
10. Page 12: There is no "state mandated 10% requirement." It is surprising and very disturbing that this report misrepresents the law on which it is grounded. (to be precluded from 8-30G regulations)
11. Page 13: Housing goals should include acknowledgement of Woodbridge's large amount (more than 300 homes) of "naturally affordable" housing and identify ways to convert some of this housing into legally affordable housing. An added benefit of this approach is that it serves Woodbridge's current elderly residents, many of whom would like to age in place but may be struggling to afford to stay in their homes. There was a bill proposed in the last legislative session that addresses this issue.

So, with some major efforts, it is possible that a couple of these houses can be converted into affordable housing opportunities. Some ideas the housing committee came up with is to use public subsidies to rehabilitate a housing unit which would then require a deed restriction that could marketed to households when an opportunity presents itself.

12. Page 14: Given that experts agree that dense housing is best located in walkable neighborhoods served by public transportation, the areas of focus for development of large-scale affordable housing should be concentrated in a town’s business district which contains shops, banks, doctor’s offices, and a bus line. Orange, for example, identifies the Route 1 corridor as its exclusive focus for affordable housing. (public transportation does not go to Woodbridge services, lower-income people have cars, cannot segregate lower-income housing in one neighborhood.
13. Page 28: The income figures cited are national averages and thus much too low for our area. Here are some current state averages published by the Connecticut State Department of Education:

Industry	Job	Days of work annually	Average Salary
Education	Teacher	185	\$78K
Finance	Tax Preparer	260	\$60K
Social Services	Community Health	260	\$67K
Law	Legal Assistant	260	\$56K
Art and Design	Graphic Designer	260	\$63K
Healthcare	Registered Nurse	260	\$85K
Technology	Web Developer	260	\$86K

14. Page 45: Here is another inaccurate reference to the “10% state requirement.” We also question the accuracy of this sentence: “The aim of this law is to commit each municipality to provide no less than 10% of total housing stock as affordable housing.” This article by housing advocate Bill Cibes asserts that the purpose of 8-30g is not and never has been to get all towns to the 10% exemption level: <https://ctmirror.org/2022/02/14/connecticut-needs-more-affordable-housing-8-30g-is-a-law-that-works/>

Recommendations:

Given all of the problems that we have identified, we offer the following recommendations. First, the committee should begin now the process of overhauling this flawed report so that a well-researched, well-drafted, and thoroughly reviewed report can be submitted to the State on or before the next deadline.

Second, the committee should update the population projections on which the report relies, after analyzing Beecher's report (and subsequent school projections) and the actual changes to the town's populations in the last few years. To assist this latter effort, the committee should seek data on the household population changes in every dwelling that has changed ownership or been built recently, as well as the ones that are now under construction.

Third, the committee needs to prepare a section of the report that describes the zoning changes made in 2021 and provides a build-out analysis showing the difference in housing opportunity afforded by these changes over time.

Fourth, the committee should make sure that the revised report accurately describes the laws and state policies that are relevant to housing opportunity in Woodbridge – including such competing policies as the Green Plan, the protection of public water supply watershed, and the limitations on sewer expansion.

Fifth, the committee should explore specific ways to promote smaller-scale affordable housing instead of making the implicit assumption that a large-scale affordable housing development on town-owned land should be the Town's and the committee's focus.

Sixth, the revised report needs to be refocused so as to be grounded in the specific characteristics of Woodbridge. At 96 pages, the current report is much too long, mostly because it is filled with irrelevant boilerplate info from the consultant. The sample reports from other towns that you include on your webpage have the following page counts:

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| a. Essex | 19 pages |
| b. Fairfield | 58 pages |
| c. Ridgefield | 35 pages |
| d. Stratford | 26 pages |
| e. Salisbury | 16 pages |

These reports are much more focused and specific to each town. We would suggest a target of about 25 pages. And lastly, the committee must insure that Woodbridge residents receive ample opportunity to learn about and comment upon the revisions at every stage of their development.