

Workforce Housing Is Essential

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

Never in the history of Estes Park has the need to accommodate our workforce been so clearly required. The term includes those in the customer service industries such as wait staff and retail clerks, but also encompasses grocery workers, nurses, medical technicians, teachers, designers, engineers, construction workers, Town administrators and staff, law enforcement, and fire fighters. We have in the time of pandemic begun to realize just how essential our essential workers are, and we have expanded our definitions with increased understanding of the important roles they play in our daily lives.

“America’s first affordable housing initiative was the Homestead Act of 1862, which enabled citizens over the age of 21 to own 160 acres of public land after building a home and farming the land for five years.” Quote from [Affordable Housing is All-American](#) (Forbes 10-3-2018, Great Initiatives Revolutionizing Affordable Housing In The US)

The struggle to find solutions for housing these workers is not unique to this mountain tourist town. Underlying hurdles, challenges, and issues in Estes Park:

- Perception of workforce as low income and undesirable as neighbors.
- NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) concerns exacerbate xenophobic reaction to diversification; the erroneous perception that increasing the population of non-white residents will increase crime.
- Higher density seen as undesirable in a wealthy community of landowners in single family residences.
- High cost of land acquisition and construction in mountain communities.
- Concerns about the impact of new development on view corridors and vistas.
- The seasonal aspect of much of the employment opportunities in town.

An interesting current endeavor to help address our deficit of affordable housing is the Wildfire Homes project in which a private office building and land will be traded for the current office and land of Crossroads Ministry in order to develop workforce housing. Public/private partnerships could be a key part of helping address the extreme need for housing solutions.

Other ways to incentivize lower cost housing could include:

- Provide the land for free or at a lower than market value cost.
- Provide the sewer, water and electric taps and fees for free or at a reduced cost.
- Reduce regulations that increase construction costs, such as not requiring fire sprinkler systems.
- Tax breaks
- Allow Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) for caregivers, health care providers and/or family of the elderly. Currently ADUs are forbidden in Estes Park.
- Allow defined ADUs to be used only for workforce housing with strict regulations designating these rentals for Long Term Affordable Housing and prohibiting their use as Vacation Rentals.
- Increase height limits in some limited zone districts, in particular in areas such as downtown which already has buildings exceeding the current 30-foot limit. Downtown Estes Park historically included multiple story structures, such as the original hotel housing the current Wheel Bar on Elkhorn. This is not a call for skyscrapers in Estes Park, but an acknowledgment

that our footprint as a community has limits. Reasonable height and density in well designed plans can go a long way toward helping chip away at this housing crisis.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau the Area Median Income (AMI) in Estes Park is \$50,833 per year. A current look at local want ads lists jobs paying \$13.50 an hour to as much as \$21 per hour. The former would gross \$28,080 per year, 55% of the AMI, thus placing them firmly in the Low-Income category. Those earning \$21 an hour would earn \$43,680 per year, placing them in the Middle-income category, as defined by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in 2018. The Census Bureau lists Median Gross Rent in Estes Park at \$932, which would be 40% of the Low-income earner's wages for rent alone.

As a community we need to find solutions to the affordable housing conundrum in which we find ourselves. We rely upon our workforce daily, and we must find a way to help them live affordably in the town in which they work.

Beck, Thomas W. "Workforce Housing is Essential", *Estes Park Trail Gazette*, Friday, June 19, 2020, <https://www.eptail.com/2020/06/19/workforce-housing-is-essential/>