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Union County summit addresses home affordability

By *Elana Knopp* on April 8, 2017 · *No Comment*



UNION COUNTY, NJ — In an effort to make New Jersey an economically thriving and affordable state, Union County civic, faith-based and nonprofit leaders and residents gathered together for a summit to discuss the issue of affordable housing.

The Union County Housing Summit to Build a Thriving New Jersey was held on March 29 at the Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Springfield, where both advocates and residents engaged in a conversation on building a thriving New Jersey by making the state an affordable place for Union County residents.

The summit offered local residents the chance to share their personal housing struggles and discuss solutions, as well as civic-engagement strategies with community leaders.

The event was part of the "Build a Thriving New Jersey" effort by the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey to recharge the state's economy through investments into affordable homes.

The HCDNNJ is a statewide association of more than 250 community-development corporations, individuals and other organizations that support the creation of affordable homes



Photo Courtesy UC Summit HomeFirst's Debbie Ann Anderson addresses the audience at the Union County Housing Summit to Build a Thriving New Jersey on Wednesday, March 29, at the Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Springfield.

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and economic opportunities.

Joining housing advocates and community leaders was Deacon Tim Williams, First Baptist Church, Kenilworth; Pastor David Knecht, Holy Cross Lutheran Church; Arnold Cohen, senior policy coordinator, of the Housing and Community Development Network of NJ; and Raphael Kasen, community building specialist.

The summit explored solutions and steps that local residents and housing advocates can take to engage decision makers in a proposal that will boost economic activity in the area.

New Jersey ranks high among states with shortages of affordable homes. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, New Jersey has just 29 affordable homes available for every 100 households.

The scarce supply of affordable rentals and homes is particularly burdensome for Union County residents, according to the HCDNNJ, where a family must have an annual income of approximately \$53,000 to afford a modest two-bedroom home — an income that is out of reach for many Union County residents.

The HCDNNJ launched the “Build a Thriving New Jersey” campaign to boost the state’s economy through a plan that creates afford home opportunities and jobs for New Jersey residents. “Build a Thriving New Jersey” calls for current and future leaders of the state to invest \$600 million annually into affordable homes.

According to housing advocates, programs that can help the campaign to secure affordable housing include the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, the State Rental Assistance Program, the Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit Program, lead poisoning prevention programs, weatherization programs, as well homeless service programs.

Nina Arce, communications coordinator for the Trenton-based HCDNNJ, discussed the initiative with LocalSource.

“We advocate for policy initiatives that expand the capacity of the community-development sector and revitalize neighborhoods,” Arce said in a March 30 email.

“We developed the ‘Build a Thriving NJ’ campaign to urge our state officials and future leaders to commit to making investments in housing and community development to help boost our economy and create opportunities that allow everyone to be able to call New Jersey home.”

According to Arce, the summit was an opportunity for local residents to learn more about “Build a Thriving NJ” and how

to engage local public officials.

“Over the last decade, state support for investments that provide the affordable homes and services that our residents and economy need, have been diverted or abandoned,” Arce said. “We have analyzed the investment the state has made over the last 30 years and are urging our elected officials to deploy \$600 million annually to a strategic set of programmatic investments. Again, this is funding that exists but has been diverted. Last night also allowed local residents the chance to share their personal struggles with living in Union County and develop a plan for advocacy,” Arce said of the summit.

Arce maintains that New Jersey needs a variety of home options to meet the needs of residents.

“We have an imbalanced housing market where luxury homes are abundant but starter homes and modest rentals are few and far between,” Arce said. “Our friends, family, and neighbors are the backbone of our economy, but if they can’t afford to live here, we can’t get our economy back on track. Sandy, the recession, and the foreclosure crisis took a toll on New Jersey – from businesses to infrastructure to the communities where we work and live – and we are still recovering.”

According to Richard Brown, CEO of Monarch Housing Associates, an affordable-housing advocacy group based in Cranford, both state and federal investments are needed to ensure that all of New Jersey’s residents can afford a place to call home.

“New Jersey’s senators and representatives must oppose President Trump’s budget, which makes devastating cuts to critical housing and community development funding,” Brown told LocalSource in a March 30 email. “New Jersey residents experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness often have trouble affording homes even while working. Residents can urge our future state leaders to support Build a Thriving NJ Campaign and their senators and representatives to oppose President Trump’s proposed budget cuts to the Community Development Block Grant and HOME programs and other critical U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development funding.”

According to Brown, Monarch Housing advocates and their partners will be in Washington, D.C., in July for a congressional reception to fight the cuts.

Deacon Williams, chairman of the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council, whose mission is to promote dialogue across multiple religious, racial, ethnic and socio-economic

groups on issues that impact communities, said that many members of their congregations struggle to pay the rent on even low-rent housing.

"This undermines our faith-based communities, as many of our worshipers must move out of county or out of state," Williams told LocalSource in a March 30 email. "We support increased rental subsidies and the building of homes that we can all afford, and support the opportunity for members of the community to gather together to discuss these issues."

According to Williams, the struggle to pay rising rents has forced many in Union County to risk eviction or move out of county or out of state.

"Many have lived here all their lives and have family and jobs," Williams said. "Losing them undermines our community. We need to build a thriving Union County so that all of us can afford to call New Jersey home. Hosting a platform such as the housing summit for discussing these issues, educating the community and supporting change is one important step we can take on the road toward achieving positive change."

Geleen Donovan, executive director of Family Promise-Union County, an advocacy group to fight homelessness based in Elizabeth, told LocalSource that the main economic issue that faces most people is affordable housing.

"Many renters or homeowners are spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing," Donovan said in a March 30 email. "This affects so many people in our community — young people, college graduates, seniors, single parents, low-income workers, and special-needs residents. We are ignoring the housing needs for a significant part of our community."

According to Donovan, creating reasonably priced housing needs to be a priority.

"We need to encourage new housing development to include fair and reasonably priced units," she said. "Not doing so will cause a substantial part of our work force to move and will weaken our economic structure."

Arce said that affordable housing is a concern for members of every demographic.

"It's difficult for our senior citizens living on fixed incomes and recent college grads," Arce said. "We know New Jersey is No. 1 for millennials still living with parents. Unfortunately, too many people are spending more than half their incomes on housing costs. The less people have in their wallets, the less they're spending on activities that spur the economy. Bottom line is that New Jersey needs more affordable home

options to meet the growing demand.”

The summit was sponsored by Community Access Unlimited, Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless, Family Promise-Union County, Gateway Family YMCA, HomeFirst, the HCDNNJ, Iris House, Monarch Housing Associates, and the Union County Interfaith Coordinating Council.

For additional information about the “Build a Thriving NJ” campaign, visit www.hcdnj.org/buildathrivingnj.

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