

Burlington County Times

Published: March 15, 2012

By David Levinsky

Burlington County apartment rents remain lower than most other places in New Jersey, but nearly half of the county's renters still pay more than they can afford, according to a report from affordable housing advocates.

The report, "Out of Reach 2012," was released Tuesday by the National Low Income Housing Coalition. It found that the fair-market rate for a two-bedroom apartment in the county was \$1,075 in 2011, about \$227 less than the statewide average, but still \$342 more than what is deemed affordable for the average renter's wage of \$14.10 an hour.

According to the report, 21 percent of the county's households are renters, but only 48 percent can afford to pay fair-market rent.

The report considers rent affordable if it amounts to less than 30 percent of a household's gross income. Based on that standard, a household would have to earn at least \$43,000 a year to afford the county's two-bedroom fair-market rent.

A minimum-wage earner would have to work nearly three full-time jobs to afford the same rent, according to the report.

Statewide, the report found that a household would have to earn at least \$52,081 annually or a wage of \$25.04 an hour to afford the average fair-market monthly rent of \$1,302 for a two-bedroom apartment, ranking New Jersey as the fourth least-affordable location for renters in the country, behind Hawaii; Washington, D.C.; and California.

Burlington County's fair-market rent was tied with three other counties (Camden, Gloucester and Salem) as the second lowest among the 21 counties. Cumberland had the lowest at \$1,017, and Bergen and Passaic had the highest at \$1,515, according to the report.

Burlington County rents also were slightly more affordable in 2011 than in 2010, when the fair-market cost was \$1,095, requiring a renter to earn at least \$43,800.

The decrease was an exception for the Garden State counties, where most rents increased. In fact, the average fair-market rate increased \$26 last year from the 2010 average of \$1,276.

“New Jersey has become less affordable in the last year,” said Diane Sterner, executive director of the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, which is part of the national coalition.

“We need our leaders to invest in New Jersey’s future and help create the homes our residents need, and empower municipalities to transform their neighborhoods into vibrant, affordable, safe communities,” Sterner said.

Increasing New Jersey’s stock of affordable housing has proved to be a difficult endeavor in recent years, largely because of upheaval, debate and court battles surrounding the state’s housing laws and rules.

Earlier this month, an appellate court ruled that Gov. Chris Christie could not dissolve the state’s Council on Affordable Housing, the agency that previously assigned towns’ quotas for how many affordable units should be within their borders and then reviewed local plans for meeting those goals.

The Christie administration plans to appeal the decision to the New Jersey Supreme Court, which previously ruled that the state must ensure that towns take steps to make affordable housing available.

In addition to the legal action, the Legislature has taken up bills to increase the state’s minimum wage and acquire vacant or foreclosed homes for affordable housing.

“The huge overhang of unoccupied, boarded-up foreclosed homes has depressed property values in neighborhoods, created safety problems, and impeded economic recovery,” state Sen. Raymond Lesniak, D-20th of Elizabeth, said in a statement. “Transforming these foreclosed homes into occupied affordable homes should be a top priority of our elected officials.”

The New Jersey Apartment Association issued a statement criticizing the report for failing to tell the whole story.

“The report points out that New Jersey is the fourth most-expensive place to rent an apartment. No surprise, given that New Jersey has the highest incomes, highest property tax, densest population, and any other number of platitudes that contribute to high costs,” the association’s statement said.

“We have the resources and the capacity to create more affordable housing in this state, but what we don’t have is the will to reduce regulation and encourage development.”