

Lack of affordable housing also affects the business community

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Published 12/27/21

A shortage of affordable housing in any community is a social crisis. When families can't make rent or spend a disproportionate amount of their income on housing, it creates a domino effect. They must make choices between having a roof over their heads and their health and personal welfare.

It's also a legitimate business issue that affects the entire economy, and right now our community's economy is feeling the effects.



Lisa Krouse is president and CEO of the Sarasota County Economic Development Corporation.
Courtesy/EDC

Like much of the nation, our local employers are dealing with a severe workforce shortage, which limits their ability to deliver goods and services and exacerbates supply chain issues. They are actively recruiting and offering strong pay and benefits. However, working-aged people must be able to find affordable housing here if our employers are going to manage the current labor crisis successfully.

It's also a requirement for many businesses that would like to relocate or expand here. We know this because we have conversations every day with companies from throughout the U.S. and abroad who recognize our unique value proposition – a beautiful and growing community with an exceptional quality of life – but need confidence that they will be able to hire locally.

The good news is that we live in a community where government, businesses and nonprofits are always working to find solutions to problems like this one. The fix is not simple, because the economic factors behind rising prices are complex and market-driven. Nevertheless, at the EDC of Sarasota County we are encouraged by the conversations we are having with numerous stakeholders and the steps they are taking to address the housing crisis.

We're also encouraged by what we see, including an exciting project that is already underway and represents collaboration at its very best. Last January, ground was broken on the \$33 million Lofts on Lemon project. This beautiful building in the heart of downtown Sarasota will include 76 affordable housing units for families earning up to 60% of the median area income, and 52 units for families earning up to 100% of the same amount. Now the developer is gearing for phase II of the project.

Notably, it was funded by several organizations, including the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation, which provided a \$2 million grant, as well as the Florida Housing Finance Corporation, the City of Sarasota, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Bank of America, Freddie Mac, Walker & Dunlop, the Sarasota Housing Authority, and the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. This amazing group of government entities, nonprofits, and private businesses found a way to avoid silos and work together for the future of our community.

Jon Thaxton, senior vice president for community leadership at the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and a former Sarasota County Commissioner, says he hopes we will see more projects like Lofts on Lemon, which was made possible with stakeholder convergence as well as federal tax credits. He and the entire Gulf Coast leadership team are constantly working on ways to increase the supply of affordable housing in our community. While recognizing that it is a long game, they routinely work with local government on related policy that might incentivize developers to build more affordable housing projects in the future.

Finding land in Sarasota County for affordable housing and for our existing businesses to grow – and new businesses to establish – is a related and critical issue. The EDC has formed a future land-use workgroup with business leaders, along with county staff, to address land availability and create unique solutions. We are looking at several options that encourage landowners to use some of their land for new businesses that employ local people and for nearby housing for those workers. The EDC will continue to work to advance more business park models that are inclusive to the community.

Furthermore, the Sarasota County Commission is in the process of discussing the use of funding expected from proceeds of the American Rescue Plan. A portion of the money has already been earmarked for housing initiatives, and some of the commissioners have indicated a desire to increase the allocation once the funds are available.

At almost any given moment, there are conversations taking place in our business community about how to make it easier for working adults to live here and for companies to hire them. While there is no single best solution, we at the EDC are confident because we know that among Sarasota County's most powerful assets are a can-do attitude and willingness to convene, collaborate, and contribute.

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