



SARASOTA

THURSDAY, MAR. 22, 2018 4 hours ago

Sarasota Housing Authority talks affordability

The Sarasota Housing Authority hopes an outside expert can spark a more serious community conversation about affordable housing.

by: [David Conway](#) | Deputy Managing Editor

In the midst of a building boom in Sarasota, William Russell is focused on what's still missing.

Russell is president and CEO of the Sarasota Housing Authority. The agency provides public housing in the city and county, working with local, state and federal governments to establish low- and mixed-income residential units.

Builders are producing plenty of housing in the city and county right now. That might be seen as an encouraging economic indicator, but Russell said increased supply alone isn't creating housing that's attainable for large segments of the community.

"None of what's really being built is affordable — or even modestly priced," Russell said.

That's why, last week, Russell helped bring an expert in the field of affordable housing to Sarasota. In partnership with the Community Foundation of Sarasota County's 2Gen Summit, the Housing Authority hosted a meeting led by Stacy Spann, executive director of the Housing Opportunities Commission in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Montgomery County, Maryland.

Russell said Spann and Montgomery County have made significant strides in providing affordable housing within an affluent community through aggressive, innovative policies. On March 15, Spann said some of those policies date back more than four decades — but that Sarasota is capable of catching up.

“We certainly know that doing nothing doesn't really work,” Spann said. “The important part here is, you're starting.”

The Housing Opportunities Commission, like the Sarasota Housing Authority, is an independently operating entity. Although it works to develop residential projects on its own, Spann said Montgomery County has been able to succeed thanks to legislative action from local governing bodies.

One example: Montgomery County has “inclusionary zoning” regulations, which require a developer to provide a certain percentage of affordable units within a market-rate residential project.

Spann encouraged officials to pursue similar measures. At one point during the March 15 meeting, Russell asked what kinds of policies could get private builders to produce affordable housing. Beyond inclusionary zoning and residential density bonuses, Spann said there weren't any.

“The question becomes: How can you take their need for (financial) return and marry it with your needs for affordability?” Spann said.

Representatives for the city, county and local nonprofits attended the March 15 meeting. They asked how to get the community — both developers and residents — to buy into drastic zoning changes. Spann said the policies aren't without controversy in Montgomery County, either, but officials held firm on prioritizing affordable housing.

“What community do you want to live in?” Spann asked. “Do you want to live in a place that only has gates — and then, consequentially, moats — around it?”

Russell himself questioned whether Sarasota is ready to take the measures he thinks are necessary. But he believes the community increasingly recognizes affordable housing as an acute need — and teachers, nurses, service workers and other essential parts of a community are struggling to find a place to live here.

For Russell, just having the conversation is a good start.

“I do think they're becoming more and more sensitive to the issue,” Russell said. “I don't know to what extent they're going to be willing to go, policy-wise, but I think they're at least feeling the need to do something. That's the first step.”