

Tryon: A chance for action on affordable housing

By Tom Tryon, Opinion editor

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When the topic of affordable and work-force housing arises, my mind sometimes drifts to a boisterous country song recorded by Hank Williams Jr. in 1992: “A little less talk and a lot more action.”

In the lyrics, “action” refers to, well, how a lonely fella at a whiskey bar hopes to end his night.

But the words can apply to the long, winding debate in this region over the need for more affordable housing, including homes for folks in what we’ll call the working class.

There has been progress, here and there, but not enough — certainly not in proportion to the need, as well as the volume of studies and discussions on the subject. The affordable-housing challenge exists nearly everywhere in Manatee and Sarasota counties but has become acute in Sarasota’s core, where increases in land-use density have, with a few exceptions, yielded expensive condominiums and apartments rather than affordability.

But opportunity — one that would quickly help to turn talk into action —knocks.

The Sarasota Housing Authority has secured funding, mainly through tax credits via the Florida Housing Finance Corp. and the ability to obtain mortgage financing, to build 80 units that would be available to, for example, a family of four earning less than \$42,000 annually. (Rent would be 30 percent of household income.) Those units would be constructed and operated by the authority on a three-acre site it owns in the blossoming Rosemary District north of downtown— between Cohen Way and Lemon Avenue, hence the name Lofts on Lemon.

The authority, under the leadership of Chief Executive William Russell, has revamped its housing stock and built units that defy stereotypes of public housing.

Lofts on Lemon will produce low-income housing, but it might do more.

Russell proposes to expand Lofts on Lemon by adding 50 units of “workforce” housing for households making between \$42,000 and \$70,000. The target market: teachers, firefighters, police, civil servants and others who want to live and work in the city.

Sarasota city government has, to its credit, pledged \$3 million. Russell has asked Sarasota County to add \$1 million and hopes to raise \$3 million from local philanthropists and foundations. Rent would be in the \$950-\$1,000 range; the Housing Authority would ensure long-term affordability.

Yes, that’s a lot of money but, it’s a relatively small amount for 50 perpetually affordable units near downtown.

Time is running short. The current zoning density, which makes the numbers work, will be reduced at the end of 2018.

Affordable housing talk is cheap. Let’s have action.