

# 'Affordable housing' Must be Quantified Before It Can be Solved

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Picture the following: You're on an airplane. You hear several screams. You look up and notice the flight attendants are frazzled. Then you see a young Middle Eastern man standing in the aisle near where the screams originated. What is happening?

Our brains are amazing at filling in the blanks. In something as simple as a traffic signal (we know that red light is coming when we see the yellow), or as complex as a Sudoku puzzle, we recognize patterns and put things into their "proper place." It's all done by memory, both short- and long-term. We may see a terrorist because that's what's in the news, or we may see a doctor — it's a simple matter of brain wiring.

Sorry for the Psych 101, but it all came back to me when I saw the story last week about the Culpeper Housing Working Group and their discussion about the need for affordable housing in Culpeper.

The idea of "affordable" housing can, and has been, quantified by the all levels of government economists. Some base it on the percentage of median household income going to pay the rent or mortgage, others look at a certain income demographic and determine how many within it can afford to rent or own.

But "affordable" means different things to different people at different income levels. In one economic classification, affordable housing means the owner spends no more than 30 percent of their income on their homes (including the mortgage, taxes and insurance). By that definition, a lot of people who bought their homes in the middle of this decade would be well over the mark — in my opinion rendering that standard as almost useless.

Culpeper Supervisor Sue Hansohn, at the working group meeting in her role as manager of Section 8 housing for Culpeper DSS, acknowledged to The Star-Exponent the "slippery slope" involved with trying to classify "affordable." But according to the CSE, "Hansohn agreed to compile data regarding the length of waiting lists at local apartment complexes." And, to me, that's the right track.

Because, while I can't speak for the meeting itself (I wasn't there), the rest of the coverage of that meeting seemed focused on the perceptions of the people in the room.

Local landlord Steve Corbin perceives a housing problem because he has a waiting list for his 24 units spread across five boarding houses.

Culpeper County Director of Social Services Lisa Peacock sees the "biggest need is single-occupancy rooms," because that's who's walking through her door looking for housing. I'm sure both are speaking accurately based on their experiences.

But the sum of the whole is more than the individual parts. And the solutions to any "affordable housing" problems in Culpeper are not as simple as plugging the holes. Drive around Culpeper (town and county), and you'll see a lot of houses; many are owned and occupied, others aren't. But we have a lot of housing per capita.

So the bigger question is: If we have both “extra” housing and a housing shortage, how does our community planning change to make sure we don’t keep exacerbating the problem with development while creating new problems with the Band-Aids.

I applaud the groups efforts and look forward to hearing more once Hansohn and others have quantified the problem. While affordable housing may remain elusive, even for current homeowners, the solutions to this problem can be found in the numbers.