

Coalition begins surveying 7 South County towns to determine accurate housing needs

By Scott Neville

GREATBARRINGTON—Community Opportunities Group (COG) consultants signed a contract with the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire (CDC) and the Housing Coalition and have begun collecting demographic information in seven South County towns to put concrete numbers to the previous hearsay on the affordable housing issue.

Keith Girouard, committee chairman for the Housing Coalition's needs assessment committee, said the demographic information will look at the whole of each of the seven towns in the survey—profiling them, and then using the information to make a generalized characterization of the whole of the Southern Berkshires.

This will provide a "regional flavor" to the county with specific numbers in Lee, Lenox, Stockbridge, West Stockbridge, Egremont, Great Barrington, and Sheffield.

Davis, also executive director of Construct Inc., said the shortage of housing, leaving apartments virtually nonexistent for new rentals during May to September in South County and rents pushing \$600 without utilities, will be detailed with hard facts in the report.

"I think a lot of the data will confirm what we've thought, but

Keith thinks some of it might be surprising," she said.

"We are trying to get a snapshot of the Southern Berkshires to develop strategies and discuss future steps," Girouard said, adding:

"The goal is to create and define a study of housing in the Berkshires that will be a useful tool for decision-makers looking for a direction."

To arrange and pay for the Boston-based COG consultation and the proper administration to perform these tasks during the estimated four-month process, \$27,000 was raised through private community funds and benefactors, which Girouard said was "very helpful in accelerating the process."

Housing Coalition and CDC executive committee member Wes Orłowski said that in some people's eyes, the word "affordable" lends a sour connotation to the project.

"The connotation of 'affordable' is a pejorative term - some say 'affordable housing' means low income housing in an undesirable area. That's not it," he said.

"Affordable housing is a middle class problem where people can't afford to live here because of their job incomes."

Co-chair of the Housing Coalition Cara Davis said "stakeholders" in the area met last week and will continue to meet as the research continues and after the data

is compiled to determine a course of action.

These "stakeholders" include representatives from Construct Inc., the CDC, Berkshire Housing Coalition, and various social services groups including the towns being surveyed by COG.

Because of the unexpected late startup to the study, the next "stakeholder" meeting will not take place until September.

When the meeting does happen, COG's initial results will be shared.

This meeting will also coincide with the the expected availability of the interim report, to be reviewed before the final report is due in late October.

Egremont Select Board member Peter Goldberg said he was relieved that the Housing Coalition was taking the initiative to do a county-wide cross-section using professionals.

He will be attending upcoming meetings as an Egremont representative. In addition to the technological and demographic input from COG, the needs assessment committee will be holding meetings for public involvement, to be scheduled in an estimated six weeks, when he expects the first of the statistical information to arrive. "This is not just an academic exercise," Girouard said, adding: "It is intended to provide useful information for everyone."