

This is the second installment in a series submitted by Stow's Master Plan Committee to keep townspeople apprised of the issues it faces in drafting a Master Plan Update. Each installment is dedicated to a different major topic of the Master Plan. This article focuses on affordable housing.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING 101: WHAT IS AFFORDABLE, WHAT IS REQUIRED OF US, AND HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Submitted by the Master Plan Committee

By Nancy West and Michelle Ciccolo of The Ciccolo Group, LLC

Housing is, of course, one of the most fundamental needs a community must address. Is the town accommodating enough varying interests when it comes to housing? Do we have options for singles and families, young people and seniors, able-bodied and physically impaired, those who like open space as well as those who want goods and services close by? Are there options to rent as well as to buy? Can recent college graduates, empty nesters, widows, town employees, divided families and nuclear families all find a place to live? And just how many options are possible under current zoning regulations?

All of these questions make housing a major component of a community's Master Plan, but issues related to housing are not solely the province of the Master Plan Committee. Other committees actively engaged in analyzing and addressing the town's housing needs in a variety of ways include the Planning Board, the Community Preservation Committee, the Stow Municipal Housing Trust, the Stow Housing Authority, and the privately chartered Stow Community Housing Corporation. The Master Plan Committee's challenge is to take into account the progress already made by these various groups as well as their input, along with state and local regulations and, of course, input from the community.

Affordability is always a critical consideration. Affordable housing is generally defined as residential costs that are manageable by a household making 80 percent of the area's median income. Additionally, as a general rule of thumb, financial specialists recommend that any individual household devote no more than about 30% of its monthly income to mortgage payments. Affordable housing units developed under subsidized housing rules, primarily laid out by the State's Department of Housing and Community Development, count on the town's subsidized housing inventory (SHI). However, other units, even though they may be modestly priced and generally affordable, do not count on this inventory unless developed in accordance with the SHI rules.

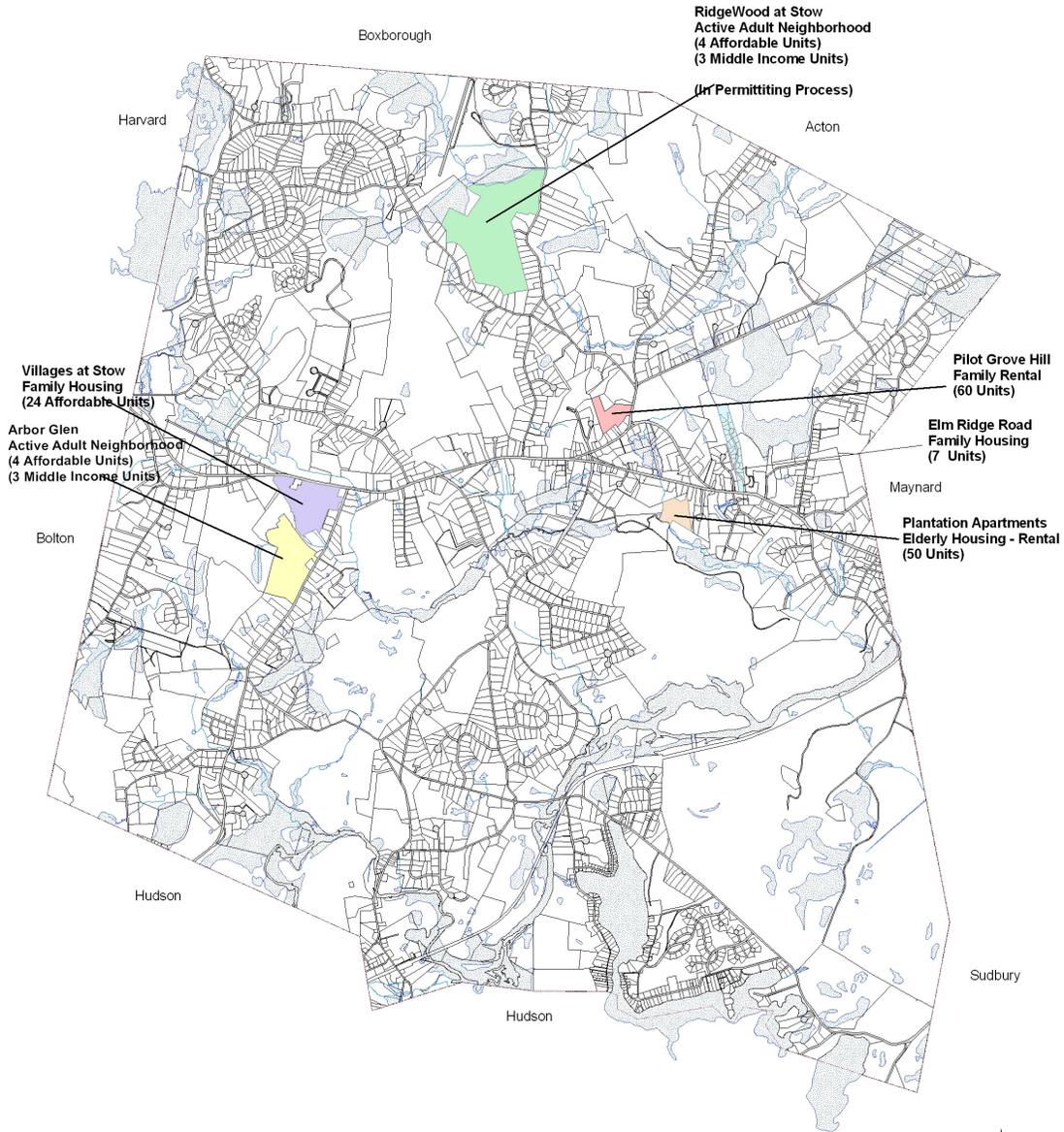
In Massachusetts, discussions about affordable housing almost always veer into the subject of Chapter 40B, also called the Comprehensive Permit Law. Enacted 40 years ago to address the state's shortage of affordable housing and what was dubbed then to be "snob zoning," Chapter 40B stipulates that if a town does not have 10% of its housing deemed affordable through the SHI, then developers can skirt local zoning regulations to build high-density housing, provided that 25% of the units they build fall under long-term affordability guidelines. (These guidelines typically state that a family making under 80% of the area's median household income can afford to buy a unit.) For more information on the guidelines go to: www.mass.gov and select DHCD.

Stow's Master Plan needs to respond to the question of how we want to address Chapter 40B regulations. Currently, the town has approximately 6.5% of its housing stock deemed affordable. However that number will go down once the new Federal Census numbers are available and new residential growth is factored in to the equation. One solution would be to work toward meeting the 10% affordability requirement with high-density housing of our own planning and design. Until the 10% is achieved, the town risks having a 40B developer make the decisions for us as far as where affordable housing will be built and at what densities. However, communities with an active Housing Production Plan (HPP) and certification by the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) are sometimes able to deny 40B applications if the HPP has resulted in the creation of 0.5% affordable housing within the space of a year, or 1% within two years. This stopgap measure serves to keep towns from having multiple 40Bs built in a short period of time. The Town of Stow is currently updating its HPP, which will help it in gaining control over where housing can be built.

Ultimately, it is incumbent upon the townspeople to decide what their priorities are in relation to housing and diversity. The goal of making our community open to a wide diversity of people – married and single, newly graduated and retired, large families and couples – might prompt us to consider higher-density housing possibilities. Another approach would be not to pursue this and allow the market and developers to choose for us. Planning for targeted higher density may require consideration of infrastructure changes. Do we have water, sewer and transportation for a wider diversity and greater number of residents? If not, changes may have to be incorporated into plans such as the Capital Plan, as we contemplate what our town's needs might be 10-20 years from now.

The Master Plan Committee welcomes your thoughts and comments on these questions. While there are no right or wrong answers, there are also no easy answers. Give it some serious consideration. Talk to your friends, neighbors and community leaders. Participate in Master Plan Committee discussions (we generally meet on alternate Wednesdays – check the town website or schedule at Town Hall for exact dates and times). Help us identify the proper course of action for Stow's future.

Town of Stow Affordable Housing Units March 2009



Legend

- RidgeWood at Stow
- Arbor Glen Active Adult Neighborhood
- Plantation Apartments
- Pilot Grove Hill
- Villages at Stow
- Elm Ridge Road

