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Demand for affordability



Sadie DiNatale Burda, left, is the Principal Planner with Outagamie County Development and Land Services, and Kara Homan is the Director of Outagamie County Development and Land Services. They are pictured here recently in Appleton. DAN POWERS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

Outagamie County develops strategy to address looming housing shortage

Jelissa Burns

Appleton Post-Crescent
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

APPLETON - The Fox Cities area needs between 1,000 and 2,000 new housing units per year to keep up with growing demand, but a labor shortage in critical positions needed for constructing housing is just one of the many challenges the area is facing when it comes to actually developing an adequate number of units.

Jennifer Sunstrom, government affairs director with Realtors Association of NE Wisconsin, said there is a lack of supply — there's just not enough units being built in any price range right now.

But building more units is not as simple as it may sound.

"There has been a labor shortage," Sunstrom said. "We lost developers, we lost builders and we also lost a lot of people who were critical to putting up housing, from electricians to plumbers to everyone in the trades."

This year, Outagamie County identified the need for a strategy to increase housing production, affordability and diversity in the area.

Some of those strategies included increasing the overall supply of housing in the region, increasing and preserving the supply of affordable housing and making better decisions about placement of affordable housing and high opportunity neighborhoods.

As a result, Outagamie County's Department of Development and Land Services formed a task force which, in turn, put together a housing strategy.

The strategy was timely, as recovery funds from the COVID-19 pandemic can be used for housing developments.

The regional housing strategy hopes to com-

plete four goals: to address the housing needs of all people and households of all incomes; to create thriving neighborhoods that balance the housing needs of urban and rural communities; to diversify the housing stock and expand the supply of affordable housing; and to support policy changes, zoning reform and plans that move toward a pro-housing paradigm shift.

The task force put together a recommended plan, with five themes and 19 actions, to address these four goals.

Housing needs for Fox Cities and Outagamie County

A study done by Outagamie County found that the region needs around 10,000 to 17,000 new affordable housing units for the period of 2020 to 2030.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that the region is meeting its housing need targets so far, with 1,102 new units in 2020, 1,280 new units in 2021 and about 123 new units to date this year.

"Our region's growing population coupled with slight housing underproduction and declines in housing affordability have created concern for many in our region who provide housing and housing-related services," the plan stated.

Higher end housing is not necessarily supported by the market, so it is in the best interest of the region to develop properties for a mix of different incomes — especially households with middle to lower income.

There is also a need for diversity in housing types. The demand for single family units is great and is typically the preferred type of housing, but

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DOWNTOWN NEENAH



More than 400 rooftop solar panels generate electricity atop Kimberly-Clark Corp.'s Experimental Mill in Neenah. COURTESY OF KIMBERLY-CLARK CORP.

Kimberly-Clark installs rooftop solar system on X-Mill

Duke Behnke

Appleton Post-Crescent
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NEENAH - Kimberly-Clark Corp. has installed 414 solar panels on the roof of its Experimental Mill, or X-Mill, at 126 N. Commercial St.

It's the first rooftop solar system in the downtown Neenah business district.

The system will generate 195 megawatt hours of renewable electricity annually, the company said.

That's sufficient to power the X-Mill's lighting, which accounts for 4% of the mill's total electrical consumption. It also equates to the annual electrical consumption of 26 homes.

In addition, the solar panels will reduce Kimberly-Clark's annual greenhouse gas emissions by 134 tons as the company works toward its 2030 Sustainability Ambition to reduce the carbon footprint of its operations by 50%.

The cost of the system and its potential payback period weren't disclosed. Kimberly-Clark realized

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Here's a look at Lawrence University's new welcome arch on College Avenue

AnnMarie Hilton

Appleton Post-Crescent
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

APPLETON - Lawrence University welcomed its class of 2026 with a new campus fixture and tradition.

Serving as a connector between the Lawrence campus and downtown Appleton, an arch on the corner of College Avenue and Drew Street that reads, "Lawrence University" and is flanked on either side with the school's crest was officially unveiled Tuesday during a welcome ceremony for about 400 new students.

"An arch represents an opening, a welcoming way to enter into a place," President Laurie Carter told The Post-Crescent. "For students, the arch becomes a gateway to the higher education experience."

With the new signage will come new traditions to bookend the start and end of a student's journey at Lawrence, which is celebrating its 175th anniversary this year.

This year's 383 first-year students walked along College Avenue, then proceeded under the arch to a ceremony in front of Main Hall as part of a new annual tradition.

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USA TODAY

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Housing

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as population and demand continues to increase, a wider variety of housing types would serve the economy best. Multifamily units can create more housing options in smaller areas.

The concept of mixed income or mixed use neighborhoods was mentioned frequently, according to John Weyenberg, president and CEO for Greater Fox Cities Habitat for Humanity, who was a part of the task force.

"We all agreed that it's best to have mixed income, mixed use neighborhoods for a variety of reasons, but primarily because what's happened in a lot of larger metropolitan areas is low income or lower income housing typically becomes concentrated, meaning it's all built in one area," Weyenberg said.

As a result, Weyenberg said that there is a lack of assimilation into the community because of the stigma that comes with low income housing and neighborhoods.

Weyenberg said that Habitat for Humanity plans to partner with for-profit builders and other developers to create mixed income housing units within other neighborhoods.

To truly build affordable housing units, there are a few challenges that need to be addressed and overcome: namely inflation and competition.

The continuous rise of costs on construction and supplies has become a challenge for building and repairing homes. When the cost to properly develop a home is so great, the home must be sold or rented at a price where profit can be made, resulting in the home becoming priced out of an affordable range. Inflation can also lead to higher mortgage and interest rates.

Competition for affordable housing can create downward pressure on lower priced households.

"When middle-income households struggle to find affordable products suitable for them, they will rent or purchase less expensive products, resulting in fewer affordable options available to lower-income households," the strategy states. "This imbalance results in higher rates of housing cost burden."

Task force offers 19 recommended actions, aligned in five themes

Together, the task force came up with a course of action, including five different themes, that they recommend to improve the regions housing market and housing situation.

"We looked at a number of best practice approaches, we started with a list of 40 different items that we have seen worked well in Wisconsin, as well as across the United States," said Kara Homan, director of Development and Land Services and project facilitator.

Across the five themes, the strategy plans to tackle public education on housing issues and strategies, reduce stigmas about affordable housing and the people that need it, remove regulatory barriers, help those in

need with financial hurdles, allocate for further projects and manage property with potential for future development.

Homan and the rest of the task force worked together to prioritize and match what needs the region had with the 40 different items, and came up with 19 different actions to evaluate and implement.

"The county expects to implement some, and we expect our different community groups to implement others through partnerships and funding opportunities that may arise in the future," Homan said.

'You do all the work to create the study, but then someone actually has to put it into action.'

As the region begins to transition from planning the strategy to actually implementing it, the task force has identified the next steps it feels will help.

"One of the biggest challenges with doing a housing study like this is you do all the work to create the study, but then someone actually has to put it into action," Weyenberg said.

The task force put together a three-step process in order to move forward with applying the strategy: Establish work groups, start on implementation and evaluate outcomes.

"For each action, the working group may need to conduct additional planning or analytical exercises, gauge political willingness and community buy-in, educate others, seek feedback from stakeholders, and evaluate funding needs. In addition, and depending on the type of action, work groups may need to establish program parameters, consider best practices, or identify options to progress partnerships or community agreements," the strategy states.

However, some actions may not show any meaningful results for years and others might produce only small, yet still positive, results.

"Right now we are at the process of starting with our county board to make an allocation of our money for affordable housing," said Homan. "The next step on that is to evaluate the best way to approach investing that money in the months to come."

Homan said that another early priority is the establishment of a housing alliance, and they are researching how this has worked in other communities through the country.

According to Burda, the Fox Cities Housing Coalition said that they are interested in helping with the education portion of the strategy.

"They just mentioned that they would be really supportive of helping with that through bringing the Chamber of Commerce to their meetings to talk about workforce, housing issues, and other things of that nature," Burda said. "So I think they're already seeing members of our communities really taking a look at the strategy and seeing how they might be able to fit in with the implementation of it."

Homan said she expects to start seeing activities being implemented within the next year or so. The main challenge is going through the process of implementing actions and figuring out how to pay for them.

"I think the most important piece is that everyone has an understanding that housing is a significant issue that is facing everyone who lives in our community across the income spectrum and that we are wholeheartedly working with all stakeholders, government, nonprofit, private developers, and entities like the Community Foundation, to really identify what we can do to address this issue that faces everybody," Homan said.

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