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## WorkshopLV: Housing Kicks Off Regional Effort

The Lehigh Valley will need to determine where to build homes for the more than 4,000 new residents who arrive each year and how to make all that new development available to people of all preferences and incomes.

That's just one of many housing questions facing the region in the coming two decades.

More than 50 housing experts, advocates and community leaders gathered Wednesday to begin answering those questions during the first meeting of WorkshopLV: Housing. The open table working group called together by the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, is working on how to manage the region's growth, without ruining its appeal or pricing some people out of an evolving housing market.

Wednesday's kick-off centered on identifying the biggest housing issues, who should solve them -- and getting to work.

"It's a regional issue that is going to take many, many partners to make an impact," LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley said during the Workshop held at the Workforce Board Lehigh Valley in Allentown. "That's why we need your help. We all have a role in making this happen."

Newly released data by the LVPC paints a picture of where the Valley housing market is, and what problems could lie ahead. Annual housing sales have nearly doubled since 2012, with single-family detached homes remaining the largest portion of the market, but they are losing share to townhouses, multi-family homes and apartments. That's also pushed median single-family detached home prices to \$240,000 – a \$29,000 increase in three years. Overall, a median sales prices of \$173,000 in 2012 has risen to \$179,900 by 2018, according to sales recorded by Lehigh and Northampton counties.

Add to that the fact that the cost of newly constructed homes in the Lehigh Valley in 2018 nudged above \$320,000, according to US Census figures. That points to increasing pricing going forward, and a likely widening between what homes cost and what some people can afford.

But LVPC Director of Planning Peter Barnard pointed out Wednesday that while attainable housing is an important issue, the WorkshopLV group was being asked to think bigger.

"We're here to talk about all types of housing, and that includes everything from affordable housing to luxury homes to apartments to mobile homes," Barnard said.

The Lehigh Valley has a new comprehensive plan. In preparing *FutureLV: The Regional Plan* the LVPC distributed a regionwide survey in which 90% of participants identified housing as a key issue facing the region's future. WorkshopLV was created by the LVPC to help implement the policies in FutureLV, and address the issues Valley residents value most.

After a brief LVPC presentation to release new housing sales data, a room that included non-profit housing advocates, developers, municipal planners and code officers broke into 10 groups to identify the most important issues. When they returned they had dozens of suggestions. Some wanted to see a better match between where new jobs are created and where workers are coming from.

“We need a better connection between housing and job centers,” said Mark Hartney, Deputy Director of Northampton County’s Department of Community and Economic Development. “We’ve built places like FedEx with no consideration of where the workers live. We add a LANTA bus stop and move on. We can do better.”

Others seized on that issue of location.

“When we build these developments, we need to ask ‘is there transportation?’ Is it close to a grocery store and schools?” said Tina Roseberry, a senior planner with Michael Baker International, an engineering and professional services company.

Many kept coming back to the issue of attainability, particularly as the rental market heats up. Data shows that between 2012 and 2017, the region lost nearly 4,000 home owners, while gaining more than 6,500 renters, and developers are finding that new rental units are leased before the construction is complete.

“You live in an \$800-a-month apartment and a developer puts up apartments costing \$1,350 right down the street,” said Tina Smith, Director of Northampton County’s Department of Community and Economic Development. “Next thing you know your rent goes up to \$1,100. We have to address this widening void.”

One thing most everyone agreed on is that the table must grow. Anyone can join WorkshopLV: Housing, and participants Wednesday suggested more developers, more banks, more homeless advocates, and perhaps most important, most residents be at the table.

And by the workshop’s end, they all agreed on one more thing: there is much work to be done.

“Your ideas will drive solutions,” Barnard said at the close of the workshop. “This is just the start.”

The next WorkshopLV: Housing meeting is scheduled for 4 p.m., February 13 at the Workforce Board Lehigh Valley, 555 Union Boulevard, Allentown.