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Fewer homes, more lofts needed in Petersburg?

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STAFF WRITER

PETERSBURG — If you build it right, they will come.

That was the message Laurie Volk delivered to City Council last night. Volk is co-managing director of Zimmerman/Volk Associates Inc., a consulting firm that developed an analysis of residential market potential in the city.

In this case, the “it” that must be built is the right mix of rental lofts, for-sale lofts and single-family homes. Volk said that mix is in part determined by the population in the city and where those people may wish to move within the city, and people who might move to Petersburg either from across the country or just within the region.

The analysis performed for Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corporation concentrated on five of the city’s oldest neighborhoods: Battersea, Blandford, Halifax, Birdville/Westview/Rome Street and Downtown/Old Towne.

The right mix of structures will target the two largest groups that are most likely to move to Petersburg according to Volk’s study: empty-nesters and younger singles. Those two groups generally aren’t looking for big yards.

“The traditional and even the non-traditional family aren’t a very large group anymore,” Volk said. “It’s generally not Mom, Dad, two kids and the pets.”

Volk also said there are too many single-family homes in the city and that number can be reduced through redevelopment, which would also answer the need for newer structures. Most of the city’s homes were built before 1939, particularly in the five neighborhoods examined in the study.

Volk said there is a large segment of the market that wants newer construction.

The big questions the report served to answer were:

- Where will the people coming to Petersburg live?
- What kind of a place do they want to live in?
- How many people will be coming to the city?

Volk’s study indicated that in the next five years, 2,800 households may move either within Petersburg or to the city; 1,500 of those households would consider dwelling in one of the study unit neighborhoods. Slightly more than two-thirds would be from somewhere else in the country.

“Thirty-nine percent would be looking for a rental loft or apartment,” Volk said. She added that 15 percent would be looking to purchase a loft or apartment, 12 percent would be seeking to purchase a townhouse and 34 percent would be looking for a single-family home. Volk said 62 percent of the structures in the five study neighborhoods are single-family detached homes.

“There’s a much lower demand for that,” Volk said of the desire for single-family homes.

If Petersburg could meet the market desire for those structures, she said, the potential residents may be willing to pay \$600 to \$1,750 for a 525- to 1,400-square-foot apartment.

When actually purchasing a place to live, Volk said potential residents, if the city had what those people were looking for, might be willing to pay \$80,000 to \$300,000 for a place to live.

Volk created the report on residential market potential for Virginia LISC. Virginia LISC has been working for more than a year in Petersburg, planning neighborhood improvements for the city. Virginia LISC Executive Director Ford Weber said the organization works to bring some business sense to nonprofit organizations working to improve the neighborhoods in their cities.



MANDANA MARSH/STAFF PHOTO Harrison Street, looking north near the intersection with D’Arcy Street, is shown Tuesday. This neighborhood targeted for revitalization is named the Halifax Focus Group area, one of the areas of a strategic neighborhood pla

“One of the ways we do that is by finding gap financing,” Weber said. “This is a perfect example of bringing in business sense. The nonprofit organizations needed to know there’s a market and to make sure they were meeting the needs of the community. For that matter, the for-profit organizations needed to make sure there’s a market.”

Weber said the businesses that Virginia LISC works with need to know there is a desire for urban living.

Weber added that his organization works as a bridge between interested residents, corporations, foundations, government and developers interested in increasing the supply of high-quality affordable housing in a given area. Virginia LISC then leverages available dollars into single-family, multi-family, community and commercial developments with far greater reach and impact than would be possible through individual efforts.

One way LISC does this, Weber said, is by reassuring lenders of the return on investment.

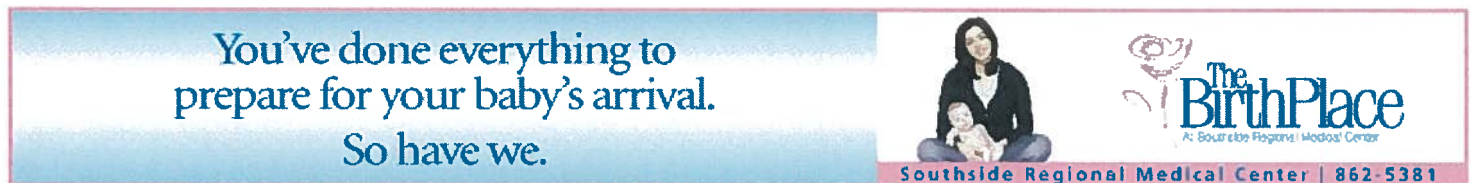
City Councilman Brian A. Moore asked if Volk’s assessment that the city had 52 percent owner occupancy was correct.

Volk confirmed that through her research, 52 percent of the city’s structures in the five study neighborhoods are owner-occupied.

“You’ve done monumental work,” Mayor Annie M. Mickens said of Volk’s report.

Weber said the next step comes today with a presentation of the same study by Volk to members of the community and those within the development industry.

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