

Group says Richmond area lacking in affordable housing

Wednesday, Sep 26, 2007 - 12:08 AM

By CAROL HAZARD
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Think of walking into a grocery store where your only choices are steak and champagne.

There's no hamburger or beer.

"It's all high-end with little for the rest of us," said Frances Stanley, research analyst for the Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp., a housing advocacy group.

Stanley, who spoke yesterday at a symposium on housing and growth, wasn't really talking about food.

She was referring to the lack of good, decent affordable housing in the Richmond area.

Hundreds of government and business leaders attended the meeting at the Virginia Historical Society.

The focus was a 48-page in-depth report, "Connections and Choices: Affordable Housing and Smarter Growth in the Greater Richmond Area," co-authored by Stanley.

The report looks at some of the most important challenges facing Richmond and the counties of Chesterfield, Hanover, Henrico, Goochland and Powhatan, said Trip Pollard, co-author and attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving natural resources.

Included in the report are these statistics:

- People in the Richmond area drive more than 27 million miles daily, traveling roughly the distance to the sun every three days. The driving rate here is the highest in the state.
- The amount of land developed in a five-year period was more than 1.5 times the entire size of the city of Richmond. In all, 58,800 acres were developed for subdivisions, office parks, highways and parking lots from 1992 to 1997.
- If the current rate of development continues, 294,000 acres will be developed in the next 20 years -- seven times the size of Richmond. More land would be developed in 20 years than in the previous 400 years.
- The percentage of Henrico County homeowners spending more than the recommended amount on mortgages rose from 19 percent in 2000 to an estimated 35 percent in 2005. Housing is considered affordable if it is no more than 30 percent of household income.
- The median house value in the region rose 50 percent to \$180,000 in 2005 in a five-year period.
- More than 125,000 housing units will be needed between 2000 and 2030 to meet projected population growth.

Managing growth will require regional cooperation to ensure a high quality of life and economic well-being, Pollard said.

The development trend to date has contributed to sprawl, the report states. A lack of a regional transit system is creating congestion and hurting the environment.

Also, "the size of the average house has expanded significantly even as the size of the average household has shrunk," according to the report.

Meantime, most new housing is designed for married couples with children, even though that is no longer the majority of households.

"The need is for more sensible high-density development," Pollard said. "The problems are interlinked, but the solutions can do double or triple duty."

Other areas, for example, have tackled sprawl and affordability by requiring builders to construct communities with a mix of higher and lower priced homes.

"You can have high density in one jurisdiction and across the street is a minimum lot size of 10 acres, which we have here in the Richmond area," said Gary Johnson, who served on a panel following a presentation by the report authors.

Johnson is emeritus professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and an urban planning and transportation expert.

"We may be reaching a tipping point in Richmond with the report before us today," said Buford Scott, chairman of Scott & Stringfellow in Richmond who also served on the panel.

"Affordable housing is an economic development issue," he said. "Without an adequate supply, our region will not continue to prosper economically."

The gap between income and housing costs here continues to widen, he said. "It's unrealistic to think that many employers can pay wages to keep pace with the escalating cost of housing."

Businesses can leave Richmond, do nothing or take steps to reverse the current trend, Scott said. He appealed to business leaders to talk with legislators to make changes that will allow for smarter growth.

"What we are talking about today is important to everyone no matter where we live," Scott said. Contact Carol Hazard at (804) 775-8023 or chazard@timesdispatch.com.

[Go Back](#)

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Shopping/Classifieds](#) | [Weather](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Obituaries](#) | [Services/Contact Us](#)
© 2007, Media General Inc. All Rights Reserved. [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Site Map](#)

-- Part of the GatewayVa Network --
webmaster@inrich.com

