

NEWS

Housing study looks deeply into City of Newburgh's needs

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CITY OF NEWBURGH - A housing study underway in the City of Newburgh could influence the city's comprehensive plan and its housing policy for decades to come.

The study, spearheaded by the Leviticus Fund in partnership with consultant Kevin Dwarka and Pace Land Use Law Center, will identify current and future housing needs of Newburgh residents, and look at best practices in terms of policy in other cities with similar housing challenges. The study is being conducted at no cost to city government.

Those areas of best practice focus on housing conditions, affordability, development and neighborhood revitalization.

Dwarka and Greg Maher, executive director of the Leviticus Fund, presented an update on the study to the Newburgh City Council during a work session Oct. 22.

Dwarka said by drawing on institutional knowledge from city and Orange County department heads and stakeholders, the study seeks to understand on a deep level the city's needs: the types of housing, where it's needed, the price points required and how certain types of housing integrate themselves into the rest of the city.

"We're not interested in a doing an academic report, being outsiders," Dwarka told the council. "We really want to see ourselves as fully embedded within the administrative process and regulatory structure in City of Newburgh so that we're able to deliver recommendations that are grounded in reality of the way the city works."

RUPCO, a regional nonprofit that focuses on creating and maintaining sustainable, quality housing and rental opportunities, provided some data for the study and attended community listening sessions on housing in September that is also part of the assessment.

Maybe this time, study will spur action

"It seems like the approach is sound," Guy Kempe, vice president of community development on RUPCO's executive council, said about the Leviticus study.

It's certainly not the first housing study that has taken place in Newburgh. Kempe pointed out there are data sets going back over a decade, but hopefully this time the assessment will spur action, since it has proper financial backing and the City Council appears to have the political will to make the necessary improvements.

Unlike the work for the City of Yonkers' housing needs report released by the Leviticus Fund in 2019, researchers are finding it much easier, and hopefully more fruitful, to collaborate with the City of Newburgh on this project, said Greg Maher.

"In Newburgh, thus far, I want to really commend all of you at the City Council and at the staff level... for being so open to this process," Maher said. "It's 180-degree difference from our experience in Yonkers."

Changes can't happen overnight, Maher said, so the housing report is meant to be a guide for the city that's practical and can be implemented.

"One of the challenges to homeownership in Newburgh, as you all know, is the high cost of entry, but also the high cost of repair, rehab, maintenance, property taxes that things that can easily overwhelm a low-income family owner," Maher said later in the work session.

The final report will touch on ideas and strategies to address those issues, he said.

Combatting gentrification and displacement

"The housing disparities here are unbelievable," said Debra Danzy, who moved to Newburgh from Brooklyn more than 10 years ago.

"I've never literally seen block after block with abandoned buildings with nobody, not even drug dealers standing on the block trying to sell drugs. That was something really frightening for me when I first got here in 2008 or 2009," said Danzy, who lives on Lake Street.

She believes the city's gentrification in the west end is apparent when compared to homes in the more densely populated and historic east end near the Hudson River.

"As I became familiar with the community, you can go to Gidney Avenue and you think you're in Long Island," Danzy said. "And you go back to Broadway and you're like what is going on here?"

Easing effects of development

Kempe said that new zoning policies could help abate some gentrification and displacement that could result from development pressure.

"They should look for inclusionary zoning to make sure all projects have some amount of affordable units incorporated into them, so we don't create islands of privilege and pockets of poverty in the community," Kempe said.

"The city could and, I think should, consider what it can do to reinvest and preserve minority cultural resources," Kempe continued. "Whether those are small businesses, bodegas and those kinds of small entrepreneurial business that serve a cultural need in a community, to preserving Hispanic community churches and other infrastructure that provides services to specific cultures that are found in the community."

A survey for City of Newburgh residents has been posted at leviticusfund.org and is available in English and Spanish. It lasts until Jan. 1 and will provide feedback for the overall housing study report.

More information about the study and other initiatives by the Leviticus Fund can be found at leviticusfund.org/initiatives.

"People have to realize housing is the tip of the iceberg," said Danzy, noting that transportation, opportunities for gainful employment, access to healthy food, prevalent mental health issues and access to health care are all issues that, hand-in-hand, affect housing displacement and home ownership.

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