

County has worst job-home ratio in Wisconsin

City, county have
begun to invest in
affordable housing



Hunter Turpin/Freeman Staff

The construction site for Domenica Park, a Habitat for Humanity subdivision in Waukesha's Broadway Heights neighborhood.

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WAUKESHA COUNTY — There's 1.37 jobs for every one home in Waukesha County, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics—the worst rate in the state. 42% of renters in Waukesha County are considered cost-burdened, meaning they pay more than 30% of their income toward housing, and the county's vacancy rate is less than 5%, census data shows.

This has pushed cities and developers in the county to pursue affordable and workforce housing developments to address the need, but getting these projects built is not always easy due to the current real estate market, zoning requirements and public perception, stakeholders said.

"It's that old, crazy concept, but it is going to take everybody," said Patricia Fabian, executive director of the Housing Action Coalition for Waukesha County, which is focused on advocacy and outreach for people experiencing homelessness.

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Housing

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In recent years, Waukesha has invested upwards of \$6.2 million into affordable housing projects, in addition to other programs. Investments have included \$1.2 million toward Habitat for Humanity projects such as for two affordable homes on Grandview Boulevard and a 20-home subdivision in Waukesha's Broadway Heights neighborhood that broke ground in August. Waukesha County has also provided funds for these projects.

"Waukesha has clearly proven itself to be a strong community, a community that cares about its people, and I have no doubt it will continue to be," Fabian said.

Challenges

Recent discussions about a workforce housing develop-

ment in Brookfield, called The Flats at Bishops Woods, highlight that subsidized housing developments are not always popular in Waukesha County.

"What we're trying to do is step down to a West Allis or a Wauwatosa. No, we're Brookfield," Brookfield Alderman Kris Seals said in a meeting last month. "We don't step down to allow the people who can't afford to live in Brookfield to come in, because then we become West Allis, then we become Wauwatosa. That's not what Brookfield is. I've been here 60 years, this is not Brookfield."

Some residents have publicly spoken against the project with concerns of its 203 apartment units being below market rate. Seals' comments have resulted in a fellow alderman calling for the censoring of Seals, calling the comments reprehensible.

"Quite frankly, it's sad that this needs to be said in 2023,"

Brookfield Alderman Mike Hallquist said. "Brookfield should be eliminating economic income barriers to housing and diversifying its supply to include more workforce and affordable housing."

Business groups like the Waukesha County Business Alliance and the Waukesha County Center for Growth support The Flats project, which passed last month, saying that being pro-business also means being in support of more diverse housing.

"We know that Waukesha County is a premier location for business," Nicole Ryf, executive director of the Center for Growth said. "However, we also understand the mounting challenges of building new housing in the current market that can be considered affordable for many workers and young families. Employers across Waukesha County have indicated it would be beneficial to

have housing options available for their workforce that are in closer proximity to their jobs."

Fabian did not want to comment on the debate in Brookfield specifically, but said that affordable housing projects often have an undeserved bad reputation.

"I don't think that visions of low-income people are accurate," Fabian said. "I think they're hardworking people who maybe don't have the same type of job that's going to afford them a \$250,000 home, that doesn't mean they're not working hard, that their kids aren't going to school, that they aren't trying to make a good life for themselves where they're at."

She challenged people who are concerned about affordable housing being built in Waukesha County to drive around and look at recent affordable developments, saying that nowadays mar-

ket-rate and non-market-rate housing often looks the same.

"(Affordable housing) has always gotten a bad rap because historically this country never likes anybody who's different ... I think that affordable housing nowadays is being built to look no different than anything else, which is great because nobody wants something that looks like a cardboard box."

Statewide issue

A 2023 report from Forward Analytics found that between 140,000 and 227,000 housing units need to be built across the state by 2030 in order to keep up with demand.

"Due to unfavorable demographics and the recent slowdown in home construction, Wisconsin could be facing a severe workforce housing shortage in the next few years," the report says. The report says that part of

the problem is the 65+ population across the state growing and remaining in their homes long after retirement.

"I'm looking at this with my own parents who are in their mid 80s," Fabian said. "They do not want to leave their condo. That condo isn't gonna turn."

Housing insecurity

The Housing Action Coalition of Waukesha County (HAC) operates an emergency overflow center from November until March. The shelter, which has three family rooms and 18 singles, helps when other shelters in the area fill up — which happens every year, according to Fabian.

While some people HAC serves could be considered "chronically homeless," there's also a notable group of people who come into the shelter for the first time after an unexpected event in their life.

"There's always going to be people who are experiencing homelessness because somebody's always going to have an issue come up in life that they weren't expecting," Fabian said. "I had a lady who called and said 'I've been a daycare teacher my whole life. I've never had to ask for any help before, but I just can't do it right now. I've got too many medical bills.' ... People live so close to the edge."

Fabian said that addressing housing insecurity first can lessen the strain on resources overall and help people find more stable employment.

"It's the whole concept of 'housing first,'" Fabian said. "When you know every night exactly where you're going, it's warm—or cool—has the basic amenities, you can focus on other things in your life. We're all geared for survival instinct."

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