

Affordable Housing- An Interview With Town Of Southold Supervisor Scott Russell

John Viteritti | June 30, 2016

In our past two articles, we covered efforts to address the need for affordable housing in the Towns of East Hampton and Southampton. According to Judi Desiderio, Chief Executive Officer/President and "Queen of Statistics" for [Town & Country](#) Real Estate (who has offices on the North Fork and South Fork), the median price on the North Fork by the end of 2015 was 48.65 percent lower. But the need for affordable housing exists there also.

When I served on the Town of Southold Housing Advisory Commission, our attempts to attract developers to assist in the development of affordable housing was stymied mainly by the fact that Town's zoning requirements did not provide for the density (the number of units that may be constructed on a particular parcel) that would make it profitable for a developer to build, even for those willing to accept a lesser profit than they could otherwise realize from other forms of development. I recently had the opportunity to meet with Town Supervisor Scott Russell at his office in Southold to discuss the affordable housing issue.



The first issue I raised was why, unlike the Towns of East Hampton and Southampton, does Southold not have a Housing Authority that would allow it to own land and develop and maintain it for affordable housing?

SR: If we have opportunities to create affordable housing, then we can revisit the issue. In the meantime, housing authorities do not create more affordable land nor do they promote developers to build on the land. The idea of the Town to be in an ownership position and perform a property management role makes me very uncomfortable. I would rather we go to developers who have a track record of good management and let them provide their expertise with reasonable oversight from the Town rather than assume that responsibility ourselves. I don't think it will provide any more access to funds than currently available, so why take on the work that can be better performed by others.

The next point I raised had to do with the supervision of the Section 8 Housing Voucher Programs supervised by the Towns of East Hampton and Southampton. I asked why the Program in Southold was supervised by the North Fork Housing Alliance, rather than the Town?

SR: The Alliance doesn't just supervise the Section 8 Program. They deal with many housing issues. It's a major undertaking that I think suits them better than if we tried to do it ourselves.

Another issue I raised that distinguishes the Towns of Southampton and East Hampton from Southold are their powers to acquire property through condemnation and then convey ownership to the Housing Authorities.

SR: We really don't have the kinds of run-down properties that are languishing from the real estate bubble of 2008 called "ghost houses." We addressed that by putting legislation in place that allows us to maintain them until we transfer ownership to a new party. Most of that inventory has been cleared out.

Do you have any idea of the total number of units that would be required to meet the need?

SR: No. We have tried to get that information from the community, but have been met with very little response, and quite frankly, that's because we haven't done much to provide affordable housing and the people are getting weary from being asked the question when they don't see any results. I would project that we could easily accept several hundred units.

Tell us about "The Cottages" in Mattituck.

SR: Yes. You're referring to the 22 two-bedroom single family homes that were constructed in 2006 - 2007 to provide home ownership opportunities to qualified applicants, based upon income. The units are made available through a lottery and must remain affordable in perpetuity, so the sale prices are regulated. I believe two of those homes have been resold. Let me point out, the real need is for rental housing for young people just starting out who can't afford to buy, but haven't reached their full earning potential yet, but when they do, will be able to buy in the open market.

Those are the people we want to accommodate. Their incomes are too high for Section 8 and not high enough to qualify for a mortgage. Our job is to build a ladder for them, one rung at a time.

We know that the density issue has been the major stumbling block to building affordable housing. Please tell us what the Town is attempting to do about it?

SR: We have legislation pending that would allow us to increase the density on 1-acre parcels from 6 to 12 units, with a 24-unit cap on each parcel. That way we could scale the development to fit in with the needs of the community. Alternative treatment systems will also help overcome the Suffolk County Department of Health issues. The Housing Advisory Commission is strongly behind this proposal. They have worked very hard and have been frustrated by the lack of achievement in the development of affordable housing by the Town, and rightly so.

In addition to those you have already mentioned to be in need of affordable housing, what other group stand out?

SR: Senior citizens who have to scale down to less expensive housing or rental situations. East Marion has the greatest density of any hamlet and the highest median age.

How do you counter the perception that a local preference for senior housing may be in opposition to housing for families with children?

SR: You do that by building multi-generational housing, rather than for one target group such as age 55 and older, which is better for condominiums. I am going to be perfectly candid: there are those who believe that we are going to get a rush of minorities rushing out to the North Fork. That's just not true. Nor is it true that we are building housing for undocumented aliens, or that we will over populate our schools. Eligible candidates will have to be residents of Southold Town for at least three years and will be subject to credit checks. I believe the people who will be candidates are already living here.

What's your response to those who say, if you can't afford to live here, you shouldn't?

SR: When the EMT worker, volunteer fireman, or boiler repairman comes to the door, tell them before the fact that if they can't afford to live here, they shouldn't.

You are familiar with Assemblyman [Fred Thiele](#)'s proposal to allow the five Peconic Bay Region Towns to set aside 20 percent of Community Preservation funds for water quality programs, do you think that Southold will vote in favor of that?

SR: Yes, I see that passing by a 3-1 vote.

When do you anticipate that the Town Board will approve the zoning code change?

SR: I would think before the end of summer, pending another public hearing.