In Providence, affordable housing advocates urge building rules that allow for higher density

Rhode Island Housing study finds that at least 3,500 units of new housing yearly, at prices affordable for millennials and retired adults, are necessary to meet the needs of Rhode Islanders through 2025.

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By Christine Dunn Journal Staff

 PROVIDENCE, R.I. - With land in Providence becoming scarce, building up rather than out would be the best way to significantly increase the housing supply, Rhode Island Housing commissioners were told Thursday.

Providence was built as a city of two-family and three-family homes, said Carla DeStefano, executive director of Stop Wasting Abandoned Property, a nonprofit based in South Providence. But, she said, land is at a premium now that the housing market has recovered and the number of foreclosed properties is decreasing.

We're running out of land, DeStefano said, and we need to look at building regulations that allow for more density, especially for the city's main thoroughfares.

Barbara Fields, executive director of Rhode Island Housing, agreed. We need density, she said.

A study completed for Rhode Island Housing in 2016 found that at least 3,500 units of new housing yearly, at prices affordable for millennials and retired adults, are necessary to meet the needs of Rhode Islanders.
The Board of Commissioners met Thursday morning at 500 Broad St., a mixed-use building with street-level commercial spaces and affordable apartments on the upper floors. The building was redeveloped almost 10 years ago by SWAP.

DeStefano updated board members on SWAP’s current projects, including Pavilion Homes, an affordable housing development. The first phase is under construction on Pavilion Avenue, Rugby Street and Byfield Street in lower South Providence.

Located at the former site of the Roger Williams Housing Development, Pavilion Homes will include 30 to 40 new or rehabilitated homes that will be sold to families earning up to 80 percent of the area median income. Prices will range from $134,000 for a single-family home to $169,000 for a two-family home. Phase One includes five two-family houses and two single-family houses.

Lots were made available by the Providence Redevelopment Agency, and federal HOME program money has been provided by the City of Providence. Construction lending is through Rhode Island Housing. On March 9, the PRA approved the transfer of 144 Rugby St., 181 Pavilion St. and 94 Potters Ave. to SWAP for redevelopment. A $100,000 construction loan to SWAP was also approved for another property, 22 Greeley St.

DeStefano said the need for affordable homes remains strong. SWAP’s affordable rental apartments have a zero vacancy rate, she said, and three or four people are waiting for every apartment that opens up. SWAP manages about 300 affordable rental homes.

As for affordable ownership homes, we're selling homes even before we dig them in the ground, DeStefano said. South Providence revitalization efforts were also highlighted last week by Mayor Jorge O. Elorza, who announced $4.3 million in new initiatives along the Broad Street corridor, including safety improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists and new arts programming.