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NMCOG promotes regional housing approach

Engages partner communities for collaborative response to crisis



By **MELANIE GILBERT** | mgilbert@lowellsun.com

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LOWELL — Housing, housing and more housing. That was the message delivered by Housing and Economic Development Program Manager Chris Hayes with the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments during a Sunday meeting hosted by Solidarity Lowell.

“Our plan,” Hayes said, “is to address the housing challenges in the region.”

Earlier this month, NMCOG held its [“At Home in Greater Lowell Kick-Off Summit”](#) at Mill No. 5, which was attended by state and local leaders such as state Rep. James Arciero, chair of the Joint Committee on Housing, and representatives of state Housing and Livable Communities [Secretary Ed Augustus](#).

The 100 attendees broke out into groups to discuss issues like housing development, area median income versus subsidized housing, and meeting the needs of the region’s unhoused population.

That kind of political muscle wasn't present at Sunday's mini summit, but it indicated NMCOG's commitment to [engage many community voices](#) on a comprehensive regional housing strategy.

"We want to hear from as many different people and from many backgrounds," Hayes told the group of almost 30 people.

All municipalities in the commonwealth belong to a regional planning agency, and [NMCOG](#) is one of those 13 regional agencies. It serves the communities of Lowell, Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro and Westford.

In NMCOG's many conversations with its regional partners, Hayes said housing has emerged as a top issue, which led to the idea to create a regional housing plan that will incorporate pieces of other community plans like the [Lowell Forward](#) plan.

"We're seeing that we need more housing units, but also different types of housing units," he said. "We think that a regional strategy, and taking action together, will be the strongest response for this. ... We want to create more front doors for more folks."

Two more summits will be held, one in June and another in the fall. The final strategy report next winter will address the housing challenges in a unified way based with recommendations for implementation.

Hayes' [data-driven presentation](#) showed that Lowell's economic profile contributes to its housing crisis.

"Health care and social assistance is by far our greatest industry here in Lowell," he said. "The average wage that that pays does not provide enough money for median household rents to be affordable."

Over the past decade, average inflation-adjusted wages have increased by 10%, while the average inflation-adjusted rental prices have jumped by about 20%.

That income-cost gap is reflected in the affordable housing crisis where one-third of renters in Lowell are cost burdened, which means those households are paying more than 30% of their income on housing. Affordable housing refers to people who pay 30% or less of their income on housing. Hayes said part of that solution is to create subsidized housing opportunities.

Last Thursday, UMass Lowell Chancellor Julie Chen unveiled an [\\$800 million development plan](#) that leverages the prestige and innovation of the university and the resources and history of the city of Lowell with the job creation capabilities of industry to envision a vibrant urban village/main street model and economic engine for the city.

LINC is projected to generate 1,300 construction jobs, 2,000 permanent jobs from entry-level positions to CEO in multiple industry sectors, and \$4 million to \$6 million in potential new tax revenue for the city of Lowell.

But even a well-paying field like construction doesn't pay an average wage high enough to afford the median price home in Lowell, Hayes said.

Given its social-justice mission, Solidarity Lowell member Dee Halzack asked how the housing piece contributes to the [homeless crisis](#).

Hayes said more [shelters](#) and subsidized housing built within NMCOG's region was one solution.

"There's a small group that needs a lot of support, but then there's a much larger group that needs cheap housing," he said. "That's a long-term solution when they need help now in terms of an emergency shelter."

Another member questioned whether restrictive zoning and enforcement complicates the housing landscape, leading to more unhoused people. Hayes said it "will be an interesting conversation in the community."

"We see a lot of people in the streets that were able to pay a low rent that was substandard housing, but it was a roof over their heads," he said. "It's a recommendation in the city's draft housing plan to do a zoning ordinance to see if zoning in Lowell can fix that."

He noted that people who live in subsidized housing often don't have a car, which requires communities to think about the [transportation piece](#) of both affordable and low-income housing.

Hayes also recognized the outsized role the state plays in housing funding and creation, referencing both the MBTA communities state law and the \$4.13 billion housing bond bill currently making its way through the state Legislature that will increase the amount of money for subsidized housing support.

“We see a lot potential solutions,” he said. “This plan is starting the conversation. I hope that it’s the first salvo, the first big effort to have our region speak as a whole to the state on some of these issues.”

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marissa.dupont@gmail.com

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NMCOG is asking for public input to its “At Home in Greater Lowell” housing strategy. The public is invited to join the agency’s [mailing list](#) and take a [vision and goals survey](#).

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