

## CHAMBER CHAT: Housing solutions sought

By MEG MOSS Aug 28, 2021 Updated Aug 28, 2021

Important conversations are happening right now at all levels of government. It's time to remind our elected officials that issues in rural communities such as ours are important. Issues like small business development, broadband access, healthcare coverage, and affordable housing.

Businesses with less than 50 employees make up 95% of businesses. Millions of households across the state struggle to access, afford and utilize high speed internet. Over one million North Carolinians are uninsured. Two in five renters and one in five homeowners in North Carolina are cost-burdened, meaning they spend over thirty% of their income on housing costs.

This information comes from the North Carolina Rural Center, who reminds us that rural issues are more important than ever. They encourage you, and I encourage you, to call or email your federal and state representatives, and attend city council and county Commissioner meetings to both become informed, and to voice your thoughts on these matters.

The mission of the NC Rural Counts advocacy program is to "research, develop, and advocate for innovative, sound and nonpartisan policy solutions to address rural North Carolina's economic development challenges and improve the quality of life for our state's rural people and places."

Let's talk about one of the issues mentioned above — affordable housing. According to the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency, there are 28,894 households in Lee County. Of that, the homeownership rate is 67%. Of all our homes, 43% were built before 1979, and 14% are mobile homes. Of the 14,601 homeowners in Lee County, their median income is \$61,969, and 22% of them are homeowners who are cost burdened.

This week, I attended an Impact Funding meeting, hosted by our local Brick Capital Community Development Corporation, which focuses on affordable housing in Lee County. Their Executive Director, Kerry Bashaw, shared some interesting statistics with those in attendance. Lee County's median income is approximately \$61,000. In a two-adult household, this equates to approximately \$30,500 per adult. This then boils down to earnings of \$15 per hour per adult. Based on these numbers, \$200,000 and under is considered workforce housing. As of last Wednesday, only five houses in Lee County were listed at under \$200,000, and only two of those were under \$180,000. Those homes are expected to be "gobbled up" quickly. Luckily, Bashaw stated, "our area median income is increasing, and new jobs are coming." But the average family is having trouble finding affordable housing.

Brick Capital does have plans to address that issue. They have property on Washington Avenue, where they will be able to build sixteen apartment units and forty-one single family lots. And in the Jackson Heights area, Brick Capital has acquired ten acres, where thirty-four single family homes will be able to be built, pending funding availability.

The NC Rural Center is expanding their focus on advancing sustainable and affordable housing, they hope to advocate for increased recurring funding to the NC Housing Finance Agency for the Workforce Housing Loan Fund, increase recurring funding to the NC Housing Trust Fund from its current \$7 million to \$15 million, prioritize use of non-entitlement federal Community Development Block Grant funding,

and to create a systematic policy response to make high-quality housing for everyone an economic asset for every community. Bashaw shared though, that “local decisions are the best decisions.”

I encourage you to let your voice be heard on this important topic by talking with our state and local elected officials.