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FEATURED

Rent beyond reach: Study reveals Lynchburg's shortage of affordable housing

Carrie Dungan
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As groups across the city work to address the needs of low-income residents, the Lynchburg Regional Housing Collaborative hopes new data can help guide stakeholders toward progress in a key issue: housing stability.

A recently completed study shows there are at least 578 fewer affordable housing units than needed for residents with extremely low incomes. The study also showed 50 percent of households in Lynchburg are considered low-income and of those, nearly 4,500 spent more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

“It’s tragic when we’re short [over] 500 units for the most vulnerable people in our community,” council member Beau Wright said. “If we really want to be addressing poverty, then we should be bending over backwards to address our challenges with affordable housing.”

According to the study, which the collaborative presented to City Council last week, there are 5,117 extremely low-income households in Lynchburg. It defined extremely low incomes as single households earning less than \$12,700 per year and households of four earning below \$24,300 annually. Of those, 73 percent spent more than half their income on housing in 2016.

Low-income households, by comparison, are those that earn below \$33,800 per year for a single person household. For families of four, this means earning below \$48,250 per year.

These results will help inform the future work of the Lynchburg Regional Housing Collaborative (LRHC), which has worked toward improving and developing affordable housing in the area.

The collaborative — made up of Miriam’s House, Rush Homes, Greater Lynchburg Habitat for Humanity, Lynchburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Lynchburg Community Action Group and the city of Lynchburg government — focuses on serving the housing needs of the low-income population, including the homeless.

After working toward these goals for nearly two years, members of the collaborative agreed they needed baseline data to inform its mission. The group engaged the Columbia, Maryland-based nonprofit Enterprise Community Partners last June to conduct a housing stability and economic security study with funding from a \$20,000 Community Impact Grant from the Virginia Housing Development Authority.

The goal of the study was to determine the actual state of housing in Lynchburg, collaborative founding member Jeff Smith said last June.

The Enterprise Foundation presented its findings to members of the LHRC Nov. 12. After receiving the results, collaborative founding member and Miriam’s House Executive Director Sarah Quarantotto said the group needed to analyze them and

determine the best path forward before discussing the findings publicly.

Several council members called the data “sobering” during the collaborative’s presentation of the data last Tuesday.

According to the study, more than 10,000 households, or 36 percent, spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Nationally, 33 percent of households are similarly cost-burdened.

“I can’t tell you what that does to those households,” Smith told council members. “That’s a formula for instability for a family ... and that’s what we’re talking about here — not so much the housing, but the instability that housing problems cause in our community.”

Another issue low-income households face is competition for affordable housing with those who can afford to pay more but choose to rent dwellings with lower rental rates.

Smith said there were 1.4 units priced affordably for every low-income renter household in the city. However, 28 percent of these were occupied by higher-income families.

Smith also reviewed a graph that showed rising rent rates relative to wages. Between 1990 and 2016, median rents in Lynchburg rose 14 percent while wages decreased 5 percent in that same time period.

Council member Jeff Helgeson said the city should not take the graph at face value because the people renting have changed over the years, so it may be skewed. He cited potential student growth at Liberty University as one factor that could have influenced the findings.

Council member Randy Nelson commented on an approximate 18 percent rise in median rents between 2012 and 2015 and its potential correlation to City Council raising the real estate tax rate in 2012. He said the data is important to understand as council moves into budget discussions over the next few months.

“In balancing a budget, if you need revenue, one of the topics that’s always discussed is raising real estate taxes,” Nelson said. “What that chart shows me is the last time we raised real estate taxes ... those real estate taxes, this suggests, may have been passed through to the tenants and most negatively impacted those in poverty and those who couldn’t absorb it.”

Another issue for those in poverty is the lack of investment in certain areas of the city that were “redlined” in 1937, Smith said. That year, assessors for the Home Owners Loan Corporation created a map that rated areas of the city to reduce home foreclosure rates during the Great Depression.

Regions shaded green — “A” areas — were rated the best and safest; “B” (blue) areas were “still desirable” with “C” (yellow) areas “in decline or transition” and “D” (red) areas considered “hazardous.” The “red-lined” neighborhoods were all-black neighborhoods and received little if any federal mortgage-rescue dollars.

Smith presented council with a map showing redlined boundaries from 1937 and the percent of low income cost-burdened black households from 2011 to 2015 within those boundaries. These include areas in the south and east urban core of the city.

“Redlined areas of ‘definitely declining’ and ‘hazardous’ line right up with the dark blue areas where the concentration of poverty is over 90 percent,” he said.

He also reviewed a map outlining job values for approved building permits in the city between 2015 and 2018 that showed “very little investment” in those areas. He said housing stability in poverty-stricken areas of Lynchburg cannot improve without investment in quality housing.

Quarantotto, the executive director of Miriam’s House, told council a lack of housing stability affects city residents because they may have to choose between paying their rent and other expenses, such as enrichment programs for their children or health care.

In an interview with The News & Advance last week, Greater Lynchburg Habitat for Humanity Executive Director and LRHC member Donna Vincent said housing instability affects health care, job attendance and performance, children’s school attendance and their performance.

“For people in poverty, one little problem one morning wrecks the whole day,” she said. “You can’t get your kids to child care, you can’t get to work, you can’t earn your wages, you can’t buy your groceries. If at least one part of your life is stable, if your housing is stable, it’s a great foundation for the other elements of your life to become more stable.”

Smith told council the collaborative is hoping for both community involvement and city leverage to address the needs identified by the housing study with policy changes such as zoning ordinances requiring developers to provide a percentage of affordable housing and public private partnerships.

Additionally, he asked for the city to initiate a task force to investigate affordable housing and develop a “progressive plan and vision” for low-income household stability as well as city-led studies on housing quality in Lynchburg and eviction rates.

“We need folks to be aware and understand that this is a community issue that affects everyone,” Smith said in an interview last week. “This takes money from their pockets too, whether it be in taxes or in the form of healthcare; it affects everyone. I know we are a community in Lynchburg that likes to work together and take care of people in need. That’s who we want to be.”

Mayor Treney Tweedy said she would like to see additional details about creating more mixed-income housing throughout the city through conversations between the collaborative and the city’s planning department. She asked city staff to work with LRHC on the group’s requests and bring updates back to council at a later date.

Extreme instability

In Lynchburg, 4,885 low-income households faced extreme conditions of housing instability in 2016:

587 adults were homeless

96 children were homeless

26.6 percent (3,711) of all renter households were low income and spending more than half their income on housing.

8.1 percent (1,174) of all homeowner households were low income and spending more than half their income on housing.

Source: 2018 Lynchburg Housing Stability Profile

https://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/lines-drawn-on-m-sidewalk-project-in-lynchburg/article_46b7e192-6ac9-11e9-9030-13f5c17966cc.html

Lines drawn on \$9.9M sidewalk project in Lynchburg

Carrie Dungan

Apr 29, 2019



A pedestrian walks on Florida Avenue in Lynchburg on October 17, 2018.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

A proposed sidewalk project on Florida Avenue has sparked heated disagreement between city administrators on one side and at least one city council member and the Lynchburg Fire Fighters Association on the other.

City officials say many pedestrians use the thoroughfare that runs between Main Street downtown and Campbell Avenue on the southeastern edge of the city to walk from their homes to work or the market. However, a 0.8-mile portion of the road between

Greenfield Drive and a curve north of Hudson Drive does not have a sidewalk, which makes the trek hazardous.

The city's proposed fiscal year 2020 budget includes \$9.9 million in the capital improvement plan for the project. That proposed expenditure has become a lightning rod for the Lynchburg Fire Fighters Association, which wants city council to use the funds for implementation of new pay scales and a new medic unit instead.

Ward III Councilman Jeff Helgeson has raised concerns during council budget discussions about the necessity and cost of the project in the face of other needs, such as Lynchburg's fire and police departments. City council has not yet discussed the project in detail during budget balancing.

"I have been over there 20 times; I have seen three walkers," Helgeson said in a Monday phone interview. "...\$10 million is a lot of money. If there's 10,000 walkers, that's \$1,000 per walker."

According to former Lynchburg Transportation Engineer Don Deberry, the city has worked for years on the issue, but ran into coordination roadblocks with Norfolk Southern, which has two railroad trestles that run over the road. Deberry said the sidewalk project necessitates rebuilding the trestle because of its current width.

This raises the cost of the project, Deputy City Manager Reid Wodicka said. Additionally, the city will have to spend about \$1 million to purchase right-of-way in the project area.

Last June the Commonwealth Transportation Board approved the city's application for revenue-sharing funds for the project, which jumpstarted the process.

The Virginia Department of Transportation will fund about \$2 million for the first phase of the project over the next four years. In that same time period, the city will spend \$2.14 million using funds from a line of credit. The VDOT funding cannot be used for other budget items, such as the fire department.

During a review of the city’s proposed CIP earlier this month, Helgeson asked to add the Florida Avenue sidewalk project to “The List” for further discussion during budget balancing.

Helgeson said there are other possibilities the city should consider for that area, including coordinating with local businesses to provide transportation for employees.

Lynchburg Fire Fighters Association President Jamie Maxwell said the association is concerned with “frivolous government spending,” which is why it has tried to raise public awareness about the Florida Avenue sidewalk project.

In a video posted on its Facebook page, the association called the project a “multimillion dollar sidewalk to nowhere.” It cites the cost of the project as \$15.6 million and said it was “rushed into the budget with an unaccounted for \$5.7 million.”

In an interview last week, Deputy City Manager Reid Wodicka confirmed the projected cost for the Florida Avenue sidewalk is \$9.9 million. He said \$5.65 million for phase II of project was inadvertently listed on a sheet titled “Planned Projects Beyond FY 2024,” but that sheet is simply a list outlining future projects for planning purposes and is not included in actual budget numbers.

The video also includes a quote from City Manager Bonnie Svrcek saying she could not give raises to city employees without affecting citizen services. That quote was from last year’s budget session. This year, the city budget includes 2 percent raises for employees who meet or exceed expectations.

Wodicka said the actual amount of city money going toward the sidewalk project over the next five years is less than \$230,000, which would equate to about \$49 per paycheck for raises before taxes if the city were to transition that funding to the Lynchburg Fire Department. A new medic unit would cost the city nearly \$330,000 over the next five years — assuming no pay increases.

“I want to be clear that these are issues that we take seriously,” Wodicka said about the association’s concerns. “But given the information we have, we believe we need to spend a lot of time really thinking through how to solve some of those issues through the assessment of data, rather than reacting to anecdotes.”

In an internal memo to city council dated April 23, Wodicka and Fire Chief Greg Wormser said they have planned for months to develop a data analysis team that will form this summer and study the fire department's current issues and "identify opportunities for changes in our operations and structure."

The memo goes on to review some of the Lynchburg Fire Association's concerns, including turnover, mandatory overtime and call volume.

Maxwell said in a Monday interview the department is on the brink of a retention issue after more than a dozen employees have left for better paying jobs over the past year. He said an updated pay schedule would help rectify some of those losses.

According to Wodicka and Wormser's memo, LFD instituted 52 mandatory overtime shifts in 2018, which accounted for 0.2% of staffed shifts. Maxwell said the city's firefighters also work nearly 8,000 hours in voluntary overtime.

One of the fire association's biggest concerns, Maxwell said, is the current call volume and time spent on calls. The department is currently about 100 calls ahead of pace from 2018. The memo states that the city's concern is more with the amount of time spent on each call because firefighters are providing more specialized treatments for citizens.

"...While we would like to address all of these issues immediately, we have to recognize that financial and organizational restraints require a disciplined and thoughtful approach," Wormser and Wodicka wrote in the memo. "A long-term strategy will result in sustainable policy and operational changes that will lead to even higher quality services to our community."

Maxwell said the pace and duration of calls is the reason the firefighter's association is requesting another medic unit for the city, which he estimates will cost over \$500,000.

"A medic unit would be best for the whole city," he said.

No matter what happens this budget cycle, Wodicka and Maxwell said they are ready and willing to sit down as a team to brainstorm ways to move the department forward.

Mayor Treney Tweedy said in a Monday phone interview it is important for council to be balanced in how it invests in the city.

“It is not a sidewalk to nowhere,” she said about the Florida Avenue sidewalk project. “It is a sidewalk to everywhere on that side of town. We have a great number of people who don’t have cars in that area. When you look at providing a safe walking opportunity for those people going to work, church or downtown, that public safety infrastructure investment is worth it.”



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Lynchburg addressing walkability with new sidewalks, citizen committee

https://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/details-for-lynchburg-s-main-street-renewal-project-including-timing/article_80bafa99-e5f3-5abd-b7f3-a8fd772a5c7d.html

Details for Lynchburg's Main Street Renewal project including timing, initial construction sites rolled out

Carrie Dungan
Apr 30, 2019



People attending a public meeting on the Main Street Renewal Project review a rendering in Lynchburg, Va. on Tuesday, April 30, 2019. (Photo by Carrie Dungan/The News & Advance)

Brace yourself, downtown Lynchburg.

The multi-block Main Street Renewal project is set to begin in earnest in September, with a projected end date of finishing before Thanksgiving 2021.

That was the timeline presented during a public meeting Tuesday evening that drew more than three dozen city officials and downtown stakeholders to the Holiday Inn on Main Street.

The estimated \$17 million renewal blueprint is the second phase of the city's downtown water line replacement and streetscape project and will involve work on Main Street between 8th and 12th streets as well as on 10th Street between Church and Main streets.

Appalachian Power Company approached the city last June with an opportunity to partner on updates to underground electrical infrastructure, streetscape improvements and replacement of century-old water lines. APCo will conduct additional work on portions of 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 12th and 13th streets.

The project will kick off in earnest Sept. 16, according to Water Resources Engineer Jim Talian, who is serving as the city's project manager for the Main Street work. He said the estimated project duration is 24 to 27 months.

Construction will begin in the 800 block of Main Street with construction possible in multiple blocks at the same time over the duration of the project. Talian said he did not have the exact sequence of construction but the city will provide more information during a follow-up meeting in August.

During construction, Talian said the city hopes to never close more than one corridor at a time and will make every effort to maintain access to buildings and parking decks.

"In each block, there are three corridors," he said. "There's a street for driving on and there's two sidewalks. Of those three corridors, we are setting a goal not to close more than one at a time. That's something we did not do in phase one."

Water utility upgrades will include 2,000 feet of new waterline, 58 individual service lines and meters, 10 new fire hydrants, nine new sanitary manholes and 14 new stormwater structures.

Once the utility updates are complete, the city will install asphalt and sidewalks with decorative pavers and crosswalks as well as native trees and plantings to beautify the corridor.

“Speaking from the city’s perspective ... virtually everything you see between the building faces on Main Street between 8th and 12th is going to change — all the curbs, all the sidewalks, all the streets, all the gutters,” Talian said.

APCo representative Tom Woodford called the Main Street Renewal a “unique project” and said he couldn’t remember partnering with another utility on such a large-scale venture.

The goal of the project, he said, is to improve electric service reliability in support of growth and to lessen the frequency and duration of outages.

“Everyone wants to move down here and that’s a good thing,” Woodford said. “... Everybody wants to come to dinner down here. So for our electrical system, that means a growing demand and it’s more difficult on the facilities we have so we have to upgrade our facilities to a new, much more modern system that can handle the growth that we have today and more importantly, the growth that we will have going into the future.”

Electrical system upgrades include new wire, transformers, concrete vaults, manholes, grates and street lighting.

APCo currently is conducting work on side streets around Main Street to reduce the impact of construction when the main project gets underway in September. Woodford said this provides added flexibility to reduce or prevent power outages while performing Main Street upgrades.

“We are very sensitive to your businesses,” he told stakeholders Tuesday. “We want to be very clear about that ... So you will have access to your business — we will make sure of that.”

If APCo has to cut power, Woodford said officials would communicate those outages in ad-vance to all affected customers.

Supporting downtown businesses is a major goal during the project, according to city spokesperson Jes Gearing. Heather Kennedy, a public relations consultant from consulting firm Cella Molnar & Associates — which has offices in Florida and

Lynchburg — will serve as a business project liaison for business owners in the affected area.

Additionally, Gearing said the city is partnering with the Downtown Lynchburg Association to creatively market businesses during construction and will have public art from local artists on construction fences.

Jannett Spearman owns Spearman Artistry in the Lynchburg Community Market and at 919 Main Street and said she appreciates the marketing campaign. She also understands the importance of the Main Street Renewal project and its future potential to increase property values as well as revitalize downtown.

“I own a building, so for me it’s very important because this is going to really help the business owners update not only their electricity coming into the buildings but also all the water work that needs to be done,” she said. “That would have cost us thousands of dollars.”

More Information

For additional details about the Main Street Renewal Project, visit www.RenewLYH.com. The website will feature regular project updates, navigational tools and detour information as well as information about business marketing programs. Visitors also can sign up for a weekly project email with updates on construction.