

# DAILY LOCAL NEWS

## People can't afford to live here, say Chester County housing activists



Chester County Commissioners host legislative delegation to hear lived experiences of residents and discuss housing in Chester County. (Left to Right): Front Row: Rob Henry (Administrator, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness), Pastor Mary Ann Mertz (St. Christopher's Episcopal Church of Oxford), Tamela Luce (President & CEO Phoenixville Community Health Foundation and Co-Chair Phoenixville Community Health Foundation), Katherine Evans (Church Housing Corp.), Wendy Gaynor (Operations Manager, Orion Communities), Kris Keller (Executive Director, Orion Communities). Second Row: Matrie Johnson (Director of Programs, Home of the Sparrow), Hallie Romanowski (Executive Director, ACT in Faith), Leandria Hall (Director of Programs, Oxford Neighborhood Services), Faith Rosa (The Erica Lundmark Group, Coldwell Banker Realty), Sheri Houpt (Housing Counselor, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness), Roberta Cosentino (Assistant City Manager of Coatesville), Mayor Peter Urscheler of Phoenixville, Cheryl Miles (Community Housing Development Director, Kennett Area Community Services), Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste of West Chester, Ethan Seletsky (Regional Representative, Office of US Senator Bob Casey PA), Conor Johnston (Constituent Advocate, Office of US Representative Chrissy Houlahan, PA-06)

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Excerpts below[

WEST GOSHEN — It is something of a mantra recited by leaders in Chester County that their home is a great place to live, work, raise a family and retire.

And while that it is almost certainly true, it is also evident that it is not necessarily an affordable place to live, work, raise a family and retire, especially if you have a household that falls below the median income of \$110,000.

According to U.S. Census figures provided to the MediaNews Group, the county has lost more than 5,500 affordable rental units under \$1,500 a month in last five years, dropping from 31,425 such units to

25,889. Meanwhile, the number of rental units — houses and apartments — that cost more than \$1,500 a month, have grown from 12,319 to 17,991 over the same period, from 2016 to 2021. Median rents in the county went from \$1,200 to \$1,400 from 2016 to 2021.

The affordable nature of housing in the county was the topic of a recent gathering organized by the Chester County commissioners that brought together housing activists and legislative representatives to not only raise awareness of the issues and impacts facing the county and its less wealthy residents, but to also encourage those participating to make pledges that would lead to solutions for the problem.

“We didn’t get into this situation overnight, and we are not going to get out of it overnight,” said Kris Keller, one of those who attended the session at the Government Services center in West Goshen on Aug. 22, in an interview after the meeting. “We need long term solutions. People can’t afford to live here.

“Affordable housing is needed not just in West Chester, Coatesville, Kennett Square or Phoenixville, but also in other places, like Chester Springs,” said Keller, the executive director of Orion Communities, an organization that serves housing needs in the county. “We need to be able to allow people to live in the communities in which they work. It can’t all be pushed someplace else.”

Put on by the commissioners, led by Vice Chairman Josh Maxwell, and the Allies for Housing in Chester County, the goals of the gathering were to hear examples of those who have attempted to find affordable housing here and to explore ways legislators and community groups can work together to ensure affordable, equitable, and accessible housing is available to all residents.

The legislative gathering served as a follow up to a similar gathering held one year ago. This year’s event featured a historical perspective offered by Cheryl Miles of Kennett Area Community Services, and elected officials’ responses to the housing crisis from West Chester Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste and Conor Johnston, from the office of U.S. Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-6th, of Easttown.

Keller said in her remarks at the session that she had spoken directly to the nature of affordable housing recently, with a landlord and developer who wanted to explore the issue.

“What style of housing do we need to build to meet the requirements of the clients you serve and the homeless in our area?” she quoted the landlord as asking. “The reality during this national housing crisis is we need everything we can get.

“We need studios for extremely low-income folks,” she said. “We need three-bedroom apartments for single moms. We need starter houses for young families. We need accessible units for elders and people differently abled. We need options in the \$350 to \$850 per month. We responded that if you build it, we will help find families for all types of housing.”

According to a news release issued by Maxwell’s office about the matter, the cost of living in the is 19.6 percent higher in the county than the national average. This higher cost of living is largely due to the high median house value of \$491,600 in the county. Despite being more expensive than average, the county does have a wide range of housing options for those looking to invest or live in the area. But many of those do not meet the test of affordability.

Said Miles, “Folks from our group want to share their stories and they want us to know that, not only do they need help with housing, but they also need housing that is going to be within their income range. They need assistance to not just move in, but to be able to maintain a stable housing experience.

# DAILY LOCAL NEWS

Letter to the Editor: Affordable housing in Chester County is a multi-layer issue that should be addressed

By [FOR MEDIANEWS GROUP](#) |

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Kudos to the Chester County commissioners and MediaNews Group's recent article highlighting the local housing crisis. Thank you to the 70 people (elected officials, nonprofits, and community activists) who participated in last week's conversation introduced by Commissioner Josh Maxwell on the 'growing need for affordable, accessible, and attainable housing in our community'.

The challenges may start with high land and property costs but the reality is that there are additional interwoven factors creating this crisis including zoning, costs to build tax credit buildings, and NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard).

While some people say the issue is landlords and developers, we need to recognize that access to affordable housing is a complex issue. We will need government funds and forward-thinking policies, private sector money, religious organizations, and creative nonprofits to provide more homes for our child and elder care providers, bank tellers and grocery store staff, families just starting out and elders wanting to age in their community.

The Allies for Affordable Housing in Chester County recognize that we need both long-term plans as well as interim solutions to keep all our neighbors safely sheltered. Please be an active ally and join the conversation in your community.

*Kris Keller is executive director of Orion Communities in Phoenixville.*