

## **Guest View: Portsmouth Is Failing on Housing. Here's How We Fix It.**

Two weeks ago, I laid out the math behind Portsmouth's housing crisis — a problem that's quietly reshaping our community by pricing out the very people who make it work. To recap: Portsmouth currently has 1,424 rental housing units in the development pipeline — either under construction, fully approved, or in late-stage planning. Of those:

- 1,131 are market-rate rentals, well above what low- and middle-income workers can afford — even the least expensive would require a minimum household income of \$160,000.
- Just 293 are income-restricted affordable rentals, accessible only to households that qualify under strict income limits.

That means 79% of rental units in the pipeline are targeted at high-income renters. The average school teacher, bartender, or city worker doesn't stand a chance. The elementary school teacher who wants to live near the students she teaches — she's priced out. The chef whose restaurant struggles to stay open for dinner service — they can't hire anyone who can afford to live within 30 minutes of work. The fixed-income senior quietly thinking about leaving town after 40 years — they no longer belong to the demographic our housing policy seems designed for. This situation is the product of choices — about zoning, leadership, priorities, and political will. And it can be reversed. It's not easy but here's what Portsmouth must do — clearly, urgently, and unapologetically — if we want to build a future that isn't gated by income:

### **1. Create a Housing Strike Team — Small, Skilled, and Unafraid**

Portsmouth doesn't need another committee. We already have a Housing Committee — composed of dedicated volunteers — but it is advisory by design, with no mandate or budget to take decisive action. Their continued input will be valuable, but we now need a team with a different job: to act. To be clear: this isn't a criticism of those already doing the work. Our city boards, committees, and staff are stretched thin. They're working hard on housing, often without much fanfare — from launching a Gateway Neighborhood Overlay District near Commerce Way (with new incentives for developers) to laying the groundwork for a Housing Trust Fund that could help finance below-market projects. That's real progress, and it deserves recognition.

But solving this crisis can't be just one more item on an overloaded agenda. It requires dedicated capacity and cross-sector collaboration — and that's exactly where the Housing Strike Team comes in. This small, focused unit — no more than seven people and chosen

purely for experience and expertise — would be empowered to drive change with urgency and creativity. It should include:

- A housing-savvy City staffer (from Planning or Economic Development)
- A Planning Board veteran
- A nonprofit or affordable housing developer
- A for-profit developer with a track record of multifamily projects
- A land-use attorney or zoning code expert
- A data/finance specialist who understands housing economics
- A community voice from a renter, workforce, or senior perspective

Their mandate? Deliver an action plan within 120 days that identifies where and how Portsmouth can unlock at least 1,000 additional affordable-to-middle-income rental units — beyond what's already in the pipeline — by 2030, using zoning reform, land disposition, public-private partnerships, and policy innovation. This plan must be grounded in data — not anecdotes or assumptions. Where is the unmet demand? Which parcels make sense for development? What affordability levels are most needed? The Strike Team's job is to analyze, prioritize, and act.

The existing Housing Committee could serve as a sounding board, reviewing drafts and providing public accountability. But the Strike Team's purpose is different: it must be results-driven, nimble, and empowered. Portsmouth is also beginning the process of rewriting its Master Plan — an opportunity to envision a more inclusive, better-planned city. But that process will take time. The next draft of zoning reforms could be two years away. The Strike Team doesn't replace that work — it accelerates the parts we already know we need: more rental housing, more affordability, and smarter land use. We can't afford to wait for the ink to dry before we act.

Mayor McEachern, in his recent op-ed, acknowledged housing as a central concern and critical to our local economy — and that's encouraging. But recognition alone won't fix what's broken; it's not enough to pay lip service to the housing crisis without vigorously pushing to accelerate solutions that will satisfy unmet demand. The Mayor and Council must now take the next step: empower a focused team to drive action. We know the federal and state landscape is constrained. That's exactly why we need to be bold and resourceful at the local level. Give the Strike Team a modest budget and full access to staff data. Make their meetings public. Don't bury them in process — empower them to do the thing we keep saying

we want: move the needle. This isn't about more recommendations. It's about execution, urgency, and delivering measurable progress. Portsmouth has the talent. What we lack is the structure to harness it.

## **2. Rezone Pease for Housing — or Admit We're Not Serious**

Pease Tradeport employs more than 10,000 workers, yet not a single housing unit is permitted on-site. That's not just bad planning — it's a missed opportunity on a regional scale. Imagine hundreds of workforce apartments integrated into Pease, close to jobs and transit, with no impact on established residential neighborhoods. In any event, we need leadership — from City Hall, the Pease Development Authority, and our Congressional delegation — to rezone Pease for housing and unlock this potential. If Portsmouth is serious about housing solutions, Pease must be part of the plan.

## **3. Face the Myth: “We Don’t Have the Land”**

We hear this a lot: “Portsmouth is built out. There's no more room.” But that's not true. What we don't have is land zoned for the kind of housing we need. Our city is dotted with strip malls, surface parking lots, aging commercial buildings, and oversized parcels. A targeted rezoning effort — focused on walkable corridors and underused parcels — could unleash hundreds of new housing opportunities. The land is there. It's our policy that's in the way.

And let's be honest: surrounding towns are not pulling their weight. Despite regional dependence on Portsmouth's jobs and services, most neighboring communities continue to block the kind of zoning reform and multifamily development we urgently need. There's no regulatory mechanism to compel them — so while we should keep pushing for regional solutions, we can't afford to wait. Portsmouth must lead.

## **4. Yes, Upzoning May Be Unpopular — But It's Necessary, and It Can Be Beautiful**

Some people will object to changes in single-family neighborhoods. That's understandable — but it's not a reason to keep the door closed to others. Upzoning — which simply means changing zoning rules to allow more than one unit per lot — doesn't mean towers in Elwyn Park. It means gentle density: duplexes, triplexes, cottage courts, and small apartment buildings — the kinds of homes that already exist in older, beloved parts of Portsmouth. We can grow without sacrificing the character of our neighborhoods. Done well, upzoning creates walkability, diversity, and vitality — the very things that make Portsmouth special in the first place.

## **5. Make Inclusionary Zoning Real — Even If It Can't Be Mandatory**

Under New Hampshire law, cities like Portsmouth can't require developers to include affordable units — but we can and must use every available incentive to encourage them.

That includes meaningful density bonuses, streamlined approvals, and tax relief for projects that deliver true affordability. But even with the right incentives, we face a tougher landscape: federal support for housing is increasingly uncertain. HUD programs and low-income housing tax credits — critical sources for nonprofit developers — are now caught in the political chaos of Washington D.C. That means Portsmouth must do more to attract and enable public-private partnerships, including collaborations with for-profit affordable housing developers and trusted groups like the Portsmouth Housing Authority (PHA) and Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH). These mission-driven entities know how to finance and manage below-market housing — but they need land, zoning, and local buy-in to succeed here.

## **6. Use Public Land for Public Good**

The City of Portsmouth owns property — and that means we have options. Other cities are using public land to develop affordable housing in partnership with nonprofits and mission-driven developers. Let's commit to this. Prioritize city-owned parcels for workforce and below-market housing. Use 99-year ground leases to keep it permanently affordable. This is our land — let's use it to shape our future.

## **7. Don't Let the Property Tax Fear Stop Us**

Some worry that more affordable housing will mean higher taxes. That's a fair point — but here's the truth: housing policy done right is a stabilizer, not a cost driver. When we build housing near jobs, we reduce traffic congestion and infrastructure wear. When teachers, paramedics, and servers can live in town, we reduce turnover and service strain. And when we partner with nonprofits and use public land, we keep costs low and share the risk with developers, not just taxpayers. Avoiding action is what leads to spiking taxes — as wealth concentration drives up assessments and low supply pushes out the middle class. The real fiscal risk is in doing nothing. The Housing Strike Team would require no new staff. No stipends. Zoning analysis by consultants, at the behest of our planners, is already underway. Public outreach can be done at modest cost. For the cost of repainting a few crosswalks, Portsmouth could finally create a serious, focused response to our biggest existential challenge.

## **8. Say It Plainly: NIMBYism Is Driving This Crisis**

The most powerful zoning code in communities across the country isn't just in the land use regulations. It's the unwritten rule of "Not In My Backyard." We dress it up in language about traffic, setbacks, and neighborhood character — but at its core, it's about preserving exclusivity. We need to name that dynamic, not to shame anyone, but to understand what's really holding us back. Because we can't build a welcoming city if we're too afraid to change it.

Fortunately, the tide is turning. More residents are recognizing that this crisis is real — and more are open to thoughtful development that adds needed housing without impairing the character of our neighborhoods. We don't have to choose between preserving what we love and making room for those we need. We can do both — if we stop waiting and start building.

Our new Master Plan will eventually help shape the next decade — but the housing crisis is unfolding right now. If we want a Portsmouth where teachers, seniors, artists, tradespeople, and families can live, we have to act. With vision. With guts. And with urgency. We need to act on facts — not fear. And we can do it without burdening taxpayers — if we're smart, focused, and willing to use the tools we already have. If not, our longstanding motto, "City of the Open Door," will become just a memory.

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