

Housing needs assessment

As per NWCCOG, "Pitkin County's main economic driver is tourism, with 39% of all jobs related to this sector: accommodation and food services (26%) and arts, entertainment, recreation (13%)."

The 2023 Housing Needs Assessment report published by NWCCOG. Aspen/Pitkin has 3,200 deed restricted housing units. Even with this number of housing units, a 2019 study sites the gap for housing units in the upper valley in the thousands. The county has 34.9% of its housing units vacant for seasonal/recreational use. The luxury rental market is one factor in crowding out rentals (for workforce housing) from the housing stock. (NWCCOG, September 2023 update)

Pitkin County is rural resort community, a tourist economy and protection and preservation of wilderness, must be balanced with economic drivers. The land use code supports the people and place and economic prosperity that have evolved in a half century of land use pattern development.

Density

Our municipalities are made up of many, let's say, 6000 SF lots, 60 x 100'. Some 90 by 100' lots have been subdivided a few times, to 60 x 100' and 30 x 100'. On the 60 x 100' lots there is often a front and back unit, the same on the 30 x 100' lots. So a lot becomes a two family lot.

The issues for municipalities are just because there is a unit over a garage, it does not mean it is deed restricted workforce housing.

The same question arises in the rural areas of Pitkin County, with a risk of more rentals, without serving the needs of workforce housing. Deed restricted, resident occupied (employee housing) is not currently a part of the mid-valley master plan (Down Valley Comprehensive Plan), but recent developments in Redstone (with existing municipal water and waste, not greenfield development) and along Capitol Creek show a willingness to house workforce staff onsite. Local housing solutions reduce vehicle miles travelled for employees and reduce valley wide congestion.

The current numbers

Aspen has 70% of deed restricted units according to NWCCOG. 5872 units, 2,303 deed restricted). Basalt is 16%. Snowmass Village is 12% deed restricted. Basalt and Aspen have development code that encourages ADUs (but not as use by right). At the Pitkin County level 34.9% of housing units are vacant for seasonal use and/or recreational use. So 1 in 3 homes are unoccupied most of the year. And only 17% of the housing stock in Pitkin County is rental.

Case study in Rural Pitkin County

In rural Pitkin County a recent multi-family development on three-acres supports three housing units. Why on 2.25 acres only 3 1-bedroom dwelling units? A dwelling unit requires an aquifer, fire rated walls, water storage tanks (for consumption, potable

water, for fire protection, as we sprinkler at 3000 SF, in accordance with NFPA 13R), an onsite waste treatment system (OWTS) and a driveway meeting fire safety standards and local land use provisions. Providing multi-family housing in rural Colorado- outside of municipal boundaries- requires water rights (state issuance) and costly site improvements for storage of water and treatment of waste (civil).

Water

As we move to a hotter and drier climate more water is needed to irrigate the same acreage, resulting in less groundwater discharge and reduction in total stream flows. Drought conditions. In the autumn, we witness low water tables and soil requiring infiltration, leaving less runoff from snowmelt for the rivers. We must maintain minimum in stream flows for wildlife, year round. Growth in Colorado, whether the Western Slope or the Front Range, has implications for reduced stream flows, lower groundwater tables and increased losses due to trans basin diversions. Our community resources are limited. Our water systems are stressed.

Waste

We have a risk to our rural resort economy when our sanitation services are flowing into our rivers and our aging infrastructure does not meet CDPHE guidelines. Similarly, many rural water treatment facilities are past their end of life.

Electrification requirements

Single Family Residential homes receive electrical service via a 200 AMP main distribution panel. In order to meet electrification needs, hot water heaters, heat pumps, and car(s) upgrades require updates to the main service panel or residences to a 400 AMP or greater (for an average size single family residence). Electrification will likely require costly trenching from the residence to the transformer and upgrades to the main service panel. This is an argument for electrification down to the parcel level.

Density and the WUI risk

Increased density will result in a lower structure separation distance (SSD), which may result in a change in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) type classification, adding additional fuel to a typical parcel and/or typical housing density. (So a low structure density, could be updated to a medium-density construction as SSD decreases). Further, land use codes today are parcel centric, so increasing density may put neighboring lots at increased risk (for exposure to a neighboring ignition point- fire and/or embers, given the increase in fuels per parcel and parcel centric site planning).

Impact for Pitkin County

Rural sprawl, throughout the greater Roaring Fork Valley has already negatively impact the health, safety or welfare of our residents. The answer for Pitkin is to keep the density concentrated in the urban growth boundary. Do not extend water or sanitation services. Concentrate growth where we have existing social services. If we are going to grow at the edges of the UGB, then identify lots that would qualify as transportation oriented, largely in municipal boundaries- which by their nature are well served by regional transportation, social, water and waste services.

Research

Continue the research and assessments found in the workforce housing tools matrix. The workforce housing needs assessment from 2023 by the NWCCOG identifies the housing gap in units as: Aspen 956, Basalt 1409, and Snowmass Village as 1400. The

unmet need, housing gap, should be looked at in conjunction with a parcel level analysis (build out and density) and not conflated with a full build out notion (which will continue to pressure prices and vehicle miles travelled).

Near term housing opportunities

1. People over parking lots- look at (County) parcel inventory and opportunities (with municipalities). Universities, like Washington University in St Louis, have expanded campus green space and walkability by putting infrastructure above ground and cars below ground. Prioritize *housing over hardscape* and wind up with a walkable community.

2. Support *Housing the Aspen Idea Project* and push the land planners to move parking spaces below ground (undergoing parking, overground people) in favor of gaining moderate density, non-profit, walkable housing. This is valuable land. Develop solutions that prioritize people over parking, in the character of meandering pathways, draws and grass mounds. Yes, a more expensive endeavor is housing over parking, where parking is subterranean).- Go down before we go up. Do not build up before building down. Cities are for people. Read Jan Gehl). Walking through the west end to moderate density housing and opening up to the Tent and Hall and looking back to shadow mountain (improvements and rural vistas), should be consistent with the land use patterns already established by Bayer.

3. Essential worker housing and essential employee housing outside of UGB. Work within the Down Valley Comprehensive Plan or have a larger community conversation about nearby “brown” field parcels. Opportunities exist for essential workforce housing on parcels already owned by the county or taxing districts- Aspen Village, El Jebel, and Woody Creek. Take the lessons learned from Station 46 and apply them elsewhere in rural Pitkin County.

4. Update the seasonal farm worker housing provisions in the code (LUC) in order to spur local ranching and farming. Local agriculture and animal husbandry, do not require loading docks and eighteen-wheelers, grow more food locally and support our local farmers and ranchers. Farmers can not manage ditches and watering and harvests from thirty miles away. This addition to the LUC has proven valuable to small farmers and could be utilized by ranchers. This is one solution to a housing crisis. One farm owner has already deployed all electric homes (RVs) to their farm. We have several seasons of use and an understanding of updates to the code required to fulfill their needs. In one case study a farmer has purchased all electric RVs; meeting or exceeding what we specified in the LUC (NFPA 1192 adherence, which addressed planners life safety concerns). While the farmer could build workforce housing, a seasonal solution is expedient and cost effective. (The farmer has approvals in their master plan for a permanent solution, but have stayed out of the construction market due to vertical construction costs).

5. Acquire free market for conversion to workforce housing, deed restricted rental units. This has been widely reported, but we must weigh a few factors. The negative impact

of acquisition may crowd out of other potential buyers at the free market stipulated price. And again, be parcel centric, we should acquire free market units outside of STR zones, for maximum economic impact. We should not compete with out of state hotel operators. Units outside of STR zones (may) enjoy a discount to those properties inside the rental mapped areas.

6. Within urban growth boundaries in the County, encourage density and deed restrictions, in order to provide workforce housing. In the case of municipalities where compliance with covenants and restrictions exists (plats and secondary declarations) and design review (committees), balance workforce housing needs with transportation concerns and quality of life.

The irony of an HOA master plan which disallows second kitchens (caretaker units or accessory use units), yet the rental of the primary home is permitted, shows the tenure of the problem.

Homeowners welcome rental income and ignore the service economy created that is impacting our community. Landscape, cleaning, snow removal, electrician, security, heating/cooling engineer, etc. all driving to the village to service the rental. Yet the HOA is against a square footage bonus, like Crested Butte, to increase density, affordability and availability of workforce housing?

7. Outside of the UBG, look at adjacencies to already developed subdivisions. Identify parcels where there is already municipal and or county ownership.

Some of this mapping already exists, now let's understand the cost and impact of development. Are there priority parcels and what is the (vertical) cost? Are we avoiding constraints? How does this fit with neighborhood character? The community favors slow (or no) growth and low density development. But our valley infrastructure is stressed, yet we have an unmet need: essential and workforce housing. How do we balance and manager our unmet need, with existing services from water to roads, to waste and emergency services all stressed simultaneously.

Conclusion

Pitkin County is rural resort community. The land use code supports the people and place and economic prosperity that have evolved in a half century of land use pattern development. Creating workforce housing density in our established municipal boundaries, reignites our urban core and protects our wilderness and rural landscape, and maintains our green fields (free from development). Keep development to where there are municipal services, don't extend these services. If we are truly at capacity, then provide a site and parcel analysis to the community and let's have an open public discussion about the UBG and municipal services.

Draft:

Jeffrey Woodruff, AIA, LEED AP
Snowmass, CO
10 June 2024