



Creating healthy communities requires collaboration – not confrontation

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The message from a recent housing conference was clear: Healthy communities create healthy regions, and that should be the goal for the Hudson Valley.

From keynote speaker Ron Sims, deputy secretary of the department of Housing and Urban Development, to three breakout panels, the integration of housing, planning and achieving vibrant communities was addressed.

"Either we find a way to work together or else we will all not succeed," said Jonathan Drapkin, CEO of Pattern for Progress, which hosted the conference at the Poughkeepsie Grand.

While a message of unity has been preached for centuries, at this moment in time, it's critical people respond said Drapkin. He cited the current economic climate, with the Hudson Valley's unemployment rate doubled over the past three years, the very real cuts in government funding to local programs and the challenges of attracting businesses to the region as a trifecta of woes that can only be addressed through public and private entities in the region working together.

"Collaboration and sharing resources is no longer debatable," he says.

One theme that has become a battle cry for Pattern is the need to streamline development efforts. The state's environmental review process, known as SEQRA, should not be confrontational, pitting builders against environmentalists and tying up projects for years, but rather a system of checks and balances that ultimately produces the best project.

"I think we're seeing the real effects, in New York state, of the high cost of doing business," said Glenn Hoagland, Executive Director of Mohonk Preserve, and a member of Pattern's board of directors. "SEQRA shouldn't be an impediment. It allows citizen input and protects the environment." Establishing solid comprehensive plans that anticipate what a community wants to become is critical for good planning and will help the process he said.

"We're actively engaged in helping communities implement comprehensive plans, to save what needs to be saved, and build what needs to be built." While he acknowledges that open space is a clean and green form of economic development, there is also a need for better business and housing solutions within the Hudson Valley.

"We can not sustain the parochial patterns of government ...if we want to be a competitive region," he said. "It's a win-win if we can create needed housing and needed employment and create quality open space for health and recreation."

The need for affordable housing was pervasive throughout the conference. Keynote speaker Sims hinted at new changes that will be coming from HUD, including a shift toward supporting regional planning, rather than just through city and town efforts. As the federal agency that controls fiscal distribution of housing funds, HUD carries immense power in planning efforts.

And affordable housing is no longer a code word for housing the needy. The housing bubble saw prices soar so high that even with a correction, homeownership is not an option for many who work in the community, including teachers and young professionals.

"There's no where near enough affordable housing," said Larry Regan, president of Regan Development Corporation and a panelist on a session entitled "Implications for Housing: Daring to Meet the Real Needs of Our Communities," which was moderated by Mary Paden, vice president of the Community Preservation Corporation.

"The key is the housing - whether it be affordable, market rate, multi-family or whatever - it needs to follow the existing need," said Regan. "Once the need is determined you can figure out how best to address the need and do that."

Existing communities need to accept those needs, and then develop a growth plan, he said. He credits Fishkill planners as being "visionaries" for understanding the need for diverse housing options.

“They understood people need to live close to where they work. They’ve been very forward-thinking. If we keep household heads and families close to places where they work we can grow communities in the Hudson Valley.”

As a developer solely of affordable housing, and a recipient of Pattern’s Housing Hero award, Regan chooses to work with communities whose leaders understand their community’s needs, even if there is some opposition from residents. But if leaders and citizens are against it, he won’t even consider the option. “There’s places for everything. It’s not my job to say where those needs should be - it’s the job of the local municipality,” he said. “Communities need to accept these needs and develop plan to meet these needs in a smart growth format.”