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Notes from editor (not for publication):

G, please see email. I took out the Susan Fillion reference but can easily put it back with a little more information.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 More housing is available in the region. But can renters
2 afford it?

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 One real estate agent sees less demand for apartments as
4 'the availability of jobs has changed'; WWHT has made changes
5 to fill housing more expeditiously

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 Opportunities for available "workforce" housing seem to
8 have taken a positive turn in town. But there's a problem. Not
9 many are applying to rent them.
10 "It's an interesting dynamic because a few months ago —
11 four to six months ago — that was not the case," says Susan

12 Bellville, principal at Bellville Realty. “There were no available
13 units. I wasn’t putting anything out because I would have been
14 inundated [with calls from potential renters].”

15 Bellville, who also manages five properties with a total of
16 36 units, watches the real estate market assiduously. About a
17 month ago she says there were at least 33 available apartments in
18 Brattleboro that she considers “workforce” housing.

19 The term has come into vogue with town planners,
20 government, and organizations concerned with housing policy or
21 advocacy, as well as real estate agents, developers, and lenders.

22 “Workforce housing” can refer to any form of housing,
23 including ownership of single- or multi-family homes and
24 occupation of rental units. It is generally understood to mean
25 affordable housing for households with earned income that is
26 otherwise insufficient to secure quality housing reasonably near
27 the occupants’ workplace.

28 Bellville sets the bar for workforce housing at \$1,200 to
29 \$1,800 per month for one- and two-bedroom units.

30 “Generally, what owners are looking for is three times
31 rent for income to qualify for occupancy,” she explains.

32 That means a renter would have to be earning at least
33 \$50,000 annually — a guideline as to how much annual salary
34 should be in hand to manage such rental costs.

35 From there being 33 apartments available here at the
36 beginning of September, by New Year’s Day there were still 27
37 listed on Zillow and other sites.

38 “I was getting no interest for two months, then modest
39 interest, so I was curious why,” says Bellville.

40 She says she checked and double-checked inventory, and
41 “there were still 27 in town. That’s a lot,” she says.

42 “To find there are that many units available is interesting.
43 We’ve got the housing, but not the people to take them up. From
44 my perspective, it feels the income in Brattleboro isn’t supporting
45 workforces. The jobs aren’t paying enough. But to have very few
46 inquiries, it feels like there aren’t that many people looking.

47 “Because I have such a broad-reaching sphere between
48 rentals and sales, I pay attention to the dynamics of why people
49 are here and leaving ... it’s a puzzling time,” she continues. “It’s
50 the cost of living here that’s the problem.”

51 Bellville thinks a potential 7% town operating budget
52 increase is “too much for people who want to live in this
53 community, and it makes it harder for rentals.”

54 Adding to the cost, due to the size of some properties,
55 dumpsters are needed — and Bellville says costs for those
56 containers recently “just went up at least 10% across the board.”

57 Generally, Bellville thinks “availability of jobs has
58 changed.”

59 “There aren’t that many in the category of [earning]
60 \$50,000-plus,” she says. “We now have the housing for people to
61 come here for the good-paying jobs, which seemed to be the
62 battle cry for a long time [...] now we have the housing, but we
63 don’t have the good paying jobs.”

64 **WWHT changes from waitlist** 65 **to notification list**

66 The Windham & Windsor Housing Trust (WWHT), which
67 owns a number of workforce housing units in Brattleboro and in
68 the region, no longer has a waiting list.

69 WWHT Executive Director Elizabeth Bridgewater says
70 that’s not because the demand for affordable housing has
71 diminished. Rather, the Trust has changed its approach “to make
72 the process more efficient and to open up the opportunity for
73 more people to access our rental homes.”

74 Bridgewater explains that about a year ago WWHT
75 began transitioning from the waiting list mode to a “notification
76 list to fill housing vacancies.”

77 “The old wait list approach was very inefficient because
78 many of the people who were on the list were not responsive
79 when we had vacancies available, but the wait list policy

80 required us to reach out in the order people appeared on the list,”
81 she says. “We found that we were sending out a lot of letters
82 announcing vacancies, but the response was low.”

83 A deeper look “revealed that some people had moved
84 out of the area or they were not looking for housing at that
85 particular time, or the vacant apartment didn’t meet their needs,”
86 she says.

87 “With the transition to a notification list, the process of
88 getting the word out is more efficient, and vacancies are being
89 filled faster,” she adds.

90 Bridgewater describes the move as a “transition”
91 deliberately, she says, because WWHT offered everyone who had
92 been on a waitlist the chance to remain on it, keeping their same
93 place in line. However, if they were unresponsive or declined an
94 opportunity offered, they were removed from the waitlist and
95 placed on the notification list.

96 “Over time, the number of people on the waitlist for any
97 given property has declined and in most cases, we’re now fully
98 utilizing a notification list,” she says.

99 The way the notification list works is that when a
100 vacancy becomes available, WWHT sends a notification to
101 everyone on the list. “We then review completed applications on
102 a first-come, first-served basis. In addition to being more efficient,
103 this new process has opened the door to people who may qualify
104 to rent a home through the Housing Trust, but who assumed they
105 would never get the opportunity because the waitlist was too
106 long,” says the director.

107 “The one exception to this approach is if there is a
108 project-based voucher attached to the rental home,” she adds. In
109 these cases, the WWHT is still required to use a waitlist at the
110 Brattleboro Housing Authority, which administers the voucher
111 program.

112 The Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston has awarded
113 \$47 million in grants, loans, and interest-rate subsidies through
114 its Affordable Housing Program to support 49 affordable housing

115 initiatives in New England and beyond. These projects will create
116 or preserve 1,532 rental and homeownership units for individuals
117 and families earning up to 80% of the area median income.

118 As part of this funding round, Vermont received nearly
119 \$3 million to fund 124 affordable housing units in Brandon,
120 Brattleboro, Grand Isle, and Newport.

121 For the WWHT's Alice Holway affordable housing
122 project, now under construction in Putney, buildings at 48 and
123 50 Alice Holway Drive are nearly completed. In December,
124 Bazin Brothers Trucking, from Westminster, dug a portion of Alice
125 Holway Drive in order to connect the new complex to the town
126 water system.

127 Applications to rent these apartments will be opened in
128 the spring. If you are a Putney group, organization, school,
129 business or other entity and would like applications on hand
130 when leasing begins, email mmajor@homemattershere.org.

131 Anyone can sign up to receive notifications for WWHT's
132 available apartments in Putney (Putney Landing, Noyes House,
133 and Laura Plantz House) at homemattershere.org/how-to-apply.

134 Tip of a trend?

135 While WWHT's waitlist changes aren't related,
136 Bridgewater says Bellville's hunch that folks can't afford
137 "affordable housing" isn't wrong.

138 "I think Sue is onto a trend due to a number of factors,"
139 Bridgewater says.

140 "In general, because of persistent inflation for the cost of
141 basic goods, renters' budgets are being squeezed more than
142 ever," she says. "And in Windham County, renter median income
143 is much lower than those who own their homes."

144 According to the Vermont Housing Finance Agency's
145 2025–2029 [Housing Needs Assessment](#), renter median income in
146 Windham County was \$37,231, compared to owner median
147 income of \$77,651.

148 Bridgewater says in addition, 74% of all households in
149 Windham County have a household income of less than
150 \$52,378.

151 The final factor: "Windham County has a higher
152 percentage of households led by someone 65 and older than the
153 rest of the state, and more often these households are single-
154 person households," she says. "These trends point to a highly
155 cost-burdened renter population that may not be able to afford
156 market-rate housing.

157 "In addition, the cost to provide housing is more
158 expensive than ever with large annual increases in property
159 insurance, health care costs, and diminishing labor force. There is
160 also the factor of the winter season, when folks don't tend to
161 move as often so there is usually a buildup in inventory during
162 this time."

163 **Board to talk housing Feb. 3**

164 Still, Selectboard member Amanda Ellis-Thurber feels
165 optimistic that there's more available affordable housing.

166 "It sounds like in Brattleboro, at least, we may be moving
167 out of the housing 'crisis,'" she says.

168 Her board colleague Oscar Heller, who is also a housing
169 provider with five units on Elliot Street, says it's early to say for
170 sure, "but if the rental market is loosening up, that's outstanding
171 news."

172 "It may be a sign that recent pro-housing steps taken by
173 the town may be taking effect," he says. "More available units
174 leading to lower rents would be a huge help to Brattleboro, and I
175 say that as a landlord who has certainly benefited from the tight
176 housing market of the last few years."

177 He says that more apartment housing "leads to economic
178 growth, workforce development, and attracting younger people
179 who often prefer rentals."

180 "And, of course, more housing means less homelessness
181 and less housing insecurity," Heller says. "I'll continue to monitor
182 the housing situation with great interest and with hope."

183 The board is tentatively set to meet with town Planning
184 Director Susan Fillion, who was not available at press time, on
185 Feb. 3. Check out the WWHT notification list online at
186 homemattershere.org.

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