

# City housing strategies seek to ensure Spartanburg's growth is sustainable, equitable

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## Comprehensive housing and development strategies meet broad range of community needs



With a rising chorus of voices in the community calling for more attention to be paid to developing workforce and affordable housing and to increasing homeownership within our borders, the City of Spartanburg has a number of strategies in place, constituting what is arguably the largest such effort in Spartanburg's history.

Indeed, much of City Manager Chris Story, Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy and Neighborhood Services Director Martin Livingston's working hours are spent focused on homeownership and housing in one form or another. At the same time, with a housing boom underway — especially visible in the number of apartments and townhomes currently under construction or on the drawing board — anxiety over rising rents and potential displacement in some neighborhoods is understandably rising. That new dynamic, arising from Spartanburg's tremendous growth in recent years, explains in part why projects that just a few years ago might have breezed through the City's development approval process have come under increasingly closer scrutiny by both citizens and city staff alike.

To ensure that growth remains sustainable and that it benefits those in our community who need it most, the City continues to invest heavily in programs and partnerships that aim to build a continuum of housing options — from subsidized units to workforce housing to higher-priced single-family homes. These efforts include:

- **Owner-Occupied Rehab and Repair:** The City provides a portion of the federal funding it receives for housing to Christmas in Action, a local non-profit organization that assists homeowners with needed repairs, including things like roof, flooring and plumbing repairs. The City also operates a lead-based paint remediation program thanks to a \$1.3 million state grant it secured in 2019.

The goal is to remove lead-based paint from 42 homes before the grant expires in 2023 — so far, 15 homes have either been completed or have been qualified for the program. Both the Christmas in Action and lead-based programs keeps older housing stock from falling into further disrepair and/or becoming uninhabitable, thus supporting homeownership in the city limits.

- **Down Payment Assistance:** For people who are not currently homeowners and are employed but need help with the down payment for a home, the City partners with CommunityWorks, an Upstate-based Community Development Financial Institution. CommunityWorks provides potential homeowners with down payment assistance and low-interest loans along with financial education and other support. This partnership has helped eight families purchase homes in the city since 2017.

- **Scattered Site Development:** Livingston said one of the biggest challenges — if not the biggest — with helping more families with down payment assistance is the city’s housing supply. To address that challenge, Livingston directed a project to identify all of the vacant residential lots in the city limits in 2017. The total came to about 2,000, 100 of which the City already owned and were suitable for building. The City has worked since to attract developers to build workforce housing on the lots, and although progress has been slow, it is starting to pick up — 10 of the lots are currently under development.

- **Inclusionary Development:** One of the more innovative housing efforts here or anywhere has been the City’s approach to ensuring certain projects include a mix of market-rate and affordable/workforce units. “What we have tried to do is when negotiating any aspects of an economic development deal that involves apartments, we have negotiated for 10 percent to be affordable or workforce units,” City Manager Chris Story said.

“It really is not what a textbook would describe as inclusionary zoning although it is accomplishing similar aims. Inclusionary zoning is a tool that makes sense in communities seeing a steady stream of new apartment development without any concessions by the local government and so the only leverage they have is zoning (that requires affordable units be included in a project). In our case, engaging with developers early on allows us to negotiate affordable units to be included (as a condition of receiving incentives).” Examples to date include the Northside Townhomes project, the proposed redevelopment of the former Mary H. Wright Elementary School, and the planned development at the corner of Kennedy and Union streets. Those three projects will add 55 workforce units (of 315 total units) to the city’s supply.

- **Neighborhood Revitalization:** This is where all of the above — plus some — comes together in one neighborhood. The Northside Initiative has been well-chronicled, and the City now has also undertaken a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization effort in the Highland community. While comprehensive in nature, much of the Northside and Highland efforts revolve around housing and both include plans for a mix of housing for various income levels.

“We really need to work toward a housing continuum citywide — from subsidized, to workforce, to higher incomes and luxury homes,” Kennedy said. “People need and want different types of housing at different stages of their lives, and our housing stock needs to reflect that. You can see that coming into focus in how we’ve approached housing development in the Northside.”

