

Q and A with housing experts on Spartanburg's approach to affordable housing

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Experts share their view of local affordable housing landscape



Note: In addition to the team developing the new Robert Smalls Townhomes at Midtowne Heights about for [our story earlier this week](#), we spoke to [S.C. Housing](#) spokesman Chris Winston and [CommunityWorks](#) CEO Tammie Hoy Hawkins, two of the state's leading affordable housing experts, about Spartanburg's approach to developing a comprehensive housing policy. The following are excerpts from those conversations.

Q: What attracted the EquityPlus team to Spartanburg?

Avram Fechter, EquityPlus Managing Director: It's rare to find a community that accepts the need to approve subsidized housing and is willing to take action to address those needs.

Ralph Settle, EquityPlus: One thing that I think is unique about Spartanburg relative to workforce/affordable housing is that a lot of communities get around to it after they build the new convention center downtown and other amenities that get a lot of attention and hype. The interesting thing about Spartanburg is we're not waiting before we start focusing on housing. It's been done in tandem.

Q: The first phase of Robert Smalls at Midtowne Heights is going to be Section 8, subsidized housing. What will the next two phases include?

Fechter: Phase 2 will be workforce housing. Phase 3 is likely to be the same. At the end of the project, we will have a mix of subsidized and workforce housing. And you couldn't find a better site for a project like this from a geographic standpoint. It is adjacent to downtown, literally within walking distance of everything downtown has to offer. It is very difficult to find a community with this kind of a site this close to the central business district available for workforce housing and/or subsidized housing development.

Settle: The changing world we live in here in Spartanburg, we have a lot of development moving west and north. A lot of development has happened and is underway on the Northside. And then heading west from downtown, there will soon be new state-of-the-art police and fire stations in Midtowne Heights. So there is a lot of good development going up that way. The city had the forethought years ago to go into that area and assemble the Midtowne Heights property to be ready when something did manifest itself.

Q: For a long time, the prevailing sentiment among private developers is that doing subsidized and workforce housing was too complicated and not worth their time or investment. That seems to be changing.

Winston: Certainly our top message is that it's not as difficult as it looks to do these types of developments. And organizations like ours are here to help developers through this process. We provide training and other assistance to help developers do these projects efficiently enough to get the return on their investment. It can probably feel overwhelming the first time because of the various layers of approvals and financing, and that's fair. When you do projects with the state and federal government involved, there is going to be documentation and measurement. The dreaded "red tape" is real, and I don't want to gloss it over, but we are here to help.

It also helps when you have a great local government like what you have in Spartanburg. Spartanburg has been using a lot of different tools in the toolbox — they are not relying on any one program or funding source to resolve the affordable housing crunch.

Hawkins: I definitely think Spartanburg has been very proactive in ensuring inclusivity is a part of their housing policy. The Northside Initiative was part of that, trying to figure out how to include workforce housing alongside market-rate housing. Trying to really attack the problem of how to maintain affordability in these neighborhoods while we redevelop.

Q: What are some of those tools that have been deployed most effectively in Spartanburg?

Hawkins: I think the city and its community partners have worked together to incentivize projects that include affordable housing as part of the overall development. That's not what developers traditionally do, but the city has really tried to push that. The city's creation of an affordable housing trust with us at CommunityWorks will help. It's goal is to support development and preservation of affordable housing, and ultimately it will encourage developers to invest in the trust even if they aren't building affordable housing themselves.

But I keep going back to the inclusionary zoning piece. Requiring developers to include some affordable housing in the developments they do is very important. For example, years ago if Greenville had done that when they were experiencing their boom, it wouldn't have solved everything but the 2,000 or so affordable housing units they're short today would be a lot less.