

## One woman's plight typifies county's wider housing crisis [column]

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LNP | LancasterOnline has steadily reported on the growing need for more affordable housing options in our community, and on the many development projects seeking to meet this need in recent years. Yet two recent articles by this newspaper are worthy of more attention when held side by side.

### Heartbreaking effects of housing market

On Jan. 25, LNP's "Lancaster Watchdog" column featured the story of Edna Amaro and her desperate search for new housing ("A housing crisis seen up close").

As the story reported, the 78-year-old Amaro lives on a fixed income in an apartment she can afford. But a new landlord recently took ownership of her apartment building, and she will soon lose her housing. The new owner plans to renovate the apartment and increase the rent — a predictable outcome in an exceptionally tight housing market. That Amaro seemingly has no alternative and no place to call home is both heartbreaking and a moral failure of our community.

She has been the recipient of a lovely outpouring of support, but her experience is not unique, and the county's housing crisis needs a comprehensive solution.

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## City's five-year housing goals

Just a few days earlier, in the Jan. 22 Sunday LNP | LancasterOnline, an article ("[Building boom](#)") provided an update on 20 new rental housing developments — each providing at least 50 residential units — taking shape in Lancaster County.

Fourteen of the projects are located in the city, and if all go according to plan, would add more than 1,700 new rental homes in the city market. Furthermore, the mix of projects would add housing that meets the needs of a variety of incomes and household sizes. As reported, this would go far toward meeting the five-year housing goals released by the City of Lancaster in 2021.

This is tremendous progress in the face of an urgent challenge. Many partners are making this possible, ranging from nonprofit housing providers, to developers and investors, to elected and appointed officials in the city who are bringing leadership and vision to the table. Not to mention unprecedented levels of local public funding to support affordable housing.

## Need for sustainable solutions

Edna Amaro's story is a sobering reminder of the human toll many individuals are paying each and every week as they struggle to find housing that meets their needs and fits their budgets.

Local housing and social service nonprofits, private landlords and clients often work in tandem to find housing solutions for individuals like Amaro who have limited community resources. Rents and length of stay are negotiated; temporary rental relief is provided; legal assistance referrals are made. However, these are temporary solutions to a systematic and persistent problem. When housing costs greatly outpace our residents' income, we need affordable housing for individuals so they can comfortably live without ongoing fear of displacement.

## A countywide task

To meet the demands of our community, we also need to see more progress and investment to create sufficient housing in our rural, suburban and small-town communities in Lancaster County.

The county's comprehensive plan, Places2040, reports that the county's population is expected to grow by 100,000 in the next couple of decades.

And a 2020 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study suggested Lancaster County needs to create more than 18,000 new units that are affordable for lower-income households alone, just to keep up with current demand.

It was encouraging to see municipalities in southern Lancaster County move toward adopting a regional comprehensive plan that follows the Places2040 model. Creation of new housing — especially affordable housing — is crucial to alleviate the tight housing market caused by lack of housing supply.

We applaud the 1,900 new homes proposed in six major developments located throughout the county, as highlighted in LNP | LancasterOnline. One of them represents the single largest number of homes ever created in a local development in East Lampeter Township. And we know there are many smaller projects in the works as well. Yet, we still have a long road ahead, as even all of these projects are simply not enough to meet the housing needs of thousands of residents across the county.

## Effects on our community's health

Limited housing options result in unfavorable effects for all of us, because housing access is the foundation for a thriving community.

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It is critical that our city and county's housing supply includes options for all income levels, as housing is an accelerator for our economy, contributes to the varied needs in our workforce, enhances diversity, closes the wealth gap and expands access to affordable health care.

This challenge is far too great to simply relegate it to one municipality: Lancaster city. We need to provide a mix of housing options within each municipality across Lancaster County through the adoption and promotion of inclusionary zoning practices and favorable regulation.

## **We're all part of the solution**

We call on local municipal leaders across the county, investors, business owners, developers, nonprofit providers and residents of goodwill to step up, join forces and actively seek creative housing solutions in your own backyard where you can make a difference. Advocacy can take many forms and we ask that you use your voice and resources to help support the creation and maintenance of affordable housing in our community. And we call on the Lancaster County commissioners to invest public funds in affordable housing at a rate that matches or exceeds the recent American Rescue Plan Act investments made in Lancaster city.

The Coalition for Sustainable Housing — a network of housing leaders and advocates — stands ready to support your efforts and provide resources to inform your community about housing challenges. We know that together we can do this, but it will take action, advocacy and increased resources to meet the need.

When we read of the plight of residents like Edna Amaro, we know we must work together to do this. Providing a decent home to each resident of our county should not be an insurmountable problem when faced together.

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