



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF COLLIER COUNTY

WORKFORCE HOUSING IN COLLIER COUNTY

Background

At the Annual Meeting in April, 2006, Members of the League of Women Voters of Collier County requested a study on the issue of workforce housing for people in Collier County earning between 80 to 150 percent of the area median income.*

The League at the national and state levels has had positions for many years on affordable housing for very low and low income people, particularly farm workers, but none on what was called “gap” housing, which this study has termed “workforce housing.” This is housing for workers who have been priced out of the market by a combination of the influx of wealthy retirees bidding up the prices of new and existing homes, the subsequent rise in property values, the increased cost of building homes and traditionally low wages in service occupations.

The cost of living in Collier County is among the highest in the state. As housing prices increased, many residents cashed out and sold their homes at rising market rates and moved to areas where they could buy more housing for their money. The problem was exacerbated by many rental units being converted to condominiums at prices beyond the reach of the renters who had lived there. Unfortunately, these were also workers whose skills could transfer easily to other locations, and the result has been serious worker shortages in areas considered essential for community quality, i.e., educators, health care professionals, law enforcement personnel, government employees, etc.

Consensus Process

Four meetings were held to discuss the workforce housing issue and to try and reach consensus on two questions which had been approved by the LWVCC Board of Directors. The first question members were asked to discuss was what role should local government have in facilitating housing for people in Collier County who earn 80 to 150 percent of area median income?

Although some members felt that workforce housing problems are best left to the marketplace to solve, there was general consensus that local government does have a role in facilitating housing for this income group. The health, safety and welfare of our citizens, and our general quality of life, depend on essential services personnel being able to live in the community in which they work. The definition of “essential services personnel” should be left to county government to determine.

Government, however, does not, and should not, build houses. Its role should be one of an enabler that adopts programs and regulations that create an atmosphere which would encourage public/private partnerships to meet the housing needs of the community.

* The Collier County median income for a family of four in 2006 was \$66,100. The income range, therefore, is \$52,880 to \$99,150 per year.

A comprehensive plan including short-term and long-range solutions is essential, and rental housing issues must be considered along with owner-occupied units. That a plan is necessary was heard over and over again in the consensus discussions. Other communities in Florida and the country have taken action to help solve their affordable housing problems; Collier should not be an exception.

It was not the purpose of this study to recommend specific programs to create workforce housing in Collier County. However, the second question did ask for criteria that could be used to evaluate programs when they are proposed. Consensus was reached on the following criteria that should be used in evaluating the expenditure of taxpayer funds in support of workforce housing.

- Workforce housing should not be built at the expense of very low income housing.
- The environment must be protected. Workforce housing should not be permitted in environmentally sensitive areas, areas set aside for ground water recharge or protected species.
- If density bonuses are given, infrastructure must be in place to accommodate the increased population of the area; concurrency requirements should not be waived.
- Current building codes and standards for landscaping, sidewalks, etc. should be maintained when workforce housing is built.
- Any funds collected for workforce housing should be retained for that purpose only.
- Provisions should be in place to ensure that workforce housing retains its defined identity for periods long enough to warrant the increased density or other incentives provided for its construction.

Summary

LWVCC believes that local government does have a role in facilitating housing for people in Collier County who earn 80 to 150 percent of area median income. This becomes a quality of life issue when workers who contribute to the health, safety and general welfare of the community cannot afford to live here and choose to either leave the area or decide not to accept employment in essential occupations.

League believes that government should consider all the options at its disposal to encourage the building of public/private partnerships that would lead to the development of housing for this income group. Goals need to be set and short-term and long-range plans developed and carried out that offer safe, decent and affordable housing. These plans should include the rental market as well as owner-occupied housing.

LWVCC also believes that community standards should not be compromised in developing housing for this income group. The quality of neighborhoods within the community must be considered along with increased availability of homes in this income range.

LWVCC Workforce Housing Study Resource Committee:

Kathleen Slebodnik, Chair

Ann Campbell

Sheilah Crowley

Joyce Evans

Marjorie Joder

Sandy Parker

Kathy Ryan

Chris Straton

March 17, 2007