

Chapter Twelve

HOUSING PLAN

Introduction

North Coventry Township has evolved over the past several decades from an agricultural community into a primarily residential community. Although it retains much of its rural character, the new residential and commercial development occurring in the north and east is giving that part of North Coventry more of a suburban flavor. The south and west are still quite rural and there are several active farms. Large areas in the far western portion are environmentally constrained due to steep slopes and extensive woodlands.

Single family homes, which were once confined to the villages and rural road frontages, are being constructed in conventional subdivisions in some areas of the Township. Other housing forms, including twins, townhomes and apartment complexes have developed near transportation arteries and commercial centers. The Township offers a wide variety of residential forms intended to provide housing options for all sectors of its population. It offers a much healthier variety than many municipalities in Chester County and seeks to focus new housing in those areas where it can be serviced by existing infrastructure.

This Chapter presents a housing plan aimed at preserving the existing housing stock and ensuring that a wide variety of housing alternatives continue to be made available to both present and future residents. The recommendations are grouped into three categories addressing the key issues of housing affordability, housing unit conservation and housing options and fair share requirements. These recommendations are not intended to be considered independently, but should be evaluated in conjunction with the future land use recommendations since housing issues are inextricably linked to land use policies.

North Coventry's goals and objectives relating to housing are as follows:

Housing Goal: Plan for the housing needs of present and future residents in appropriate areas of the Township.

Objectives:

- Direct housing development, particularly higher and medium density uses, away from environmentally sensitive areas and into areas consistent with the future land use plans and served by necessary facilities and services.
- Encourage creative site design and flexible land use ordinance standards to accommodate housing that blends into the character of the surrounding landscape.
- Protect the character of existing residential neighborhoods by ensuring land use controls do not allow incompatible uses; Require adequate screening where higher intensity uses are planned.
- Allow for a variety of housing types designed to meet the full range of age, income, and family housing needs of Township residents.
- Encourage the location of a retirement community within the Township to meet the extended care needs of senior Township residents.

- Establish area(s) where neo-traditional village communities with a variety of housing types and limited commercial and service uses could be appropriate to provide another lifestyle option for Township residents.
- Encourage the maintenance and rehabilitation of the Township’s existing housing stock to ensure a neat appearance and to maintain safe housing and stable neighborhoods, while preventing the decline of property values.

Housing Options and Fair Share Obligations

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code requires that each municipality provide for the housing needs of both its current and future residents. The Pennsylvania courts have defined this obligation as the “fair share” requirement, that is described in Chapter Four. The municipal fair share obligation outlines the responsibility to provide a reasonable opportunity for the development of varied housing forms. Zoning provisions that permit multi-family units along with single, twin, and attached units, are a necessary part of fulfilling the Township’s “fair share” housing obligations. As discussed in Chapter Four, however, the fair share obligation extends beyond simply allowing for such housing forms: adequate land must be zoned for these uses as well. To estimate the Township’s fair share of various housing forms an analysis must be performed, that consists of applying the three “tests” from the *Surrick V. Upper Providence Township* 776 Pa. 182A2d 105 (1977) court case to local conditions and using the results to assess the adequacy of the land areas and locations designated for different housing types.

The following recommendations address the fair share issues in terms of providing for various housing forms. These should be considered in conjunction with the recommendations relating to residential development contained in Chapter Eleven, the Future Land Use Plan.

➤ ***Continue to provide for a range of housing forms in the residential zoning districts.***

North Coventry’s Zoning Ordinance, as of spring 2001, contains seven zoning districts that provide for residential development. Of these, six are residential districts with the seventh district (Town Center) providing for mixed uses that include residential. Apartments, twins, and townhouses are permitted in the R-4 Residential District and TC Town Center District. Twins and townhouses are also permitted as part of a Unified Residential Development in the R-2 Residential District. Residential conversions are also permitted in all residential districts, but are strictly controlled (no more than one apartment per structure, among other restrictions) in the lowest density districts. The various forms of residential development are referenced in Article II of the Ordinance and each subtype is referenced. Clearly defining each term allows for a better understanding of where different residential forms are permitted, reducing ambiguity in both designing and reviewing subdivision and land development plans. The Township appropriately provides the opportunity to develop various residential alternatives fulfilling key elements of the fair share obligation.

➤ ***Consider modifying the minimum acreage standard for development of multi-family complexes.***

The area and bulk regulations for the development of multi-family complexes in the current R-4 Residential District require a minimum lot area of ten acres. (The ten acre minimum does not apply in the TC Town Center District.) This tract minimum allows for the construction of a reasonable number of units in a design that meets the supplemental standards contained in the Zoning Ordinance. The Township, however, may wish to consider a smaller minimum tract size in order to permit construction of small apartment buildings that are better scaled to the existing development and result in lower multi-family unit density on a neighborhood level. The larger the complex, the more it requires in terms of

infrastructure and service. Large complexes also tend to be traffic generators that are best situated along major transportation routes. By reducing the minimum tract area requirement for multi-family development, the Township provides for greater flexibility and offering residential alternatives in a design that meets the scale of the existing rural/suburban land pattern.

- ***Continue to exercise the conditional use or special exception processes to ensure that new housing development blends with existing land uses.***

In most residential districts, attached and multi-family development is subject to the conditional use or special exception provisions of the Zoning Ordinance. This gives the Township discretionary authority over the projects, in particular, the ability to specifically evaluate the effect of the development on the neighborhood for which it is proposed. The Board of Supervisors or Zoning Hearing Board can then set additional conditions for development. This discretionary authority should be used to ensure that the proposed development blends with the surrounding land uses, is buffered from adjacent development, provides for open space, and offers sufficient recreational opportunities. The authority to set additional conditions necessary to ensure that the future residents of the new housing are provided with a pleasant living environment rests with the Township.

Housing Affordability

The availability of affordable homes is an important issue in North Coventry Township and throughout Chester County. Affordable housing is defined as housing available for rent or purchase at approximately 30 percent of household income. The lack of affordable housing limits housing choice and indirectly excludes those residents that desire housing other than traditional single family detached units. The lack of affordable housing can result in a lack of diversity, and prevent, for example, older residents from remaining in the community if they desire smaller homes upon retirement, or, young people from purchasing their first home. This lack of choice can impact community stability, the community cannot rejuvenate as its population ages. The lack of moderately priced housing can also affect employment patterns and the ability to fill many types of positions. If moderate income households cannot afford to live in the Township, the quality of life for all residents can suffer. Addressing the barriers to affordable housing at the municipal level helps to facilitate the creation (and preservation) of housing forms that suit the needs of residents at all age and income levels.

The following recommendations relate to maintaining affordable housing in the Township.

- ***Promote infill development on smaller lots as an alternative to large lot sprawl.***

An important way to accommodate new housing and residential choice without promoting sprawl-type land consumption is by encouraging infill in those areas that are already developed. Most of the lots available for infill in the Township are smaller and have the potential to accommodate moderately priced homes. Although homes on smaller lots do not always cost less than those on larger lots (in many instances they can be more costly), infill development in an older development would likely be more affordable than homes in a new subdivision. Several of the residential subdivisions still have open lots. The villages also present residential infill potential and should be viewed as places to focus future residential development. As village protection programs are developed, infill and village extensions should be considered. In order to maintain the existing scale, residential options should be limited to the size and type that is already existing in these villages. It should then be marketed as an alternative to conventional development.

➤ ***Reduce opposition to moderately priced housing by supporting educational efforts on the topic.***

There is often local opposition in communities to development plans that propose housing other than single family detached units. This is usually due to misconceptions about what constitutes affordable, moderately priced housing. The lack of understanding of the terminology is one such problem. The term “affordable”, for instance, is not synonymous with “subsidized” or “public” housing. Affordable simply means housing for moderate income families. It is very unlikely in this society that an individual or family would require only one housing form. Residents at different stages in their lives require different housing alternatives and providing these options within the community in which they live and work reduces the need to relocate elsewhere simply because of a lack of housing.

There are a number of organizations, non-profit and governmental, that address the issue of affordable housing by providing information (and sometimes funding) and can assist with education efforts. It is particularly important for municipal officials to be cognizant of the housing needs of all residents in the Township when planning for future residential land uses.

➤ ***Support the development of retirement communities and other forms of elderly housing in the Township.***

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of North Coventry indicates that the population is aging and the percentage of seniors, is increasing. Although the data used in the analysis is from the 1990 census, this assumption will likely be confirmed by the 2000 census data once it becomes available. To accommodate the aging population, the Township should continue to support the development of elderly housing and retirement communities, thereby providing the opportunity for residents to transition into such housing without relocating to another community. The lack of elderly housing options can often force residents to leave the community once they are no longer able to function independently and as a consequence, they also leave behind the friends, family, and affiliations that they developed over the years. In fact, 30 percent of the respondents to the *North Coventry Township Public Opinion Survey* indicated that retirement was a reason for leaving the Township. North Coventry clearly supports housing options for the elderly by providing for retirement communities in all the residential districts except for the lowest density (FR-1, FR-2 and R-1) districts and as an additional measure should consider seeking out developers that specialize in this housing form.

➤ ***Facilitate the maintenance of existing multi-family complexes.***

There are three apartment complexes in North Coventry Township that contain more than one hundred units each. These are Hanover Gardens, Valley View Apartments and Highland Manor. These complexes are attractive, well-maintained and are fairly well integrated into their surroundings. They provide a valuable alternative to conventional single family houses and provide the opportunity for both older and younger people to remain (or move into) the community. Multi-family complexes must be well-maintained to be an asset to the community. Their success is very much dependent on effective private management and compliance with high maintenance standards. The Township can supplement private efforts through strong enforcement of property maintenance ordinances that identify problems before they become significant.

Housing Unit Conservation

North Coventry has a variety of homes and neighborhood settings that combine to create the Township’s unique residential character. Most of the newer homes are located in conventional subdivisions located throughout the central and north central regions of the Township, and along rural road frontages. The older

and more historic homes are found in and around the four villages and in the farmsteads along rural roads. Over the past three decades, newer homes have intermingled with the historic homes traditionally found in the rural regions and have produced an eclectic pattern in the western regions. The quality of the housing stock overall appears to be quite high and maintaining that quality requires a concerted effort on the part of both the Township and individual property owners. The following series of recommendations address conservation of the housing stock in North Coventry.

➤ ***Place a high priority on enforcement of Township maintenance codes.***

Enforcement of property maintenance regulations as specified in the adopted building code should be considered a high priority. Active enforcement of such codes can identify problems early on and prevent maintenance issues associated with residential structures from becoming rehabilitation issues in the future. Early identification and working one-on-one with property owners in resolving the problems can save the property owner and the Township both time and money. In addition, active enforcement of maintenance codes can prevent the decline of property values, a circumstance that can be difficult to reverse once begun. As most maintenance code enforcement tends to be complaint driven, the Township should consider a different tack and establish a proactive program that uses municipal officials and staff as the “eyes and ears” to preserve North Coventry’s quality of life.

➤ ***Support the formation of neighborhood organizations and homeowner’s associations.***

In communities such as North Coventry that have large land areas, neighborhood organizations and homeowners associations play an important role as a liaison between the residents and Township officials. Information can be passed through to these organizations to be relayed to residents. Likewise, concerns noted at the neighborhood level can be relayed to local officials creating an effective means to accomplish local objectives. In terms of property maintenance and housing conservation, neighborhood organizations and homeowner’s associations play both a formal and informal role in housing conservation in the Township. Some neighborhoods are subject to covenants and restrictions established at the time the development was approved. These restrictions often limit land use in an effort to maintain property values. Enforcement of covenants and restrictions rests with the homeowners association and does not involve the municipality. Although the Township has no authority to enforce covenants and restrictions, it should support the organizations that have this authority as they tend to complement municipal efforts.

➤ ***Ensure that regulatory provisions associated with home occupations are strictly enforced.***

Home occupation provisions establish standards by which a homeowner can undertake a limited level of business activity in residential zones. North Coventry’s Zoning Ordinance permits home occupations in all residential districts in North Coventry. Those meeting the definition of “minor” are permitted by right while those considered “major” are permitted by special exception. Although the Zoning Ordinance contains provisions that regulate their scale, home occupations can quickly escalate and grow beyond the permitted scope. To maintain the residential character of the neighborhood and conserve the housing units for their intended use, home occupations in the Township should be monitored to ensure continued compliance with zoning standards. Home occupations that are not in compliance with established standards can have a negative impact on residential neighborhoods and their overall stability.

➤ ***Promote housing rehabilitation in locations where home maintenance is declining.***

When the maintenance of a home declines to the point that it is in need of rehabilitation, the value of surrounding properties, in fact the entire neighborhood, can be affected. Rehabilitation should be

encouraged where necessary. An important program that provides funding for rehabilitation subject to qualification criteria, is the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. This is a federal program that, in Chester County, is administered at the County level and provides funding to assist those with limited incomes in rehabilitating or repairing their homes. Although the Township has no role in administering this program, it can help to advertise its availability by providing information and a point of contact. Code enforcement officials should be made aware of the basic provisions and general application procedures, and relay this information as the case warrants. The Township could take a proactive approach and include information in Township newsletters and postings.

➤ ***Adopt an ordinance requiring the inspection of rental housing.***

In order to ensure that rental properties continue to be maintained, the Township should consider adopting an ordinance requiring rental units to be inspected at the point they change occupants. Although the rental properties in North Coventry, particularly the larger complexes, are in good condition and appear to be well-maintained, an ordinance such as this could help to prevent undetected maintenance problems from becoming serious. Not all landlords willingly maintain their rental properties and identifying maintenance problems is particularly important in situations where the landlords are not on-site, or in cases when they appear to lack interest in the property. Declining complexes are not only problems unto themselves, they can negatively affect surrounding property values as well. Although rental inspection ordinances can be complex and time-consuming, to enforce, they do serve to hold landlords accountable by requiring code violations to be corrected. The cost associated with administering this type of ordinance can largely be funded by charging inspection fees.

Conclusion

A critical responsibility of North Coventry Township officials is to plan for the housing needs of both present and future residents, and to preserve and protect the housing stock. The Township has a long standing policy to address this range of needs by allowing for all types of housing forms aimed at accommodating individuals and families in different stages of life. The Township is implementing this policy through zoning provisions that allow for a wide variety of housing forms in many locations. It can further strengthen the quality, variety, and availability of homes located throughout North Coventry by considering the recommendations contained in this Housing Plan.