

## Local think tank hammers out housing issues

Dan Astin Enterprise Staff Writer  
Nov 15, 2023

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Park County Commissioner Bryan Wells, left center with hat, listens to community members talk about accessory dwelling units at the Shane Center on Tuesday. Courtesy Gavin Clark

Most chairs were taken at the Shane Lalani Center for the Arts ballroom on Tuesday afternoon, as nearly 60 community members and city leaders awaited an opportunity to partake in a community conversation on the overall housing situation in Livingston and Park County.

The think tank meeting was organized by the Park County Housing Coalition.

Gavin Clark, executive director of the Park County Community Foundation, opened the session, explaining housing “affects everyone in the community.”

Nearly 75% of 850 Park County survey respondents identified housing as the area’s greatest challenge, said Clark. Half of respondents confirmed they are currently affected by housing-related struggles.

With countywide home prices up 45% since 2020 and interest rates more than doubling, Clark explained it would take an annual income of more than \$160,000 to afford a home in the community, which routinely sell for more than \$500,000.

Katherine Daly, program manager of the Park County Housing Coalition, introduced the PCHC Housing Action Plan for 2024, announcing 12 policy tools for improving affordable housing to be implemented over a three-year period, dependent on community interest and support. One of the tools already being advocated and implemented is the Resident Owned Community program,

Three other affordable housing tools were introduced and then the group split into three groups to discuss the topics. The topics discussed were: accessory dwelling units, or ADUs, employer-assisted housing partnerships, or workforce housing, and zoning reformation.

Daly promoted ADUs as a solution to ease the housing crisis, creating “opportunities for low and moderate income households,” in what is otherwise an unaffordable community for some, while managing to maintain the character and community feel of Livingston downtown, neighborhood and rural areas.

Daly said that ADU “construction costs are typically far lower” than building single or multi-family homes and there is a potential for rental income, without the need for developing additional infrastructure.

Employer housing partnerships were also introduced as a viable method for employers to assist employees with the costs of owning or renting homes. The benefits for employers were presented as increasing retention and decreasing turnover, expanding the local labor pool.

As far as zoning reformation, Daly encouraged updating zoning codes in order to assist local and county-wide ordinances with accelerating public and private sector development, increasing housing market stock.

One of the most popular and controversial topics was ADUs, where two full tables and close to a third of community attendants engaged in earnest discussion, listing barriers to building the units.

Government officials in attendance at the ADU table included Bryan Wells, Park County commissioner, and Greg Anthony, City of Livingston policy analyst.

Two common barriers and concerns identified by community members about ADUs were the ability to afford contractors for construction and potential negative effects on community infrastructure.

Wells spoke from personal experience, explaining he learned how to do the necessary construction himself as contractors were financially cost prohibitive and unavailable.

Community member Elizabeth Studebaker said, “Construction workers are hard to find, and there are not enough workers to meet demand.”

Studebaker described the process of finding contractors as “painfully difficult,” believing trade stigmas and low wages have caused a decline in the local construction industry.

One suggestion to the group encouraged a more robust trade program at Park High that would promote construction skills development.

Some community members were not in favor of ADUs, referencing anecdotal parking problems.

Cody Wood, proprietor of Woodland Ridge Tiny Home Crafters, said one of the biggest problems locally is the lack of available, affordable land. He advocated for leased-land home solutions, which are rare countrywide, but relatively commonplace in a few states, including Delaware, Florida, Arizona and Hawaii.

Anthony, the city’s policy analyst, cited a resource showing the average home in Livingston is more than 60 years old, and added not a lot of meaningful development has occurred in the area for half a century.

The coalition indicated they would compile the information and suggestions from the community meeting, and implement the best ideas into the master housing plan.

To read about the Park County Housing Coalition and its action plan, visit its website at: <https://www.parkcountyhousing.com/documents>

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Park County Housing Coalition Steering Committee members:

**Becky Miller**, mortgage lender, Opportunity Bank, **Carrie Holder**, human resource specialist, Yellowstone National Park Lodges, **Geoff Anderson**, developer, Good Housing Partnership, **Grant Gager**, city manager, City of Livingston, **Hannah Wologo**, community health coordinator, Livingston HealthCare, **Jamie Isaly**, retired teacher, Livingston School District, **Kristen “Kris” Smith**, lead researcher and policy analyst, Floodwise Community Assistance Program, Headwaters Economics, **Samantha Ricketts**, human resources leader, Sage Lodge, **Tawnia Rupe Mraz**, Montana Philanthropy Senior Program Director, Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation.

**Dan Astin**

