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Stonington housing task force pitches island housing manager

Final report details problems and solutions
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BY WILL ROBINSON AND JACK BEAUDOIN



THE ISLAND—After a year of work, the volunteer task force charged with finding housing solutions on the Island has released a report with a list of recommendations for the governments of Deer Isle and Stonington. Number one on the list: hiring someone to focus on the issue.

The housing task force formed in December 2024 after a vote of the Deer Isle and Stonington select boards. Its membership was drawn from local experts and stakeholders, including real estate, finance, lobstering, building and land conservation.

Its research included interviews, data gathering, a review of town ordinances and an in-depth survey of 33 Island businesses. Housing, it discovered, intersects with almost every other facet of life on the Island.

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The task force report says that just 39 percent of Island homes are affordable to median income households. In 2023, the median household income in Hancock County was about \$69,000 a year.

The employer survey showed that there is a shortage of at least 102 workers on the Island, which employers almost universally attributed to a lack of housing. It also revealed that nearly one in 10 Island workers commute more than 50 miles, with some seasonal workers commuting over 65 miles to work.

Task force chair Stuart Kestenbaum of Deer Isle and his fellow volunteers presented their work to the Deer Isle and Stonington select boards during regular meetings and to the public at the Stonington town hall. Kestenbaum told both boards that one thing is certain: there's no silver bullet.

"The one major conclusion we drew," Kestenbaum told the Stonington select board on November 17, "is that there's no one answer that can address the entire issue."

But there are multiple solutions that the task force says will help alleviate the problem. To that end, the group asked both Stonington and Deer Isle to contribute \$20,000 each to fund a contracted position for a housing coordinator who could see projects through.

"If you don't have a person, it's not going to go anywhere," he cautioned Stonington board members.



Stuart Kestenbaum, housing task force chair, gives a presentation of his volunteer group's findings at a public event on November 19. BY WILL ROBINSON

Linda Nelson, Stonington's economic and community development director and a driving force in updating the town's housing policies in recent years, said on November 17 that the task force deliberately did not write a job description before gathering input from the town boards and from the community at large.

However, she said, "it's really a project management position. The time for studies and research is done. This is a project manager for implementation."

The potential housing manager would generally be responsible for implementing some or all of the task force's recommended actions, which include:

- . Develop a mixed-use residential park for both seasonal and year-round members of the workforce that might include recreational vehicles, mobile homes and manufactured housing.
- . Convert current seasonal rentals into year-round housing.
- . Encourage and support private sector development of affordable family friendly starter homes.
- . Collaborate with existing groups like the Deer Isle-Stonington Adult Education program-to promote financial education.
- . Identify available land within the growth areas of each town.
- . Review and amend local ordinances to support housing development.
- . Use town resources to pursue grant funding and technical expertise to encourage development.

Kestenbaum said the task force envisions the housing manager as a part-time, contracted, "boots on the ground" position that would only last about a year. They would be partnered with Holly Warner, the volunteer service fellow who is already working for both Deer Isle and Stonington.

Why the towns?

Local nonprofits have made progress on the issue. In 2023, Island Workforce Housing constructed a 10 unit apartment complex in Deer Isle and, this year, started construction on another 12 unit development in Stonington. HomePort Senior Living, formerly the Island Nursing Home, is also in the process of converting its complex in Deer Isle into 23 rental apartments. By the end of next year, the two entities will have added 46 new rental units. Still, Kestenbaum told the Deer Isle select board, "it's not enough."

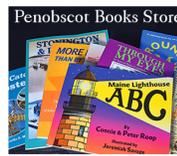
While there are local, regional and state-wide groups working on the housing issue, the task force report says that there is no single local group or entity "with the capacity to manage the many challenges of housing on the Island." The Task Force concluded that the Island's municipal governments are the best entity to put the puzzle pieces together.

"There's this gap and unless it's addressed by the towns, there's not really any organization that can step up and address this," Kestenbaum said.

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When the task force presented its findings and recommendations on November 17, Stonington town officials seemed receptive to the idea of a two-town housing manager.

Town Manager Kathleen Billings said that solving the housing shortage on the Island was key to just about every other challenge Stonington and Deer Isle are facing.

"Business owners say that they can't hire employees because they can't find housing on the Island. How many times have we had to scramble to find housing for a new employee?" She asked, pointing out that about half of Stonington houses had less than year-round occupancy. "Unless we figure this out, it's going to be an uphill battle. It will all go over to gentrification, which I don't want to see happen."

She warned that the report should not become "just another plan that sits on the shelf and collects dust."

Board member Evelyn Duncan said the towns would need to move quickly if they hope to fund any of the report's recommendations.

"There's a lot of information in here that is valuable and can be built on," Duncan said. "We're getting close to finalizing a budget plan for next year."

Deer Isle town officials were similarly receptive, but drilled down on the details of the housing manager position.

Select Board Chair Ronald Eaton questioned whether the two towns would be able to jointly hire someone, either contracted or staff.

"There's a lot of details you have to work out when you go to contract someone to avoid legal trouble," answered Town Manager Jim Fisher.

Kestenbaum said the ideal candidate would be a local person who "knows the community, knows what they're doing and can talk to people."

Both boards made an effort to praise the work of the task force's volunteers.

"Really, really nice job," Billings said. "Excellent work."

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Temp	High	Low	Previp	Wind	General Conditions
23°	0			NNE	modly sunny
30°	0			NNE	sunny
35°	0			NNE	sunny
39°	30°			W	inc over overnight & daytime, C
40°	0			NNE	partly sunny
35°	0			NNE	sunny
40°	0			NE	sun a.m., cloudy p.m.

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