

Group pushes for affordable housing in Chatham County

By Bill Willcox

There are a lot of people living in poverty in Chatham County and they need affordable housing.

That was the message presented to county commissioners at their last meeting by a non-profit group Sustainable

Prosperity. The group was pushing for affordable housing to be added as a line item to the budget for FY 2015-2016.

The group presented a binder full of information on affordable housing, living wage standards, economic data on Chatham County and the plat-

forms for the Democratic and Republican parties respectively.

According to data presented in the report:

The poverty rate for the county is 15.6 percent (10,000 residents) with 21.9% of children living in poverty.

There are 950 fewer people employed in the county than in 2007.

The median household income for Chatham County in 2013 was \$56,981, with 80 percent of this income \$45,584. At this income level,

See 'Housing' page 12-B

Housing

(Continued from page 1-B)

a conservative loan would only generate \$115,000 in buying power for a home.

But the median home selling price for the Pittsboro area so far in 2015 was \$281,950. Last year for the county, the median selling price was \$316,000.

Renters are in no better shape. The report states that 52% of renters in the county were unable to afford the fair market rent for a 2-bedroom housing unit.

In North Carolina, the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$747, meaning a household must earn at least \$29,897 annually to be able to afford it.

In Chatham County, rents are higher.

The fair market rent is \$843 which translates into an annual household income of \$33,720 or \$16.21 per hour. And at minimum wage, this would require 2.2 full time jobs for a household.

Sustainable Prosperity is working to keep these figures forefront in the public consciousness.

The group was originally formed as the Greater Pittsboro Community Development Corp in 2010. A 501c-3., the board consists of Randolph Voller, a former mayor of Pittsboro, Janet Nichols and Arturo Velasquez.

Voller, president of the organization, said the name was changed to incorporate a broader audience for their vision.

According to the vision statement, Sustainable Prosperity's focus is "on providing a higher quality of life for all residents by addressing and solving issues such as affordable housing, sustainable energy, water reuse, the provision of clean drinking water, management of solid waste and waste water, downtown revitalization, social and health welfare, and jobs that pay living wages."

Voller said locally he was hoping the county commissioners would partner more with Habitat for Humanity in providing affordable housing.

He said he had been a member of the Affordable Housing Task Force in the 2007 and the need for inexpensive housing in the coun-

ty was strong then and remains so today.

In 2007 the Wooten Report prepared for the Affordable Housing Task Force indicated the county had a latent need for affordable housing of over 800 units and the figure would likely grow every year.

Voller said the purpose of bringing the statistics to the BOC at this time was to encourage county leaders to incorporate money for that need in the budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Casey Mann, a Chatham resident and former executive director of the state Democratic Party, spoke to the commissioners about her own experience. As a single mother of two, she said she had lived in public housing at one time and at other times slept on her couch because she could not afford the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment.

"We need to have an active and staff-supported affordable housing committee," she said, "not to create some sort of haven for the unrighteous or unwilling, as many would have you believe. We need a strong affordable housing committee because we want to be a righteous and willing community."

Jan Nichols, secretary/treasurer of Sustainable Prosperity, also spoke to the BOC and expanded on the needs in the county.

"I am formally requesting that you fund our schools and our teachers to the level that will make us competitive nationally," she said. "Of course economic development will depend upon the quality of our schools, but there are other factors that support it. We must invest annually in transit, affordable housing and arts and culture."

"I recommend that we fund the bus system, re-instate affordable housing as a line item in the budget and fund it and get serious about funding the arts council and its programming initiatives."

Voller said Sustainable Prosperity intends to advocate for affordable living and workforce housing across North Carolina.

The group owns property in Pittsboro and in Johnston County and is currently in discussions with Habitat for Humanity regarding the possibility of working together in Pittsboro.