

Viewpoint: Year-round housing helps us all

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By Marla O'Byrne

An article in the Nov. 19 issue about the expected revaluation of Mount Desert homes echoed the stories we've heard at Island Housing Trust from potential home buyers and realtors since the pandemic began: That houses on Mount Desert Island "have been selling for more – and, in some cases, a lot more – than the asking price." Increased pressure on the market here exacerbates an already urgent year-round workforce housing crisis. As the inventory of homes affordable to those who work here – our police officers, Acadia National Park staff, teachers, nurses, ambulance drivers – withers, the risks to MDI grow.

I had direct experience with those risks a few weeks ago. My brother fell from a step in my house and couldn't get up. He was pretty sure something was broken, and the pain was excruciating. I called 911 and within 10 minutes the Southwest Harbor-Tremont Ambulance Service was at the door. I was relieved to know both of the EMS providers and my familiarity with the rescuers reassured my brother, reducing his stress and discomfort. But the comfort of familiarity is secondary to simply having someone available to respond. The day my brother fell, no one was actually on duty at the ambulance service – staffing challenges the ambulance service is doing its best to address, as reported in last week's *Islander*. We were lucky – one of the EMS providers just happened to be driving through town to answer the call and the other lived in town. It could have been different, with a much longer wait while my brother suffered distressing pain.

Not all impacts of a strong year-round community are so striking. During the pandemic, we are seeing our neighbors step up creatively and carefully to meet our every-day needs too, helping us maintain a sense of normalcy.

Although the upward slope of real estate costs has become steeper, over the years Island Housing Trust has developed a toolbox of solutions to bend the curve. Inspired by the 30 qualified families on our waiting list and the generosity of our donors, we are making meaningful progress on several projects:

In 2020, all four towns on MDI approved funding for our Home Ownership Assistance Program (HOAP). This funding was approved despite economic concerns in the face of a global pandemic. In the midst of uncertainty, MDI residents voted for the future of their communities.

IHT has purchased two houses, one in Northeast Harbor that we renovated and sold in 2019, and one in Seal Harbor, which had provided seasonal employee housing, that we purchased this past October from the Acadia Corporation. The house was sold to IHT at a below-market price to make it attainable for a year-round household to purchase. While advertising the house for sale, we received a call from someone interested in purchasing the house sight unseen, unaware of the covenant requirements. From what we are hearing, this is not an unusual occurrence; it reinforces the very real challenge for average income local buyers to compete in this real estate market, and the important role that IHT and our partners play. We are grateful to the Acadia Corporation for making this house attainable for year-round ownership and occupancy.

IHT is creating a new energy-efficient neighborhood of 10 year-round housing units at Jones Marsh, at the head of this island in Bar Harbor. We are planning a mix of duplexes and single-family homes to meet different price points and housing needs.

IHT envisions a future for Mount Desert Island that builds on our diverse and vibrant history. We are grateful for the growing support of our mission as we build our capacity to provide workforce housing solutions that benefits us all.

Marla O'Byrne is the executive director of Island Housing Trust.