

# County, city hope new study will lead to more affordable housing

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WEST OLIVE — A new countywide housing study recommends developing new housing to meet the specific needs of seniors, migrants and the homeless.

The \$47,000 study, presented to local leaders Thursday by Anderson Economic Group, found 20 percent of homeowners and 35 percent of renters are overburdened by housing costs in Ottawa County.

A homeowner is overburdened when 30 percent of their take-home income goes toward housing, property tax and utilities.

While addressing housing needs in the area should be a priority, Anderson analyst Jeff Smith said Ottawa County's situation is better than most of Michigan.

The study also reported there are more than 6,000 migrant workers in Ottawa County each year, while Michigan only allows housing for 2,375 in the county.

With the highest concentration of migrants in the state, Smith said more and more Ottawa County farmers are recognizing the vital role migrants play in the local economy.

"Farmers really want to keep people here, so they're starting to come up with new ways to find them housing," he said.

Smith said one major issue unique to Northwest Ottawa County is the amount of seasonal housing.

"Second home owners are going to drop those second homes when the market gets tough," he said.

In Northwest Ottawa County, the study found 680 occupied homes are worth less than \$125,000, while 100 rental units cost less than \$400 per month.

The median income in the northwest quadrant of the county is \$61,795 and the median age is 39. The average household size of 2.5 in the Tri-Cities area is less than in the other quadrants.

The study showed the average asking price on a foreclosed house in Northwest Ottawa County is close to \$139,533, which Smith said shows housing is not just an issue for the poor.

"That's not a very cheap home and that's not a very poor home," he said.

Anderson presented several general recommendations on how to increase affordable housing — including rehabbing existing housing, incentives to private developers and setting up a county land bank.

Building new low-income housing is necessary, Smith said, but should be done only when the demand is clear. Otherwise, new construction may be hard to sell and rent.

Smith said a land bank would allow the county to put properties that are tax-reverted and foreclosed

back into the market quickly. He said only seven Michigan counties have land banks at this time.

"Foreclosures can really put a stranglehold on the community," he said.

Assistant County Administrator Erika Rosebrook said this is the first time an all-encompassing housing study has been conducted in Ottawa County.

The county set up a five-member Housing Commission for the first time a few years ago, and Rosebrook said this study should help give them a clear direction.

"This is the first time we've seen everything in one place," she said. "This study has been about a year in the making, so the commission has been monitoring it during that time."

The next step, Rosebrook said, is getting the study's information out to the people who can best utilize it.

"Our big challenge will be to ... get this report out to other people so they can use it in their communities," she said.

The city of Grand Haven began two housing programs in 2007 to help an area of the city's Eastown neighborhood, according to Char Seise, the city's neighborhood development coordinator. She said many people have called about the programs, but only a few have been helped so far — partially because of the limited coverage area.

"That's our beginning," Seise said. "We hope to grow and grow. We're getting phone calls from people all over the community that could use these programs. The need is there — there is no doubt about that."

City officials will use the new study to determine whether or not to expand its programs, she added.

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