

No Hope in Sight for Those Affected by Housing Crisis

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Alexa Suess at the housing forum.

When one phone call from your landlord can turn your life entirely upside down, there's little solace in hearing about potential long-term housing solutions, as panelists at the North Fork Civics' forum on the North Fork's housing crisis did attest.

But perhaps the most stunning moment of the conversation came just as the forum was ending, as Southold Town Councilwoman Alexa Suess, freshly arrived from another meeting, told the crowd that she, too, has just found out she will need to find a new place to live, after her landlord raised the rent to more than \$4,000 per month.

Ms. Suess, a jeweler and small business owner who was elected to the Town Board in 2025 on a platform centered on fighting for housing security, was born and raised in Greenport.

"I just found out last week that I'm going to have to find a new place to live, because now my rent will be over \$4,000 per month, and I'm not the only one," she said. "We all know this, because we're all sitting in this room, caring about this topic."

"This problem is so important. I'm in my early 30s, and I work in town government and I don't know anybody my age who I went to school with who is still here," she said. "This is obviously a problem that is not going away. There is not one solution. I call it the Swiss cheese theory — a series of solutions that we stack together that hopefully collect all of the people that are experiencing all of these different problems. It is a strategy we are currently trying to employ in Southold Town. It takes time. It takes too much time, in my opinion, but we are working very, very hard at this."

Five people affected by the housing crisis shared their stories at the forum, which was held at CAST's headquarters in Southold — a mother and caregiver, a young man trying to figure out how to make it here, a young volunteer firefighter, the principal of Cutchogue East School and the Chief Administrative Officer at Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital.

Here are their stories.

Joey Owens

Joey Owens went to Greenport and Southold schools, and graduated from Southold in 2019. "It's changed a lot since I was a kid," he said. "It's gotten more unaffordable, but I didn't have to wait until I had to rent a place to figure that out. It's hard to find a place to rent. Sometimes you have to move to the next town over. You have to move schools, and that can be difficult. After you graduate, it's hard to find a job here. It's hard watching your friends leave and not be able to stay."

"The hardest part is the lack of community here," he added. "A lot of people leave after the summer, and it's a ghost town where I live. In the summer it fills in a little bit, but it seems like people only come here for vacation and they don't want to live here."

"A lot of the people our government — they aren't doing enough. They're doing the opposite. They're making it easier to turn your house into a short-term rental. It's not right. We should be stopping that," he said. "It's property rights, I get it, but it's greed. When you have a big single-family home and you have rooms, consider renting some rooms out, consider doing something for the community. Help them out, if you have the ability to. That's the only reason we're able to stay — because our landlord charges us below market value, way below. If we had to pay full price, we wouldn't be here."

"People who don't own anything can't build an ADU in their backyard," he said. "We hope people have the heart to do it themselves. It doesn't have to require paving over farms or hurting the water. It requires us to be neighborly, get to know each other, and get to know the community that you moved into and see what you can do to help."



Joey Owens

Kim Click

Kim Click moved to the North Fork with her son eight years ago, to be closer to her mother in East Marion. They're currently staying with a friend in East Marion, so she can care for her mom, who has dementia, and her sister, who is developmentally disabled.

She said she and her son were "incredibly lucky to find an illegal and affordable apartment" in Mattituck when she first moved here.

"It was too small for us. We had no privacy, but it was ours," she said.

When her son went to college, she moved in with a relative in Cutchogue before she and her son moved in with the friend in East Marion.

"It was supposed to be a temporary situation, but it's now been over two years," she said. "Without his generosity, I don't know where my son and I would be residing."

Her mother and sister "live in a tiny house on what is now a prime piece of real estate fronting Gardiners Bay," which was purchased by her great-grandfather as a summer home and was winterized 25 years ago.

"My mother has always been my sister's caregiver, and I thought that would be the case until she passed away," she said. "But my mother being diagnosed with Alzheimer's has changed all of that. The house they are living in has two bedrooms, and there is no place for me to be. I'm lucky that my friend's house is a stone's throw from my mother's, but there will come a time, potentially very soon, when the stone's throw is too far. I will need to be there in the house at all times. I'm not sure where I'll be. In a makeshift bed in the laundry room, where I have less space than I have now? On the floor in my mother's bedroom? Even if I squeeze myself into the house, there's literally no place for my son to be at all."

"I've looked into extending the house, building out the attic or converting the garage, but none of these options are feasible, financially," she said. "People say 'maybe you should sell — it's worth so much. Move somewhere else. The North Fork is my mother's home, my sister's home. I'm not sure how my mother's brain, which is slowly slipping away, could even deal with something so monumentally changing."

"I wish I had the answer — I wish I could say more flexible zoning would solve it, or additional affordable rentals will solve it, or that grants to build accessory dwelling units will solve it," she said. "I fear our community leaders are too afraid to take a full stand...Without that strong leadership, those who are trying to stay in our homes are left with little to no options."



Kim Click

Mike Gaunci

Mike Gaunci, 27, has lived in Southold for five years, and is a volunteer firefighter with the Southold Fire Department.

“The fire department is very demanding, but any help is appreciated,” he said. “People in fire departments across Long Island are very passionate about it, but at the same time, they’re working 30, 40, 50 hours a week at another job, and to give another 10, 20 or 30 hours a week to the fire department is very challenging.”

He stressed the importance of “having people my age be a part of certain teams that are physically demanding — climbing a ladder when someone’s screaming at you with 100 pounds of gear on you — you have to be in the right mindset, but you also have to physically be able to do that.”

“Luckily, we only have about 800 calls a year. We probably have five to seven people under 30 who are routinely going to calls,” he said. “A lot of the people are 60 and older. There’s a weird generation gap between 30 and 50. I think that’s a reflection on people moving away, not coming back and raising their families here.”

Despite the strain on volunteers, Mr. Gaunci said local volunteers “are still far away from even talking about” becoming a paid fire department.

“I think a lot of the people putting in a lot of the hours are getting a little bit tired,” he said. “You want to be the best fireman you can, but you also need to live your life.”

Amy Brennan

Amy Brennan is the Principal of the Cutchogue East Elementary School, where all elementary school students in the Mattituck-Cutchogue School District attend classes.

“As an educator, I see in practical and personal ways how the availability of housing affects families,” she said. “Housing and distance often make it difficult for talented people to choose a position here.”

“When we hire new staff, at times we identify a candidate who’s excellent in the spring, but by the time the end of summer rolls around, they’ve accepted a position closer to home... It does impact us to have to begin the hiring process in August. There are fewer candidates, and we’re working harder to make sure every classroom has the right teachers.”



Mike Gaunci

She said this year, five teachers left the district to take a position closer to where they live.

"In elementary school in particular, consistency matters a lot," she said. "Children benefit when they have stable, consistent adults around them."

She said she often hears stories from parents who have to uproot their children from their friends because their landlord has decided to do something else with the property. One recent case, she said, was of a parent whose landlord wanted to turn their house into an Airbnb.

"We need to continue this conversation with urgency and empathy," she said.

Paul Connor

Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital Chief Administrative Officer has been with the hospital since the late 1990s, when he said 75 percent of the hospital's employees lived and worked on the North Fork.

"Today, that's 48 to 49 percent," he said.

He added that, with the median price of a home on the North Fork now \$1.45 million, "we offer great pay and benefits, but you have to have a lot of capital to put down to be able to afford a mortgage."

Mr. Connor said many staff members travel an hour or more to get to work, and the hospital recently hired a Chief Nursing Officer who lives in Lindenhurst.

"She had worked on the west side of Manhattan, and that was a worse commute," he said, adding that making a choice to work at his hospital can be difficult for people who have to "literally drive past every other hospital" on Long Island in order to come to work here.

"We're proud to provide exceptional care close to home, but that depends on a stable work force that works close to home," he said. "We know there's an advantage to living and working in the community. When you have that culture in a hospital, that's meaningful."



Amy Brennan



Paul Connor



Greenport Mayor Kevin Stuessi

Greenport Village Explores Options

The Greenport Village Board will soon hold public hearings on allowing third stories in its downtown commercial zoning districts for affordable housing, and on legalizing accessory dwelling units throughout the village, said Greenport Mayor Kevin Stuessi at the forum. But he had sharp words for Southold Town.

“I’m angry. As an elected official, we haven’t done enough on the North Fork,” said Mr. Stuessi. “We need to treat this like a three-alarm fire and start finding some solutions.”

“This is going to become an ever-increasing problem, and it’s going to come down to zoning,” he added. He said Greenport Village “has the vast majority of Section 8 housing in the town, and allows multi-family housing.

“One property owner owns over 40 houses in the village and they’re all rented affordably to workers on the North Fork,” he said. He added that Southold Town will soon “hand a check over” to a billionaire who is building 47 mansions in Cutchogue — Stefan Soloviev — because the town has committed to using its Community Preservation Fund to encourage “conservation subdivisions,” which would preserve farmland.

“It should be called the Land Preservation Fund,” not the Community Preservation Fund, said Mr. Stuessi. “You could house hundreds of people in that development. Everybody needs to work together. We’re doing our best in the village.”

Former Greenport Mayor Dave Kapell, who was in the audience, agreed that the town doesn’t have the proper zoning for affordable housing.

"I bet most of the people in this room at one time rented when they were young," he said.

Mr. Kapell then urged the town to use the parking lot behind the former Southold Savings Bank — now the Town Hall Annex, to build housing, and to also convert another office space on Youngs Avenue, adjacent to the railroad tracks, into affordable housing.

"You need zoning and subsidies," he said. "The subsidy is available, but the zoning is not."



Southold Town Supervisor Al Krupski

What is Southold Town Doing?

Southold Town Supervisor Al Krupski explained the changes the town has made over the past several years to its accessory dwelling unit code, allowing people to make apartments in their homes or in accessory structures.

"We're trying to realign all sections of town code, so we will be able to subsidize that housing," he said. Southold Town Community Development Project Supervisor Andrea Sullivan, who was hired last year to oversee the town's implementation of its Community Housing Plan was in the audience, though she didn't speak.

The town currently has just over \$8 million in its Community Housing Fund, Ms. Sullivan told *The Beacon* earlier this summer. That fund had been collecting money for the past two years through a .5

percent real estate transfer tax paid by buyers of property here, but the town has not yet spent any of the money, as it puts together the policies in its Community Housing Plan to guide how to spend the money.

Ms. Sullivan said after the discussion that the Town Board is planning a Code Committee for Sept. 15 at which it will hash out the housing-related code changes the town needs to make before issuing Notices of Funding Availability (NOFAs) for its housing funding programs, which will include subsidies to developers building community housing developments, down payment assistance and, eventually, assistance in building accessory dwelling units.

The Town Board also agreed to finally send a letter to New York State taking a pledge to become a Pro-Housing Community in late July, after Ms. Suess advocated to send the letter at the board's July 28 work session.

The board had been cautious about taking the pledge earlier this year, as Governor Kathy Hochul made major changes to the State Environmental Quality Review Act's guidelines for review of housing developments.

The North Fork Civics plan to hold a follow-up housing forum, exploring what's being done in other nearby towns, on Monday, Nov. 9. We will publish more details when they are available.