

The Suffolk Times.

North Fork Housing Crisis Hits Schools, Hospital — And A Southold Councilwoman

9/1/26 | Brendan Carpenter



Southold councilwoman Alexa Suess said she too will have to find a new home with her rent eclipsing \$4,000. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter and file photos)

The North Fork housing crisis has gotten so bad that a Southold councilwoman who made housing affordability central to her campaign says she is now being priced out of her home.

Alexa Suess told an audience at a North Fork Civics housing forum Monday that her landlord is raising her rent to more than \$4,000, forcing the Greenport native to find another place to live.

“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 that is still here,” she said as the two-hour meeting drew to a close.

Ms. Suess’ predicament is the latest consequence of an affordability crisis that has been hollowing out the North Fork’s year-round community.

Earlier this year, The Suffolk Times documented a North Fork exodus of young workers and families who said they had been forced to choose between stretching beyond their means, accepting substandard housing or leaving altogether.



Joey Owens said it's increasingly difficult to find housing where he grew up. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter)

The numbers help explain why. The median price of a North Fork single-family home reached \$999,000 at the end of 2025 as inventory fell 22% to its lowest level since Corcoran began tracking the market in 2019. Nearly 60% of fourth-quarter purchases were made in cash. Southold officials also identified roughly 1,500 properties as transient rentals last summer.

The forum — hosted by CAST at its Southold headquarters — showed that the damage no longer ends with the residents who leave. Schools are losing teachers. The local hospital is recruiting workers from farther west. The volunteer fire service is struggling to replace an aging corps of responders. One of the forum's panelists had already become a face of the exodus.

Joey Owens, 24, was the subject of an April Suffolk Times story that reported he had left Greenport for Oregon after struggling for years to afford life on the North Fork. He also spoke at the Aug. 31 forum about the difficulty of finding housing near the community where he grew up.

Mr. Owens attended Greenport and Southold schools, graduating from Southold in 2019. When The Suffolk Times interviewed him in April, he said he had worked full time at Southold IGA for three years, earning \$2,300 a month and contributing \$900 toward household expenses.

"It's gotten more unaffordable, but I didn't have to wait until I had to rent places to figure that out," he said at the forum. "It's hard to find a place to rent."

His current residence and whether the Oregon move was permanent could not be confirmed before deadline.

Mr. Owens also accused local governments of making the shortage worse by allowing homes to be converted into short-term rentals.

“A lot of the people in our government aren’t doing enough, and they’re doing the opposite,” he said. “They’re making it easier to turn your house into a short-term rental, and it’s not right. We should be stopping that. When you own a big single-family home, and you have empty rooms, consider renting it. Consider doing something for the community.”

Ms. Suess, who runs a jewelry business in Greenport, was elected to the Town Board last year after making housing affordability and the plight of the North Fork’s “missing middle” central issues in her campaign.

She said the town cannot solve the shortage through a single project or policy.

“I call it the Swiss cheese theory — a series of solutions that we stack together that hopefully collect all of the people who are experiencing all of these different problems,” she said. “It is a strategy that we are currently trying to employ in Southold Town, but it takes time. It takes too much time, in my opinion, but we are working very, very hard at this.”

Southold is rewriting six chapters of its community-housing regulations and plans to consolidate its housing definitions and procedures into a new section of town code. A draft is not expected to be ready for review until December or January, The Suffolk Times previously reported.



Cuthogue East Principal Amy Brennan said it's hard to recruit new teachers. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter)

While the town works through those policies, local institutions are confronting the consequences. Cutchogue East Elementary School Principal Amy Brennan said housing costs have made it more difficult for the Mattituck-Cutchogue School District to recruit employees and keep them.

Some staff members commute at least 45 minutes, she said. The district has also hired candidates during the spring only to have them withdraw before the school year after accepting positions closer to home.

“Over the past few years, we’ve had at least five valued teachers that have left for positions closer to where they live,” she said. “Those departures aren’t just staff changes on a chart. Each one is a relationship with children, colleagues, and families that we have to rebuild with the new teacher.”

The district is separately confronting declining enrollment. It plans to vacate its Depot Lane administrative center by June 2027, move those offices into existing school buildings and lease the property to Just Kids Early Childhood Learning Center, as The Suffolk Times previously reported.

“As enrollment declines, you can’t always offer as many things as you did once before, just because of the numbers alone,” Ms. Brennan said. “Those experiences really matter.”



Paul Connor said less than half of SBELIH employees live on the North Fork. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter)

Another panelist, Paul Connor, chief administrative officer of Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital, said fewer hospital workers now live near the facility, complicating the competition for employees. He said that, just before the turn of the century, 75% of the hospital staff lived either on the North Fork or just into Riverhead. Now, roughly 49% live on the North Fork, 20% in Riverhead and the rest even farther west.

“We can build new programs, purchase state-of-the-art technology and expand services, but none of that matters if we don’t have physicians, nurses, technicians, therapists and support staff that we need to care for our patients,” Mr. Connor said.

Housing is among the first concerns prospective employees raise, he said.

“Every health care organization is competing for our nurses, physicians and other highly skilled professionals,” Mr. Connor said. “Communities that can offer attainable housing have a significant advantage.”



Mike Gaunci said the Southold Fire Department only has a handful of younger members. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter)

The shortage is also reaching Southold’s volunteer fire service.

Mike Gaunci, a 27-year-old small-business owner who has lived in Southold for five years, said only a handful of the department’s regular responders are younger than 30.

“We probably have five, six or seven people under 30 who are pretty routinely going to calls, and then there are a lot of people who are 60 and older,” he said. “It’s a weird generational gap of people between the ages of 30 and 50, which I think is a reflection on people who are moving away and then not coming back and not raising families here.”

For Kim Click, the crisis has meant years of housing instability.

Ms. Click and her son moved to the North Fork about eight years ago to help care for her mother, who has dementia, and her developmentally disabled sister in East Marion.

They initially found an illegal studio apartment in Mattituck and considered themselves “incredibly lucky” to have it. After the apartment became too small, they moved into a friend’s East Marion home. What was supposed to be temporary has lasted nearly two years.



Kim Click has had issues finding housing while caring for her mother. (Credit: Brendan Carpenter)

“Without his kindness and generosity, I do not know where my son and I would be residing,” Ms. Click said.

Her mother’s house has no room for them. If their current arrangement ends, Ms. Click said she could be forced to sleep in the laundry room, on the floor of her mother’s bedroom or on a living-room couch. She said local leaders must be willing to move beyond years of discussion and accept the political consequences of acting.

“I also fear that our community leaders are too afraid to take a bold stance to enact policies that maybe some in the community will be against,” she said. “The only way that meaningful change will happen has to start with the leaders who are willing to make decisions that are difficult.”

The North Fork Civics Coalition plans to hold another housing forum Monday, Nov. 9.