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The housing options in Barrington

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Barrington has a reputation as a fine town, with attractive homes surrounded by neat lawns, good schools, many boats moored in the harbor and a location only 15 minutes from the heart of Providence.

It is also a wealthy town, although it has slipped behind East Greenwich to rank as number two in family income in the state. And most recent figures for this year place median house prices, at \$114,000, impressive even in this day of escalating prices but only sixth in the state, with East Greenwich, Portsmouth, Middletown, Jamestown and Cumberland having higher house prices.

But this town is a leader in other housing characteristics: 89 percent of occupied housing units are owner occupied, highest rate in the state and well above the 59 percent average for Rhode Island, and 93 percent of the 5,399 total housing units are single family, detached houses, again, highest in the state and well above the state average of 61 percent.

Barrington is a town of single family, detached houses that are owner occupied, and the currently proposed Barrington zoning ordinance being discussed before the town council will maintain and, in time, likely increase these proportions.

But is this the best policy for a community whose children cannot afford to live in the town in which they were raised and whose residents are aging and often are unable

to care for the single family units in which they live? Does the community have an obligation to these younger and older residents who have different housing needs?

The proposed zoning ordinance specifically prohibits two-family and multi-family dwellings so that rentals will not be available to younger households unable to buy single family units and to older residents who need rental units because single family units no longer fill their needs.

A possible option for these young and old households is clustered housing, i.e., placing the approximate same number of units on a larger parcel of land as conventional zoning allows but in the form of housing units that are attached to each other. Ownership of the units is individual, but the outside of the units and the common land is shared through a condominium arrangement, i.e., shared ownership, a practice now accepted throughout the state. Clustered housing, by reducing land and building costs, allows home ownership at lower prices and helps conserve open space. (In the first six months of this year in Rhode Island condominiums were selling for approximately 10 percent less than single family units.)

The proposed zoning ordinance addresses clustered housing but not in a manner designed to cut costs because it allows only detached housing units to be clustered, and this does little to reduce land or building costs. The ordinance provides, for example, that in an R-40C zone (minimum lot size 40,000 square feet) 11 detached houses rather than 10 could be built on a 10 acre parcel, with two acres of the

site to be open space.

Objections expressed in public hearings on this cluster provision center on the open space feature, if the town took over the land would it go off the tax rolls, and the fear that the housing units would have condominium ownership.

The single family, detached house served an important function during the late baby-boom era when households in Barrington averaged 3.81 persons in 1965. The children have now grown and moved out. (the town had an 8 percent population loss during the 1970s) and households in 1980 average only 3.05 persons. With smaller households and an older population (median age is 33.3 compared with state average of 31.8) there needs to be a variety of housing options so that these longtime residents will not have to move to apartments and condos in surrounding towns as they currently do.

The question that should be uppermost in the minds of the town council next month when they vote on the ordinance is whether to maintain the anachronistic, more expensive, child-oriented, single family, detached house tradition that blossomed in the postwar years of large families, or whether to allow some options in housing for a changing town population so that residents, both old and young, have the opportunity to rent or buy less expensive houses in the community where they have spent most of their lives.

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