Why Have a Housing Commission?

- So that a resource can exist to help local land use boards and governing bodies as they deliberate over housing needs.
- A housing commission can be requested to review zoning ordinances or research housing data.
- Review housing development requests.
- To have a voice for the community on affordable housing matters.
- To help a community better understand affordable and workforce housing concerns.
- Employers rely on a stable workforce and a housing commission can support the development of a balanced supply of housing to meet the workforce needs of local businesses.
- The housing needs of residents in a community change over time as a result of many factors including income and stage of life. Housing commissions can promote balanced housing resources to meet the economic, social and physical needs of a diverse population.
Who Can Serve:

Commissions rely on local volunteers and RSA 673:4-c outlines the basic criteria for housing commission membership. Usually selectmen or town or city councilors will appoint the members of a housing commission.

A commission must have at least three but not more than seven members comprised of local residents. It can also have up to five alternates. One or more members of a housing commission may also serve on other municipal boards and commissions such as a conservation commission or historic district or agricultural commission.

The statute allows one commission member to serve on the local governing body and one member to serve on the local planning board.

Common members can help to establish and maintain communications among these bodies, whose interests and activities may overlap but whose perspectives may differ. It also provides opportunities for education and informed debate on proposed local ordinances that may affect the supply of affordable housing.

The statute provides some basic guidance as to the selection of membership by requiring the appointing authority to, “take into consideration the appointee’s demonstrated interest and ability to understand, appreciate, and promote the purpose of the housing commission.”

Interest in affordable housing matters and the willingness to commit time to the work of the housing commission are important considerations for membership. The accomplishments of each housing commission will depend on the time and effort put forth by commission members.

What Does a Local Housing Commission Do?

A housing commission advises other town boards and advocates for the interests and needs of affordable and workforce housing in the community. It has no regulatory or enforcement powers under the enabling statutes. Housing commission members work cooperatively with local governing boards and other local land-use boards and commissions to ensure that affordable and workforce housing concerns and interests are better understood and considered in decision-making.

Once a municipality has voted to establish a housing commission, it has the powers and duties described in RSA 673:4-c. A housing commission is the only local board specifically established to be a resource and a voice for housing concerns of the municipality. Without a housing commission, this work would be done by other boards where housing concerns are not part of their primary responsibilities.

A housing commission may:

• Assist the planning board in the development and review of those sections of the master plan that address housing and local land use ordinances and regulations that have the potential to affect the cost or availability of housing.

• Advise local agencies and other local boards in their review of requests on matters affecting or potentially affecting housing resources.

• Conduct activities to recognize, promote, enhance, and encourage the development of housing, particularly affordable and workforce housing.

• Hold meetings, hire consultants and publicize activities

• Coordinate activities with other service organizations and nonprofit groups.

• Conduct activities to recognize, promote, enhance, and encourage the development of housing, particularly affordable and workforce housing.

• Acquire and dispose of real property, both real and personal, in the name of the city or town, to assist in carrying out the purpose of this section.

• Acquire and dispose of real property interests in the name of the town, with approval of the local governing body, for the purpose of maintaining or improving housing affordability. The goal of this power is not to have the commission become a landlord, such as might be the case of a local housing authority, but to facilitate affordable housing transactions by serving as a “middle-man.” The commission does not have power of eminent domain.

• Manage an Affordable Housing Fund. When a municipality establishes a housing commission, an affordable housing fund is also created. While there is no requirement for the community to appropriate money to it, the fund allows the housing commission to act as the municipality’s agent to receive funds and make expenditures that support affordable housing. Fund monies can accumulate from year to year and do not lapse to the municipality’s general fund.

When dealing with property acquisitions, the housing fund typically will only serve the purpose of facilitating transactions relative to affordable housing.

Housing Commissions Don’t:

• Have regulatory authority.

• Have power of eminent domain.

• Limit a municipality’s authority relative to a housing authority under RSA 203.
A housing commission of no less than 3 nor more than 7 members may be created only by vote of the local legislative body (town meeting, city council or board of aldermen).

In a town, an article establishing a housing commission must be placed on the warrant in order to be considered at town meeting. Such an article might be worded:

“To see if the town will vote to establish a housing commission of ___(3 to 7) members and ___(up to 5) alternate members in accordance with RSA 673:4-c, said members to be appointed within ___ days of the annual meeting by the selectmen, who also shall designate a temporary chairman for the purpose of calling the first meeting of the commission.”

Assuring that voters understand and support the concept before the town votes to establish a housing commission requires preparation and groundwork.

Any local resident or group interested in the development of affordable and workforce housing can start organizing support for a housing commission.

There is no one formula to assure a town will adopt a housing commission but, at the very least, finding a champion to support a housing commission on the local governing body and having a strong steering committee can help ensure that a housing commission is considered and supported by the residents on the community.

Each town or city will need to create a process that will work best for them and take into consideration the unique environment that exists within the town.

Here are some steps to consider:

- One or two people from a group of interested citizens agree to coordinate organizational tasks.
- Build a case for support for the establishment of a housing commission and recruit a member of the local governing body who will sponsor its creation.
- Talk with community decision makers, residents, and board and committee members to assess and build interest in creating a housing commission.
- Gather support from affordable housing advocates and town leaders for a public exploratory and informational meeting about organizing a housing commission.
- An exploratory meeting helps determine and build interest in the idea of a housing commission and if it is right for the community.
- Use postings, press releases and community newsletters to promote.
- Have knowledgeable people speak about the purpose and activities of the commission and how the community would benefit from its creation.
- Have a town administrator, selectman or councilor facilitate the meeting. Allow for questions and end the meeting asking whether a housing commission should be organized.
- Ask for volunteers to serve on a steering committee that will write the warrant article and continue educating citizens and town officials about the benefits of having a housing commission.

The Steering Committee

Should include representatives from the local governing body and staff in addition to interested residents. The first steps include:

- Setting a meeting time and place.
- Selecting a chair.

Work of the steering committee includes:

- Establish deadlines and requirements.
- Draft warrant article or council motion article for review by town counsel and submission to the board of selectmen or town or city council.
- Develop and implement a public education plan for the housing commission vote.

Next Steps:

- The article is presented at town meeting for discussion, questions and vote.
- Upon approval, the local governing body solicits applications for housing commission membership. The appointing authority may seek advice on appointments from the steering committee.
- New members are notified in writing and provided a list of all members and are charged to meet within a certain date.
- Selectmen may facilitate the first meeting of the appointed housing commission membership.
Develop a Plan for Work

Each local housing commission determines its own plan of work often seeking advice from knowledgeable people involved in affordable housing as well as others in the community that are interested in the balanced supply of affordable housing.

Establish a Budget

There is no obligation for a municipality to fund a housing commission but if there is an appropriation made, the budget should reflect the commission’s work plan for the year. As with other local land use boards, some funding may be appropriated by the municipality or may be obtained from grants or other sources.

Communicate with the Public

Open meetings provide a place for members of the housing commission and the public to engage in the give-and-take of opinion, advocacy and resolution. Keeping communication open with other town boards, town staff, businesses and residents helps further the mission, goals and vision of the commission.

Communication with the public generates awareness of the housing commission and the public to engage in the give-and-take of opinion, advocacy and resolution. Keeping communication open with other town boards, town staff, businesses and residents helps further the mission, goals and vision of the commission.

Members attend meetings regularly and serve to fulfill the purpose of the housing commission as stated in the statute. Members report on issues of concern, serve on sub-committees, vote and conduct business based on its rules of procedure established pursuant to RSA 676:1. Minutes are required. Because a housing commission is a public body, it must comply with RSA 91-A, the Right To Know Law, which requires posting of meeting notices, timely availability of minutes and that meetings are open to the public.

Alternate members attend meetings regularly and vote in the absence of a regular member. A housing commission may also choose to have volunteer advisors who are volunteers that provide information, expertise and recommendations to help guide the work of the housing commission.

Electing officers is one of the first responsibilities of a newly organized housing commission. Officers lead the commission through meetings, public events and community relations.

Here are suggested roles and responsibilities for officers:

Chair
• Preside at all commission meetings.
• Conduct all meetings with openness, efficiency and respect. Conduct business according to the commission’s rule of procedure and the state’s open meeting laws.
• Sign documents prepared by the commission.
• See that housing commission decisions are implemented.
• Represent the commission in dealings with the local governing body and other boards and organizations.
• Vote on matters before the commission.

Vice Chair
• Assist the chair as requested.
• Accept duties delegated by the chair.

Secretary
• Record minutes of commission meetings.
• Provide notices of special meetings.
• See that all meetings are posted in the same places as those of other town or city boards.

Treasurer
• Maintain records of commission budget, income and expenditures.
Want Help Getting a Housing Commission Up and Running?

Contact one of the following workforce housing coalitions who are ready to help:

Upper Valley Housing Coalition  
Anne Duncan Cooley  
(603) 448-0272  
adc@uvhc.org  
www.uvhc.org

Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast  
Lisa Fisher Henderson  
(603) 205-0539  
lisa@seacoastwhc.org  
www.seacoastwhc.org

Greater Nashua Workforce Housing Coalition  
Judy Vincent  
(603) 459-0086  
judy@gnwhc.org  
www.gnwhc.org

Heading for Home (Monadnock Region)  
Susy Thielen  
(603) 352-1449  
SusyT@headingforhome.org  
www.headingforhome.org

Mount Washington Valley Housing Coalition  
Ed Butler  
(603) 374-6131  
EdoftheNotch@aol.com

Eastern Lakes Region Housing Coalition  
Edie DesMarais  
(603) 569-2512  
desmarpe@metrocast.net

Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast  
Lisa Fisher Henderson  
(603) 205-0539  
lisa@seacoastwhc.org  
www.seacoastwhc.org

Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce  
Michael Skelton  
(603) 792-4107  
michaels@manchester-chamber.org  
www.manchester-chamber.org

Rosemary Heard  
CATCH  
(Concord Area Trust for Community Housing)  
(603) 225-8835  
rheard@catchhousing.org  
www.catchhousing.org

NH Workforce Housing Council (Statewide)  
George Reagan  
New Hampshire Housing  
(603) 310-9253  
greagan@nhhfa.org  
www.nhhfa.org  
www.workforcehousingnh.org

Acknowledgements:

This publication is based on the material in “Creating an Agricultural Commission in Your Hometown” developed by Lorraine Stuart Merrill and is used with permission. Photos and artwork are used with permission.

For additional information about this document, contact:

George Reagan  
New Hampshire Housing  
(603) 310-9253  
greagan@nhhfa.org
Appendix A

Here are sample agendas and correspondence to adapt for your use:

NEWS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(DATE)
CONTACT: (NAME)
(PHONE)
(E-MAIL)

Housing Commission Exploratory Meeting Planned

A public meeting to explore a proposed Housing Commission for the (city/town) of (TOWN) will be held on:

(DATE) at (TIME)
at the (PLACE) in the (ROOM)
Refreshments will be provided

(If appropriate, insert announcement of any speakers who will introduce or explain the concept).

The purpose of this exploratory meeting is to introduce (TOWN) residents to the concept and benefits of a municipal Housing Commission and discuss if (TOWN) should pursue organizing a Housing Commission.

A Housing Commission is a non-regulatory, town recognized entity which provides a voice for affordable housing matters and a resource for information to local governing bodies, other boards and commissions and residents of the community.

# # #
Proposed (TOWN) Housing Commission
Exploratory Meeting

Date
Time
Place
Address

**Purpose:**
To introduce (TOWN) residents, and those interested in the future of affordable housing, to the concept and benefits of a Housing Commission.

Discuss if residents of (TOWN) should pursue organizing a Housing Commission

**AGENDA**

6:30 p.m. Refreshments
6:45 p.m. Welcome (local official)
           Introductions (NAME)
           Why We are Here (facilitator)
7:00 p.m. Value of Housing Commissions (NAME)
7:30 p.m. Questions & Answers (ALL)
8:00 p.m. Next Steps (Steering Committee; organizational process) (facilitator)
8:30 p.m. Adjourn
(TOWN) Housing Commission
Steering Committee

(introduction)
Select facilitator for meeting
Select recorder for meeting

To Do
Review regulations/rules regarding composition of boards and commissions
Review schedule/process for submission of article for (DATE) Town Meeting Warrant

Draft/Submit Article
Assign responsibility for submission and follow up on status of the article.

Identify Next Steps
• Develop communications plan (town boards, Town Meeting members, newspaper articles, media advocacy…)
• To introduce and gain support (identify and understand opposition) for the warrant article.
• Assign tasks
• Steering Committee member listing of names, addresses and contact numbers
• Prepare agenda for next meeting
• Schedule next meeting

Other

Adjourn