

**2021**

# HOUSING AFFORDABILITY IN BLACKSBURG

RESULTS FROM PHASE 1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



VALUES, CHALLENGES, AND PRIORITIES

# OVERVIEW OF INVOLVEMENT, PROCESS & PEOPLE

This document summarizes the feedback and key themes from Phase I of the Town's public engagement process regarding Housing Affordability in Blacksburg. This first phase asked respondents to provide input on community values, concerns, and priorities.

Over the two months that this phase was open, the project page on Let's Talk Blacksburg:

- received 1,400 visits
- informed 586 visitors
- obtained feedback from 340 respondents
- received 200 views of the local housing trends video
- had 80 downloads of the housing trends summary

## PHASES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS



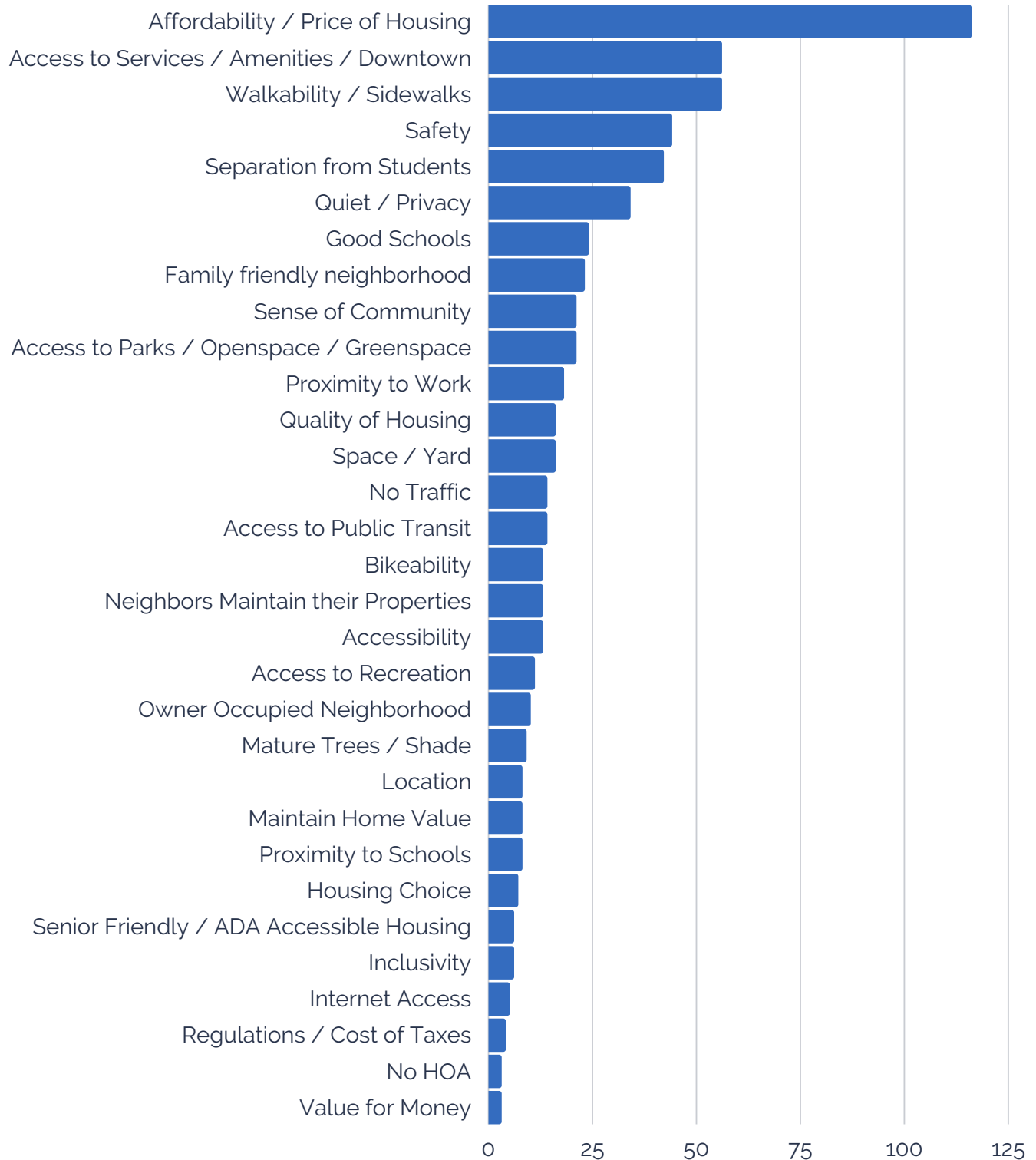
**VALUES**  
Community Values,  
Concerns and  
Priorities

**HOUSING &  
COMMUNITY**  
Preferred Amenities,  
Housing Types and  
Density of Development

**STRATEGIES**  
Compare and Prioritize  
Strategies and  
Investment

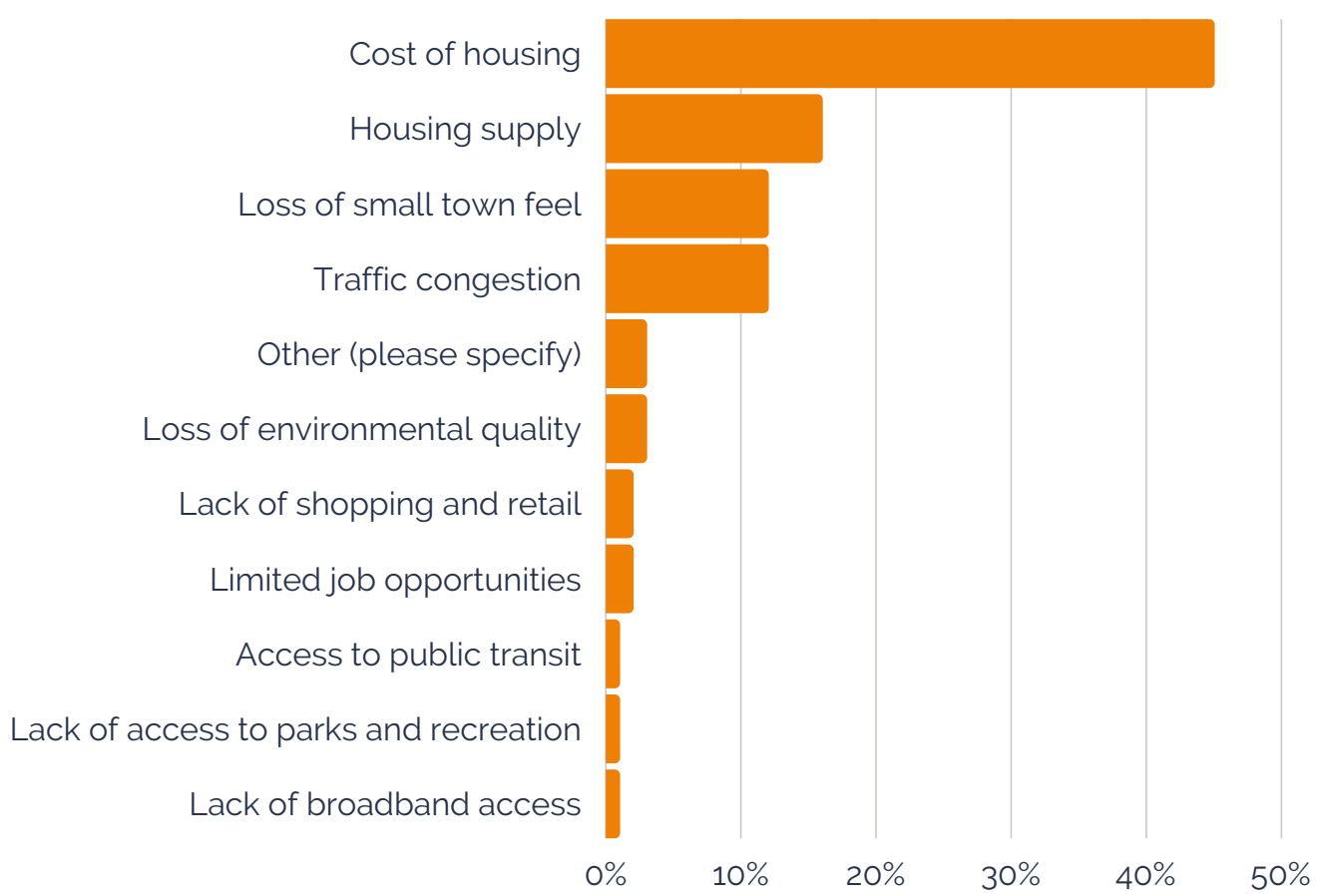
# What is most important to you when choosing a home or neighborhood?

RESPONSES IN ORDER OF FREQUENCY



# What do you think is the biggest challenge our community will face as Blacksburg continues to grow ?

BY PERCENT OF THE 340 RESPONSES RECEIVED



## COST OF HOUSING

Those who chose this answer most strongly agreed with the proposed value statements (next page).

## TRAFFIC CONGESTION

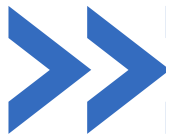
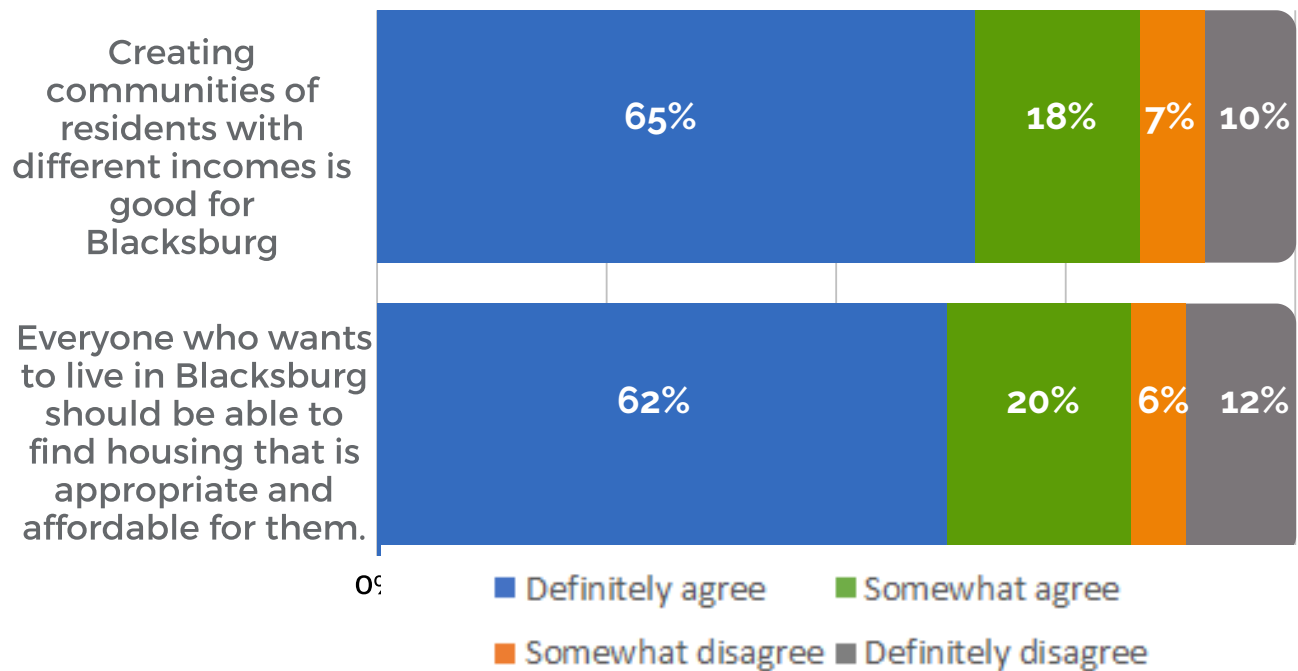
Those who chose this answer primarily wanted access to greenspace, walk ability, accessibility, and safety.

## OTHER

Predominant answers provided for "other": VT growth, inability to generate tax revenue from VT, lack of housing for seniors and service workers, and government limiting growth.

# How do you feel about the following value statements?

BY PERCENT OF THE 340 RESPONSES RECEIVED



The predominant reason provided by those who chose "somewhat agree" is because they felt the town is too small for everyone who wants to live here, but by and large, these respondents also felt those who work in Blacksburg should be able to live here.

## Respondent Perspectives

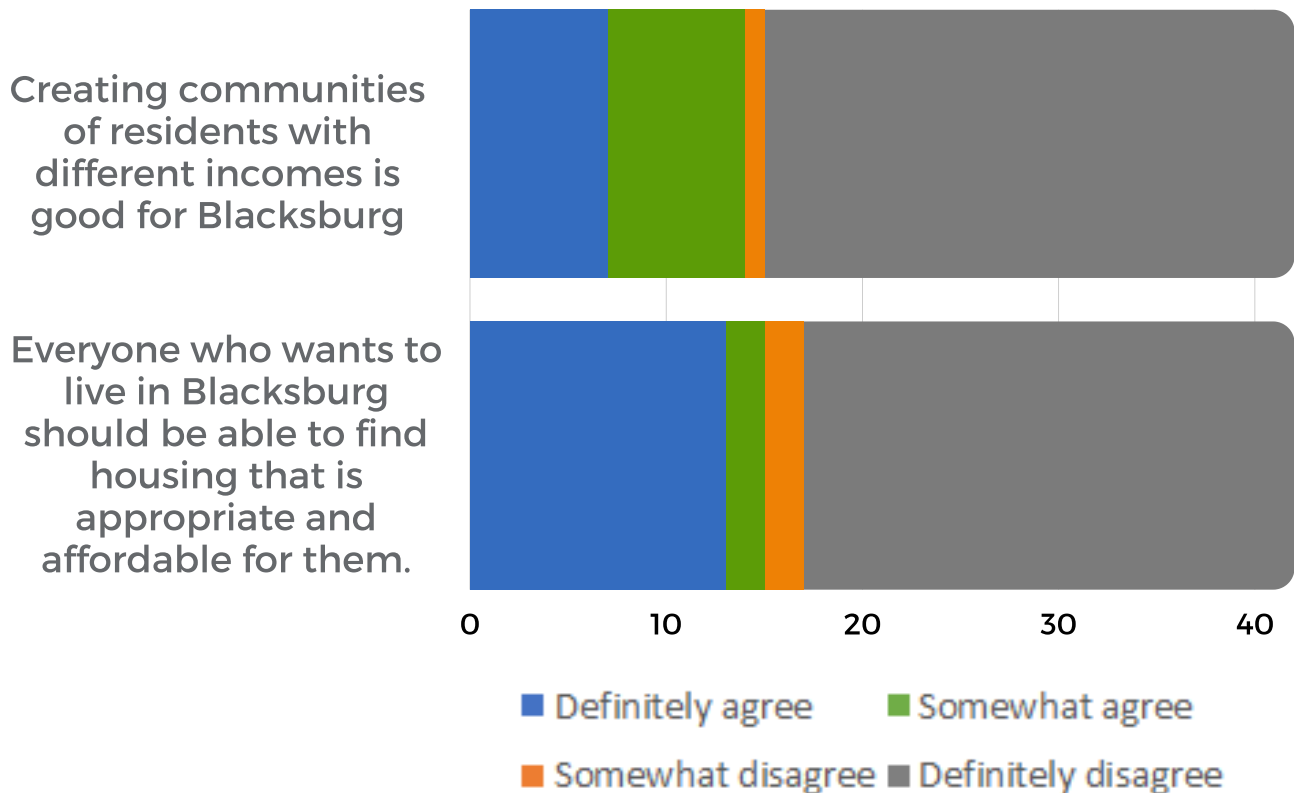
"I don't think there is a way to provide housing for everyone who desires to live in BLACKSBURG, but I believe priorities should be for those persons and families who work in Blacksburg and wish to live where they work."

"It's not fair that people who work in and serve Blacksburg can't afford to live there. Teachers, Tech employees, law enforcement—they all are vital parts of the community yet many live in other communities and have longer commutes because of housing cost."

"It is not physically possible for everyone who wants to live in Blacksburg, but it should be possible to find housing in all income brackets with a limit on the number of student housing options encroaching true family neighborhoods."

# Top Concern: Loss of Small Town Feel

BY NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS




## THE WHY?

Respondents most concerned about the loss of small-town feel also expressed concern about the loss or impact of:

- Walkability
- Bikeability
- Greenspace
- Yard Space
- Property Maintenance
- Privacy
- Safety
- Access to Retail
- Access to Good Schools
- No Separation between Student and Permanent Resident Neighborhoods
- Bad Zoning
- Government Interference in the Housing Market



# Key Themes



THE FOLLOWING SECTION  
INCLUDES 6 KEY THEMES OR  
COMMON SENTIMENTS  
SHARED BY AT LEAST 20% OF  
SURVEY RESPONDENTS.

# Virginia Tech Growth is negatively impacting our housing market



Many respondents noted the impact of VT's growth as the primary cause of the Town's lack of affordable housing. This growth is creating competition from investors and parents of VT students and driving up housing costs. This is also causing displacement and longer commutes for low to middle-income workers who seek lower housing costs in other communities.

A sample of comments from survey respondents:

- "Permanent residents are becoming extinct in the Town in favor of a more transient population of students. Low to middle-income residents cannot and will not live in Blacksburg with the current heavy emphasis on satisfying university needs."
- "People who work in Blacksburg should be able to live in Blacksburg and not be forced to commute from other places because students force the housing costs out of reach of normal working people."
- "You cannot have a vibrant diverse community if the housing is primarily for students in lieu of dorms. They do not have a long-term commitment to the community."
- "It is very sad to me that there are so few affordable housing options in Blacksburg for families of limited means and who are not students."
- "I currently live in Blacksburg but we need a bigger house for our family, but it is completely unaffordable. Almost everything is geared towards students with prices of \$2,000+ For rent. Even buying a house is almost impossible with the ridiculous prices."



# Blacksburg is Becoming More Elite and Less Diverse



Many respondents commented on the declining cultural, racial, and economic diversity in Blacksburg as it becomes predominately student-centered and affordable only to higher-income households.

A sample of comments from survey respondents:

- "I don't like the "us and them" mentality of those who can afford to live in Blacksburg. It's totally elitist and lacks any sense of diversity."
- "Many who live outside Blacksburg in other communities within the New River Valley perceive that Blacksburg and its residents are relatively privileged. While I worked at VT for 36 years, I could not afford to live here most of that time."
- "Blacksburg is becoming very limited to upper-middle-class white families. Diversity is what creates a community, but very few families can afford to live in Blacksburg. We have a combined income of nearly \$150K, and ended up having to buy elsewhere."
- "Developing " economically mixed" neighborhoods provide, not only, more diversity, but also more opportunity for those who wish to move into homeownership. Blacksburg is increasingly becoming more "elite", creating a less diverse & interesting community."
- "I'm concerned that Blacksburg is rapidly moving toward becoming a town exclusively for rich people students. I have lived here for over twenty years, but if this pace continues, I may not be here for twenty more."

# Our Community Values Cultural, Racial and Economic Diversity



**30% of respondent comments stressed how important it was for them to live in a diverse and inclusive community.**

A sample of comments from survey respondents:

- "A variety of housing options is better for resiliency, for creating a diverse community where I want to raise my kids."
- "Diversity is a strength, and it's the responsibility of governments and societies to make inclusive spaces."
- "Diversity brings richness to a community- this includes class. I do not want to live in a town where the people who work here can't afford to live here."
- "Creating an economically diverse community is important for quality of life for all residents."
- "Diversity is an asset. That includes a diversity of lifestyle, income, and age. I want both students, young professionals, families, and seniors to have access to a place to live in our community."
- "We don't want to create a place where only the rich can live even though we need all people to keep the town moving."
- "Housing is a right. In addition to that, diversity is the lifeblood of a community. Communities that become homogenous - whether by income, race, or other - have a tendency to lose vibrancy and eventually become stagnant."

# There is a need for a wider range of housing types to create housing for a wider range of incomes



34% of respondents felt our community should create housing affordable for a wider range of incomes. Many respondents also noted the need to diversify the types of housing available to help increase housing affordability and availability.

A sample of comments from survey respondents:

- "Prices for buying and renting in Blacksburg is expensive and there needs to be something for different income levels."
- "The housing stock is so limited. I have looked for two years in BBG, Christiansburg, Radford. Now I am looking in Roanoke."
- "We do not have great (regional) public transportation, so if we want workers to staff our restaurants and other services they need a place to live with reasonable access to work."
- "With the growth of VT, many people are being pushed further from town to find decent housing. It's important to be welcoming for all people regardless of income. A variety of housing types in all price ranges is essential."
- "Smaller houses in expensive neighborhoods are good for our community's soul. To remind us that status is unimportant. Renters are monopolizing the market and it isn't fair."
- "There needs to be enough housing in each income level to meet demand. Lack of affordable housing in Blacksburg makes it so that young professionals struggle to remain in Blacksburg."
- "My grandchildren need options as they begin entry-level jobs, young families have different needs, retirees need flexible rentals with services."

# We need diverse neighborhoods but also a separation between students and permanent residents



20% of respondents felt it was important to diverse incomes or housing types within neighborhoods. However, many noted that this did not include students due to incompatible lifestyles, a desire for quiet and to live among permanent residents, and concerns around maintenance and property values.

A sample of comments from survey respondents:

- "Affordable housing should be scattered throughout the Town not just in one neighborhood."
- "Affordable housing is really important, but the neighborhood should mix incomes."
- "I think having areas where residents can afford to live with a mixture of homes, apartments and townhomes builds community."
- "Student areas need to be controlled, they're overriding our town. Have VT build more high-rise apartments for students ON campus."
- "I don't have a problem with lower-income housing mixed in neighborhoods, but I don't want a rash of students moving into the neighborhood."
- "Students have different lifestyles and different housing needs than families and retirees, so trying to mix them up by arbitrary zoning may not be a wise solution."
- "I agree that neighborhoods should be all-encompassing. But, I do like that there is somewhat of a separation between residents and students."



# We need to focus on permanent residents



There were a few sub-themes found in the respondent comments related to the need for housing that was affordable to young professionals, seniors, the disabled, those who grew up in Blacksburg, and for our low and middle-income workforce.

## **Focus on housing for young professionals and young families.**

- "Lack of affordable housing in Blacksburg makes it so that young professionals struggle to remain in Blacksburg after graduation from Virginia Tech."
- "Young couples who do not have parents that can buy them apartments, condos, or townhouses have very little housing available to them."

## **Focus on senior friendly housing.**

- "I am a senior who wants to and plans to age in place. Currently, it is very difficult to find quality affordable housing in a quiet neighborhood near the necessities of life."

## **Focus on those who grew up in Blacksburg.**


- "I especially worry about individuals who grew up here and faced with disabilities (mental/physical etc.) are forced to move OUT OF THEIR HOMETOWN because there is not affordable housing with access to public transportation."

## **Focus on housing for our workforce.**

- "There is not enough quality housing for our teachers and healthcare workers (except physicians, of course)."



# Strategies



THE FOLLOWING SECTION INCLUDES 4 MAIN TYPES OF STRATEGIES RESPONDENTS FELT THE TOWN SHOULD CONSIDER. THESE WERE INCLUDED AS COMMENTS IN THE SURVEY OR IDEAS SECTION OF LETS TALK BLACKSBURG.

WE WILL ALSO SEEK MORE DETAILED FEEDBACK ABOUT SPECIFIC STRATEGIES IN PHASE 3 OF THIS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS.

# 1

## MAKE CHANGES TO CURRENT ZONING REGULATIONS

- "Increase density and avoid sprawl, It does not allow for equitable housing (e.g., hard to access services without a car)."
- "Revise zoning regulations, current land use restricts development/antiquated for the level of growth pressure."
- "Allow manufactured housing in more districts."
- "One solution may be allowing basement apartments and mother-in-law suites to create more supply."
- "Allow higher density affordable housing in commercial areas."
- "Place restrictions on remodeling low-cost homes into game day houses."
- "Stop approving housing development that charges rent many times above what minimum wage is."
- "Adopt a Tree Ordinance to protect against the loss of trees as development intensifies."

# 2

## CHANGE TAXES TO SUPPORT AFFORDABLE HOUSING

- "Place a small a 'community' fee on student rentals to support affordable housing and transportation."
- "Residents should not be taxed to provide affordable housing. Tax the developers."
- "Remove taxes and regulations to let the market control demand and pricing."

# 3

## IMPLEMENT INCLUSIONARY HOUSING / DENSITY BONUS

- "I've seen what lack of affordable housing has done to entire communities during the "tech boom" in Silicon Valley and Seattle area. The best strategy is to require developers to set aside units that are for lower-income people."
- "Requirements should be placed on developers to provide affordable housing, whether it is a % of an approved development or a dedicated development for affordable housing."
- "Integrate affordable housing into all new development. Require developers of luxury student housing to include affordable housing."

# 4


## WORK WITH VT TO ADDRESS STUDENT IMPACT ON HOUSING

- "VT needs to build on-campus housing. VT expansion is a major factor in the lack of affordable housing."
- "VT should supply more student housing to take the pressure off the town."
- "New developments should include HOA rules to help maintain the integrity of the community/neighborhood from students rentals."





# HOUSING STORIES



THE FOLLOWING SECTION  
INCLUDES A SAMPLING OF  
STORIES SHARED BY  
RESIDENTS OF THEIR  
EXPERIENCES TRYING TO FIND  
HOUSING IN BLACKSBURG OR  
WITH HELPING OTHERS FIND  
HOUSING.

# LIVING IN THE BURG

" I am lucky enough to live in a house in Blacksburg that is within walking distance to town. I live on a street of single-family homes. The last several homes sold on my street have been sold to investors who rent to students, while families who want to live in town can't find/afford a house within walking distance to town. It would be nice if there were a way to limit the number of single-family homes that turn into student rentals or Airbnb-type rentals. People want to live here - but finding a house in town is very difficult, affordable or not."

## 11 YEARS, 5 RENTALS

" I came to school here and went to work full-time after graduation. I love Virginia Tech, the Town of Blacksburg, and the surrounding outdoor recreation. I have always loved Blacksburg for how pedestrian and bicycling friendly it is for this part of Virginia. I love that I don't have to be dependent on a car to live here and that we have access to lots of parks, grocery, and dining options. I also love the students for the energy, jobs, and economic stimulation they bring to this area.

However, the housing market makes the hope of ever owning a home a pipe dream. I have never lived in a rental with a properly maintained HVAC unit. It is stressful knowing that the rent will increase faster than my salary and that homes will increase in cost faster than I can save the down payment. I feel like I am in a race to buy any home at all before I can't afford to live here anymore.

A relative was recently selling her childhood home here, and I didn't stand a chance. She could not afford to let me buy it at any lower than market cost, and even then it needs \$50,000 to repair a leaking basement. The new owner will probably slap a band-aid on it and rent it to an unsuspecting student. I currently live with roommates and plan to for as long as they are willing to live with me, so I can't imagine how a family does it.

We need the zoning to allow for higher-density student housing so that they don't need to live in single-family areas out of necessity. Virginia Tech could also stand to provide more dense student housing on campus because many students would choose to stay on campus if there was room. We also need higher-density low-income housing for professionals and families. Why is there no housing on top of the shops on South Main or Price's Fork? How convenient it would be to live above Kroger, Bull & Bones, CVS, or Chipotle? It would certainly help small businesses if their customers could walk downstairs. We would need to get creative with parking underground or garages but it can be done with proper zoning. The students aren't the enemy, they are a great resource. The issue is zoning and supply."

# A REALTOR'S VIEW

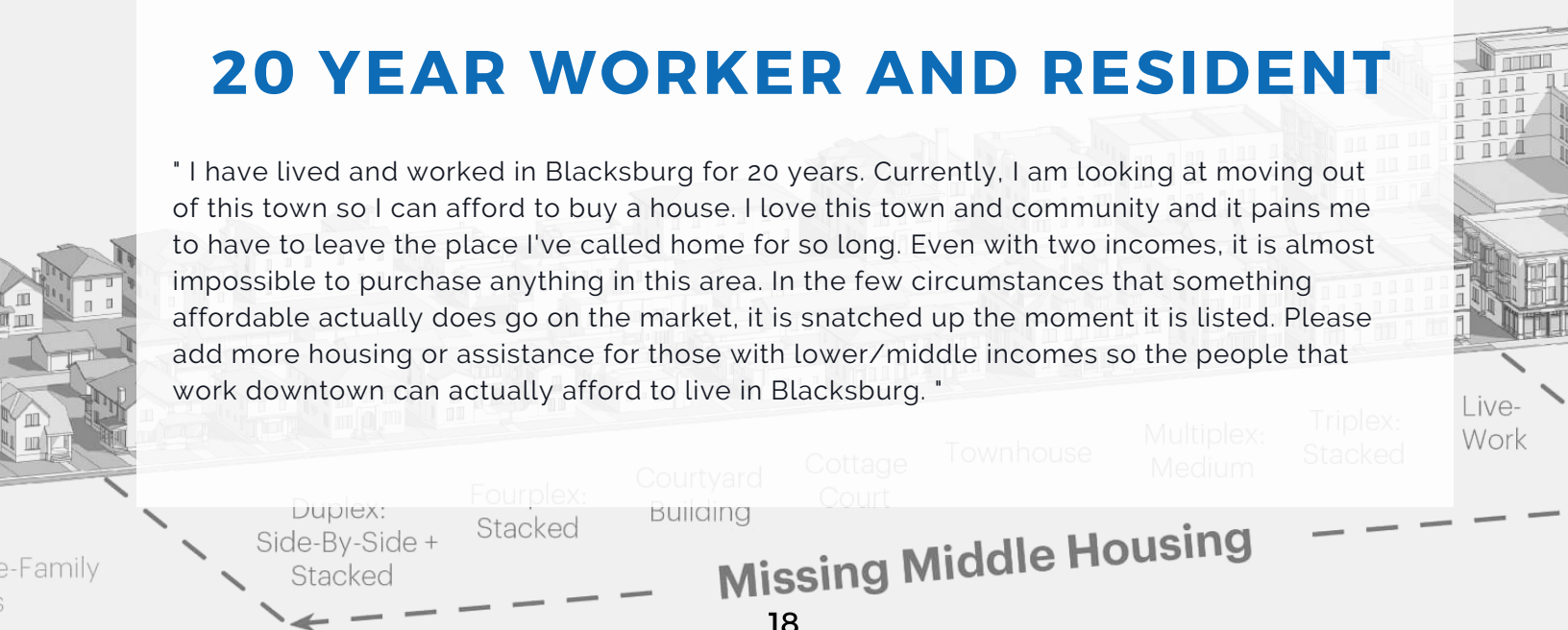
" As a former realtor, the pattern I have seen for 20 years is that lower-priced housing gets bought up as rentals to students, so my buyer clients who were limited in income, or wanted properties to fix up with their own work, were usually priced out of the market.

When landlords could get \$300 a month, or more, per bedroom in even a non-luxury building, they were always winning the competition with families. There is no law preventing buyers from renting to students, and any regulations about the number of unrelated persons living in a structure were unenforced, so I don't know that there is any public-policy remedy for this problem. I do know sellers who tried very hard to protect their valued neighbors by selling only to someone who would be an owner-occupier, but that was a matter of personal preference and on-market conditions for the sale.

Not all student renters are a problem for their neighbors, of course -- I now have some near my new Blacksburg residence who are totally unobtrusive (except for lots of cars clogging the street because of the driveway/garage situation in their buildings is inadequate). But many buyers are rightfully wary of living in a neighborhood with lots of student rentals, even if they can afford the purchase, and often there is simply nothing they can afford. The town is also allowing endless building/rebuilding of apartment complexes that are now "luxury" student housing, and I see little being done to prevent some of the older student complexes from decaying into unsightly and unsafe slums."

# 20 YEAR WORKER AND RESIDENT

" I have lived and worked in Blacksburg for 20 years. Currently, I am looking at moving out of this town so I can afford to buy a house. I love this town and community and it pains me to have to leave the place I've called home for so long. Even with two incomes, it is almost impossible to purchase anything in this area. In the few circumstances that something affordable actually does go on the market, it is snatched up the moment it is listed. Please add more housing or assistance for those with lower/middle incomes so the people that work downtown can actually afford to live in Blacksburg. "



Blacksburg TOWN OF  
VIRGINIA