

## Workforce Housing Shortage Threatens Andover's Future

Andover Planning Board to address this issue

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There is a housing shortage that threatens Andover's long-term viability as a prosperous community.

A couple of months ago I attended a meeting of Lakes Region business leaders. At that meeting I heard several executives complaining that their large companies were unsuccessful in hiring the local workers they really need, even though their companies had boosted starting wages 5%, along with offering a \$1,000 signing bonus.

One person in that group blamed our local companies' troubles on the federal

pandemic relief packages and a widespread lack of character among people in our region, saying "Nobody wants to work anymore!"

This explanation doesn't ring true to me. Although I believe that the trouble these companies are experiencing is real, the cause of their trouble is not that somehow, vast numbers of lazy workers in the Lakes Region are idling at home.

The true reasons, as I see them, are not so simplistic and as politically polarizing as heaping blame on "lazy workers" or "government handouts," as some claim. Town planning boards, including Andover's, must take action to correct a policy error we made decades ago. That policy error was one that blocks appropriate development of entry-level workforce housing by limit-

# OPINION

ing new construction to expensive single-family dwellings.

Nearly everywhere I go in northern Merrimack County, I see "Now Hiring" signs. Yet, employers are not able to fill positions. The problem is widespread.

The New Hampshire State Police say they have 25% of their positions unfilled, and their starting wages are above \$24 an hour. Even fast food places are offering a seemingly attractive \$14 to \$16 per hour to start. (For a fascinating deep dive into typical wages paid for every line of work in our greater Concord area, go to the NH.gov website and examine the data on wages-conc.pdf.)

Why are so many jobs in New Hampshire remaining unfilled? There is one glaring reason: wages here are too low relative to housing costs.

Currently, the jobless rate in New Hampshire is 2.3%, far below the national average of 3.6%. Many rightly regard low unemployment numbers as good economic news, and yes, they are, if those numbers are considered in isolation. We New Hampshire folks work hard!

But New Hampshire's low unem-

ployment numbers indicate that we are in a so-called "tight" labor market where job offers exceed the number of job seekers. Job seekers can be choosy, and will even move out of our state in search of their best work-life opportunities.

From the viewpoint of some person who does not already own property in Andover, it is bad news that our local housing market has really exploded since the start of the pandemic. From a first-home buyer's perspective, the existing shortage of entry-level and workforce homes has become even worse.

As the global pandemic frightened many folks away from crowded residential neighborhoods in Boston and New York, people cashed out valuable southern New England suburban properties and bought beautiful homes in the rural Lakes Region, including in Andover. In recent months the *Beacon* reported that median sales prices in Andover have rocketed up, many homes being only on the market five or six days before sale, sometimes closing thousands above the asking price.

This "land rush" may be thrilling for

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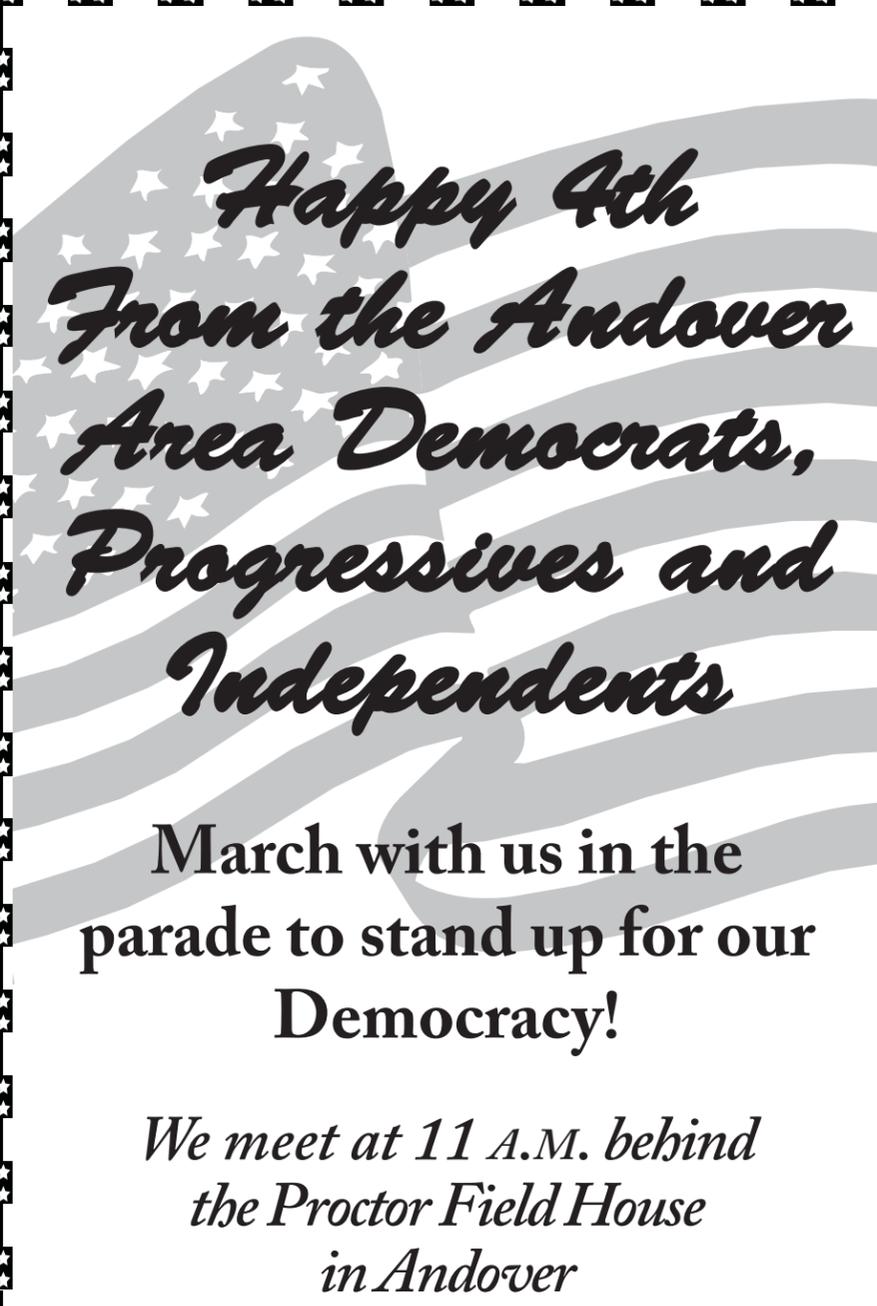


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