

Wages left out of affordable housing debate

by Ben Brewer

“Affordable housing is not inner-city-type housing,” County Commissioner Scott Conklin explained after the Centre County Task Force on Affordable Housing presented its report in June of last year.

Conklin, a Democrat now serving in the state House of Representatives, said he wanted to refute the “stereotype” of affordable housing as low-income housing. “This is housing for teachers, county workers and mechanics,” he said.

George Khoury, chair of the task force and the Centre County Affordable Housing Coalition, echoed Conklin’s comments in an opinion piece in the March issue of *Voices*.

“In Centre County, we are not talking about low-income, urban housing projects,” he wrote.

If we’re not talking about housing for low-income families, then what are we talking about?

Houses.

“It’s hard any more for a family to find housing in this community for under \$150,000 or \$160,000,” Centre Regional Planning Agency Director Bob Crum told

“The first thing you have to do is fix the labor market, or you will always have to provide low-income housing.”

--Amy Glasmeier

the Council of Governments general forum in March, as reported by the *Centre Daily Times*.

This despite considerable attention paid to low-income residents and renters in the task force report.

The report stated that 46.2 percent of Centre County renters pay more than 30 percent of their incomes for housing, in part because of the large student population. Less than 19 percent of home owners spend that much. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines housing as affordable when a household pays no more than 30 percent of its monthly income for total housing costs.

More than one-quarter of renters spend at least 50 percent of their incomes on housing, compared to less than 7 percent of owners, the report said.

Yet discussions often revolve around the median working family income in Centre County—\$50,557—the price of an afford-

able home for such a family—\$128,545—and the median price of an area home—\$156,000, according to the task force report.

Crum’s numbers were higher. He told the COG that a family of four with an income of \$49,350 could afford to spend \$150,000. But, he said, the average price of a home in Centre County is approximately \$190,000, with new homes costing upwards of \$245,000.

In either case, the question is how to find houses for families with incomes tens of thousands of dollars above poverty level.

Business incentives.

Most of the almost two dozen proposals by the task force involve encouraging the development of more affordable housing by making information and funding available to developers, reducing regulatory barriers and providing zoning “incentives.”

The demand side of affordable housing is less a part of the solution. The only propos-

al that addresses residents’ difficulty paying for affordable housing is the expanded use of housing vouchers, such as HUD Section 8 and Shelter Plus Care vouchers.

Amy Glasmeier, professor of economic geography at Penn State, said more needs to be done to bring wages up to meet housing costs.

“The first thing you have to do is fix the labor market,” she said, “or you will always have to provide low-income housing.”

Glasmeier acknowledged that income and housing are intertwined. But until workers are paid a what’s called a “living wage,” she said, housing will remain unaffordable. A living wage is the minimum hourly wage full-time workers need to afford housing, food, utilities, transportation, healthcare, recreation and other basic expenses.

Glasmeier is the author of *An Atlas of Poverty in America: One Nation, Pulling Apart* and runs the Poverty in America Project.

According to the living wage calculator on the project’s Web site, in Centre County,

see **Wages**, pg. 4

Primary offers few choices, many opportunities

by Ben Brewer

This primary day, Centre Countians are likely to find more choices on the touch screens at Sheetz than the voting machines at their polling places. (And they’ll get a receipt at Sheetz.)

There is no candidate, Democratic or Republican, running for eight council, seven supervisor and seven school board positions around the county, according to the Centre County Office of Elections Web site.

Only about 10 percent of the party nominations up for grabs May 15 are competitive. Out of 35 boroughs and townships, 27 are without a competitive local race, Democratic or Republican, and seven don’t have a single local candidate on the ballot.

Although empty ballots don’t bode well for voter turnout, which was 30 percent of registered voters in the last municipal primary with a Centre County Board of

Only about 10 percent of the party nominations up for grabs on May 15 are competitive. Out of 35 boroughs and townships, 27 are without a competitive local race.

Commissioners race, they’re great news for aspiring politicians.

On primary day, a candidate not already on the ballot needs 10 write-ins to be eligible to win a party’s nomination, according to Joyce McKinley, director of elections. Those 10 write-ins count as the 10 signatures required to petition to get on the ballot, and they also count toward the candidate’s vote tally.

In the general election, there is no minimum number of write-ins required to qualify for a position with no candidates on the ballot. Just a handful, and in some cases a couple, of write-ins on Election Day are enough to put a candidate in elected office.

There are approximately 350 party nominations for about half as many county and local positions to be voted on in the primary. Thirty-five of those nominations are contested.

The competitive races are for Court of Common Pleas judge, the Centre County Board of Commissioners, sheriff, register of wills, magisterial district judge, the State College Area School Board, and nine supervisor and six council positions.

There are no candidates running for more than 220 party nominations, and more than 80 candidates are unopposed.

“That’s not out of the ordinary,” McKinley said of the apparent candidate shortage. She said write-ins, during the pri-

mary or on Election Day in November, will likely take care of some of the vacancies, and supervisors or council members can nominate individuals to fill any positions that remain empty.

In the Philipsburg-Osceola School District, there are no candidates for two of the school board seats.

“This has happened before,” said Superintendent Chuck Young. “Usually people see that nobody’s running, and they write themselves in.”

Young said many potential candidates are deterred by the time commitment. Jack Aberegg, chairman of the Marion Township Board of Supervisors, has a different explanation for lagging participation.

“Young people today just aren’t interested,” he said. “It’s awfully hard to get them involved in the operation of the township.”

see **Primary**, pg. 6

Democratic candidates for Centre County

Rich Rogers

Place of residence: Spring Township
Years in Centre County: 35
Occupation: administrator and accountant

Background: I have extensive background in budgeting, planning and business. In my five years as a school board member, I was elected board president three times. A lifelong Centre County resident, I coach and officiate various youth sports. I am married with one daughter.

ON THE ISSUES:

Centre Crest Nursing Home

Centre Crest has been operating at a \$1.5 million deficit. We are paying more than \$700,000 over three years to Premier Healthcare Resources to manage our facility, which continues to operate at such a substantial loss.

We need to return the management of this great facility to our county government. We must strive to provide the care that our residents deserve.

If possible, Centre Crest should remain under the control of our county government, as this is the only local facility that will accept residents regardless of their ability to pay. With county leadership and focus, this facility can become the proud operation it once was.

Affordable Housing

Development. Funding. Employment. As commissioner, I would work hard with developers to foster ideas that would provide affordable housing for our residents while preserving our agricultural industry, conservation areas and waterways.

We need to ensure that new developments are centrally located, with municipal services, utilities and busing already present, to keep the costs for the developments and the residents affordable.

I would also fight to continue funding for programs that address residents' housing needs. Additionally, I would call on our



state legislators and other officials to help promote our county and attract industries to provide more quality jobs in Centre County.

Voting Machines

Voting is a right. This right should be protected. Our citizens deserve to have peace of mind, knowing that their votes were counted correctly and their ballots could be reviewed in the event of a recount.

Since the Board of Commissioners chose the most expensive voting machine option, we are now faced with the challenge of providing a verifiable paper trail.

As commissioner, I would look to return our paperless touch-screen machines for credit to purchase the optical scan machines that provide verifiable paper trails. In the event that the county is unable to return these machines for a substantial credit, I would propose that we work to reconfigure our machines so that there is a verifiable paper trail associated with each ballot cast.

Given that our current touch-screen machines are more costly, have a shorter life span and fail to provide a verifiable paper trail, I would propose that as we need to replace voting machines, we look to a more cost-effective and voter-friendly machine, such as the optical scan machine.

Chuck Roeschen

Place of residence: Miles Township
Years in Centre County: 28
Occupation: family farm manager and taxi driver

Background: I attended Drexel University and Penn State, majoring in physics and sociology. Since 1983, I have managed a family farm in Brush Valley, raising vegetables and flowers using sustainable farming methods. I have been the host and organizer of the Sunflower Farm Harvest Festival for over 20 years.

ON THE ISSUES:

Voting Machines

As long as a verifiable paper trail in the form of a printout is forbidden by Pennsylvania state law, the touch-screen voting machines should not be used.

When two of the current county commissioners voted in favor of these machines, they put convenience and speed ahead of the sanctity of the vote.

With no paper trail, accurate vote counts are vulnerable to both computer error and manipulation by unscrupulous individuals. Until the technology is developed that allows a printout that is in accord with state law or state law changes, we need to use a different type of voting machine, such as the optical scanner.

It is vital that voters have confidence that their vote will be accurately counted and recorded, and that is not possible with touch-screen voting machines that have no paper trail.

Police Siege in State College

Over the past decade, State College Borough has massively increased the police presence downtown, a decision that affects both the borough and the rest of the county.

This police presence has gotten so large that an increasing percentage of people feel like downtown is under a police siege. Citizens are feeling more intimidated by the police than protected. Many from the outly-



ing areas will not even go downtown at night, not because of fear of crime, but because the overwhelming police presence intimidates them.

I am not blaming the police, who are only doing what the elected officials ask of them. But when a large percentage of people feel more intimidated by the police than by crime, some line has been crossed.

I intend to be a voice to Borough Council for all those who feel they have gone overboard on the level of police presence.

Rush Township Landfill

I am a strong supporter of property rights. I do not believe government should infringe on these rights without a compelling reason, but the dump in Rush Township is just such a compelling reason.

Clean water is vital to the long-term sustainability and quality of life in Centre County. Putting a landfill on top of a mountain right next to where one of the few local large bodies of water drains would be an ecological disaster. It is not a question of if this landfill will pollute the water from Black Moshannon, but when.

As county commissioner, I would take all possible steps to stop the dump.

from Wages, pg. 3

an adult supporting one child requires a monthly after-tax income of \$2,100 to cover monthly expenses, including \$706 in housing costs. That translates to a minimum gross annual income of \$30,777. The living wage for one adult supporting one child is \$14.60 per hour.

Among the occupational areas that pay

less than that are community and social services (\$13.42); construction and extraction (\$12.98); farming, fishing and forestry (\$12.37); and protective service (\$11.92), according to the project's Web site.

Two adults supporting two children must each make \$10.44 per hour to pay the bills. They would be unable to do so working in sales (\$8.85); healthcare support (\$8.71); and cleaning and maintenance (\$8.09). The

living wage for a single adult living in Centre County is \$8.03, according to the Poverty in America living wage calculator.

In January, the Pennsylvania minimum wage rose to \$6.25 an hour, and in July it will increase to \$7.15.

"To middle-class people, a dollar or two an hour doesn't mean much," said Robert Drago, professor of labor and industrial relations at Penn State, "but it makes a big

difference when you're struggling to put food on the table or afford medicine when your child is sick."

Drago said that housing costs are so high, especially in the State College area, that even with a living wage, the best many workers can hope for is to rent.

see Wages, pg. 5

Board of Commissioners go head-to-head

Jon Eich

Place of residence: State College
Years in Centre County: 28
Occupation: retired county administrator and community planner

Background: I spent four years as county administrator, 20 years in the Centre County planning office and three years in the Snyder County planning office. I served on the Centre County Planning Commission in 2004 and the State College Borough Transportation Commission in 2005 and 2006.

ON THE ISSUES:

Rockview state prison property

What happens to the Rockview land will have an important impact on the quality of life in the Bellefonte and State College areas. For most of the past 100 years, state ownership has prevented these two communities from sprawling into each other, and the Spring Creek Canyon has been protected. The state needs to insure that any disposition of Rockview property does not diminish the benefits that state ownership of the land has brought to this portion of the Nittany Valley.

If Penn State acquires 1,200 acres for agricultural use at below market value, the development rights should remain with the state, ideally as a permanent agricultural easement.

If Benner Township acquires the 400 acres of the Spring Creek Canyon, the township will need the resources to provide a year-round, well-qualified staff dedicated to managing the canyon.

If the county acquires 100 acres for affordable housing, the location must be where infrastructure is already in place. Free land is not the only ingredient necessary for a low-cost site; access to existing infrastructure is just as important.

Federal funding for county projects

Funding by earmark and walking-around-money is bad public policy. In spite



of the largest federal debt in history, last year's budget contained 15,000 earmarks.

What is needed is a comprehensive approach to paying for necessary improvements. That comprehensive approach is provided by programs like the Community Development Block Grant program. The CDBG program funding has been reduced in recent years.

It is hypocritical for officials to be cutting programs that provide funds for infrastructure, then funding those projects through earmarks and walking-around-money, which are not subject to competitive process or public scrutiny.

Voting machines

In order to ensure voter confidence in elections, particularly elections that are close or hotly contested, Centre County needs a voting system that produces a voter-verified paper ballot. Unfortunately, the incumbent commissioners chose a system that does not produce a VVPB.

The paperless system selected by the incumbents is not accepted by 28 states, is being replaced in Florida and has been determined to be unsuitable by the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

The selected system also costs more to purchase and operate, has a shorter life span and requires more equipment than the alternative system.

Vana Dainty

Place of residence: Bellefonte
Years in Centre County: 17
Occupation: editor of the *Bellefonte Gazette*

Background: A member of the Bellefonte Borough Council, I chair the finance committee and sit on the building and property and sanitation committees. I am also on the Nittany Valley planning committee. My work with the *Bellefonte Gazette* has kept me up to date on many of the issues facing the residents of Centre County.

ON THE ISSUES:

Affordable housing

Affordable housing is a large problem in Centre County, where there is a true lack of housing for working people. According to the Centre County Board of Realtors, the average price of a home in Centre County in 2006 was approximately \$200,000. Using Fannie Mae affordability calculations, a typical working family earning approximately \$50,000 a year can afford to spend \$128,000 on a home.

Centre County can't survive without its workforce and without affordable housing. A dilemma in Centre County is created, not only for the families looking for homes, but also for the companies that rely on the workers.

The role the commissioners would play is to use the expertise of the Centre County planning office and the newly formed Centre County Land Trust. Working closely with these groups and the various municipalities will help bring about a solution.

Bellefonte Central Rail Corridor

I would like to see the proposed rail trail project happen in Centre County. The Bellefonte Central Rail Corridor is approximately 13 miles long, with one end in Patton Township and the other in Bellefonte Borough. This is the proposed rail trail site.

The trail would help the economic wel-



fare of the area by way of the tourists and local people who would use the trail. The trail would be a safe place for people to hike or bike by themselves or with their family, and it would help preserve Buffalo Run's rural character.

Voting Machines

I prefer the touch-screen voting machines over the old punch-card system. One of the best points in this system is that voters can check to make sure they voted the way they planned before the process is finished. The one thing lacking is the fact that it is paperless.

I believe since it's easy to use, eventually voters will be comfortable with the system. The biggest fear is what if the system fails during an election.

The voters need to realize that the information is saved in various databases on the hard drives and that there are many safeguards in place to insure that votes will not be lost.

As in anything, there is no guarantee that something won't happen. The paper trail would be a nice solution for that problem.

from Wages, pg. 4

The living wage is becoming an attractive option because the minimum wage hasn't kept up with inflation, Drago said. The real value of the minimum wage reached its peak in 1968. The 1968 minimum wage would be the equivalent of \$8.50 per hour today—a living wage in most parts of the country.

"The living wage really resonates with people because it doesn't cost the government anything," Drago said, noting that mothers make up more than half of low-wage workers. "We could get it passed in Centre County, but it would take a lot of work."

Khoury agreed that in the absence of lower housing prices, increases in salaries and wages could make housing more

affordable. But he said the living wage is not a likely issue to be taken up by the Housing Cabinet, which was proposed by the task force to bring together the various entities working on affordable housing.

"That's not a battle that I think most of the coalition members are prepared to fight," he said. "It would be even more difficult than trying to convince builders and municipalities to put in a few homes."

The Poverty in America Project
 go to
www.povertyinamerica.psu.edu
 for

- living wage calculator
- community economic toolbox
- atlas of poverty in America

from Primary, pg. 3

“One of the many possible explanations for the lack of interest may stem from the general decline in the sense of community and network of social memberships that used to characterize American society,” said James Eisenstein, retired professor of

political science at Penn State. He said the lack of participation is troubling because competition for office keeps elected officials accountable to voters.

“When no candidates file for an office,” Eisenstein added, “it opens the possibility that someone who organizes a minimal write-in campaign can win without facing any scrutiny from the voters.”

Run for local office!

The following local offices have no candidate running in the primary. Residents of these areas can wage a write-in campaign.

A candidate not on the ballot needs 10 write-ins to be eligible to win a party's nomination. Those write-ins count as the

signatures required to petition to get on the ballot and also count toward the vote tally.

If only one candidate wins a party nomination for one of the positions below, the candidate will be unopposed on the ballot in November and virtually guaranteed victory.

Council

Four-year term

HOWARD BOROUGH

One seat

MILLHEIM BOROUGH

Three seats

SNOW SHOE BOROUGH

Two seats

UNIONVILLE BOROUGH

Two seats

Supervisor

Six-year term

BURNSIDE TOWNSHIP

One seat

HAINES TOWNSHIP

One seat

LIBERTY TOWNSHIP

One seat

MARION TOWNSHIP

Two seats

UNION TOWNSHIP

One seat

WORTH TOWNSHIP

One seat

School Board

Four-year term

BALD EAGLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Region 2

One seat

BELLEVILLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

One seat

PENNS VALLEY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

At-large

One seat

One seat – two-year interim

Region 1

One seat

PHILIPSBURG-OSCEOLA AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

District 1

One seat

District 4

One seat

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www.scpeacecenter.org



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room 201

Four years of war



Photo by Ben Brewer

More than 150 local residents rally at the Allen Street gates in March to mark the four-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. The demonstration was part of a national expression of antiwar sentiment that included four days of rallies in Washington D.C. and in cities and towns across the United States. Peace vigils continue at the gates Wednesdays, 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. and Saturdays, 1:30 to 2:30 p.m.

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