

Housing and Neighborhoods

Goal:

Provide the opportunity for comfortable and adequate housing, and encourage the improvement and protection of established neighborhoods.

A complex relationship exists between private housing decisions and public policy, due to the physical impacts of development on a community and the public services required by the citizens who occupy the houses. As with all development, private choices affect such public policy concerns as planning for land uses, timing and providing for public facilities and services, anticipating transportation needs and safeguarding the environment. Conversely, public policy affects housing location and costs through the provision of utilities, zoning and subdivision regulations, and building codes.

Generally speaking, housing growth tends to parallel population growth very closely. In Front Royal, however, due to the decreasing average household size, the number of dwelling units is increasing at a faster rate than the number of Town residents, as demonstrated by the changes in the last several decades. Between 1970 and 1980, the Town's housing stock increased by 56.5%, while population increased by 36%. The changes between 1980 and 1990 are less dramatic, with the housing stock increasing 9.7% while population growth was 6.8%.

Housing Stock

According to the recent Census information, Front Royal had a total of 4,983 housing units in 1990, increasing from 4,544 in 1980. The Loud Fairfax Planning District Commission has estimated, from building permit information, the addition of 259 housing units as of January 1, 1994. Based on this, the 1994 total number of units in the Town of Front Royal was about 5,242 units.

The vast majority of these units are single-family units (62.2%). A review of recent residential permits has shown that single-family residential development is still the overwhelming choice of the market. Figure HN-1 shows the breakdown of dwelling units by the type of residential structure and magisterial district in town.

Vacancy: The vacancy rate for all housing units in Town in 1990 was about 5.7%. The two areas in Town with the highest vacancy rate were the South River district with 9.4% vacancy and the Fork district with 8.3% vacancy. The rental vacancy rate at that time was 6.2%, while the homeowner vacancy rate was considerably lower at 1.7%. (Figure HN-2)

Ownership: Of the 4,699 housing units reported as occupied in the 1990 Census, about 2,835 (60.3%) were owner-occupied and 1,864 (39.7%) were renter-occupied. The 1980-90 period reversed a 20-year trend towards increased owner-occupied units. The percentage of owner-occupied fell from 64% in 1980 to 60% in 1990. This percentage is lower than that in Warren County at 72.3% owner-occupied, the Lord Fairfax Planning District at 70.7% and the State of Virginia at 66.3%. In comparison with Winchester, the other "urban" center in the region, our owner-occupied rate is considerably higher. They come in at 45.4% owner-occupied.

Of the rental units, 59% (1,100 units) are in multiple-unit structures. About 41% (764 units) were single-unit, detached or attached structures. Approximately 20% of all single-unit structures (detached and attached units) are renter-occupied. A detached unit is a single-family home; attached units are either duplex or townhouse units that are side-by-side.

Affordability: Overall, real estate values in our geographic area have been driven up in the past 30 years by land and housing market pressures from retirees, commuters and investors from the Northern Virginia - Washington metropolitan area. Local wages have increased, but not in proportion to the increases in housing costs. The Lord Fairfax Planning District Commission developed a "Housing Affordability Ratio", which considers whether a household with the median income can afford the median value owner-occupied unit, and do so within the rule of thumb that a household can afford a home valued at 2.5 times their household income. The median value of an owner-occupied house in 1990 was \$85,100. The PDC's calculation of the housing affordability ratio places Warren County at 2.74. (The State of Virginia is 2.73 and the entire Planning District is 2.82.) At the standard of 2.5 times income levels, the median household in Warren County can afford a house valued at \$77,655, about \$7,500 less than the median house.

This situation reflects the fact that a substantial portion of our workforce commutes to the higher paying jobs outside of the county. In comparison to the average weekly wage paid workers in Warren

County (\$325) as reported by the Virginia Employment Commission, the ratio of housing cost to income rises significantly higher, with the amount of "affordable house" dropping to a value of \$42,250, less than 50% of the median house value in Warren County. A most common solution for households in dealing with this situation is to have two wage earners.

The median monthly housing cost for owner-occupied dwellings, with a mortgage, is \$638 (1,453 households), and without a mortgage, is \$178 (1,200 households). Based on the 1990 Census, 17.9% of homeowners spent 30% or more of their monthly income for housing costs.

The proportion of renters spending more than 30% of their monthly income for housing was considerably higher -- at 33.6 percent. The median gross rent in 1990 was \$411 (based on 1,850 rental households).

Age of Housing Stock: Due to increases in new housing construction in the last two decades, our housing stock appears to be growing younger. In 1980, 74% of the housing stock was less than 50 years old. In 1990, that percentage had increased to 80 percent.

Adequacy: If all housing units met minimum standards, the housing market would only require the addition of enough units to meet the growth in households with enough surplus to provide an adequate vacancy rate. In 1990, a small percentage of dwelling units in Front Royal did not meet such standards.

While the adequacy of housing stock (the number of units standard or substandard) was not measured directly in the 1990 Census, other criteria can be used. The two most common are: 1) the unit lacks basic plumbing facilities, and 2) the unit provides less than one room per person and is thus considered overcrowded.

Another measure has to do with the cost of the unit compared with the household income. If the household is paying more than 30 percent of its income for gross rent, including utilities, then the unit, whether structurally substandard or not, is too costly relative to household income. In some respects, this is a measure of the adequacy of the income; but, it also indicates to what

degree the market provides adequate housing at certain price levels.

In 1990, 34 units or 0.7 % of the 4,983 year-round housing units in town lacked one or more plumbing facilities. These figures are down substantially from the 1980 total of 97 units (2.1%) and from the 1970 total of 213 units (7.3%) that lacked complete plumbing facilities. Considering the criterion of overcrowding, about 104 units (2.3%) of the 4,699 occupied units had more than one person per room. This is the same rate as that in 1980. Overcrowded units are not necessarily substandard and from the data, it can not be determined if these units also lack adequate plumbing.

Unfortunately, there are no statistics that deal with the structural integrity or maintenance of the housing stock in determining adequacy. A visual survey of the town's older residential areas, particularly those with units more than 40-50 years old, indicates need for increased maintenance, repair and rehabilitation to maintain and enhance the existing housing stock.

FIGURE HN-1

**TOWN OF FRONT ROYAL
NUMBER OF DWELLING UNITS
BY TYPE OF RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE**

<u>Magisterial District</u>	<u>Total Units</u>	<u>Single-Family (Detached)</u>	<u>Duplex/Townhouses 2-4 (Attached)</u>	<u>5-9 Units</u>	<u>> 10 Units</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Trailers</u>
Fork	1085	446	251	185	73	90	40
Happy Creek		1397	1091	52	56	58	100
North River	805	473	152	43	28	80	29
Shenandoah	1100	813	48	92	55	71	21
South River	596	277	54	97	24	141	3
TOTAL	4983	3100	557	473	238	482	133
PERCENT OF TOTAL	100.0	62.2	11.2	9.5	4.8	9.7	2.7

SOURCE: 1990 Census

See attached map (HN-3) for the location of the magisterial districts.

FIGURE HN-2

**TOWN OF FRONT ROYAL
1990 VACANCY RATES BY MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT**

<u>MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT</u>	<u>OCCUPIED</u>	<u>VACANT</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>
		<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	
Fork	995	90	8.3	1085
Happy Creek	1350	47	3.4	1397
North River	766	39	4.8	805
Shenandoah	1048	52	4.7	1100
South River	540	56	9.4	596
TOTAL	4699	284		4983
PERCENT OF TOTAL	(94.3)	(5.7)		(100.0)

SOURCE: 1990 Census
See attached map (HN-3) for the location of the magisterial districts.

Assets/Opportunities

- ◆ A beautiful setting and pleasant rural environment provide an attractive place to live.
- ◆ A variety of housing types and values are available.
- ◆ Utilities and services are provided to most residential properties in town.
- ◆ There are a number of private organizations in the community to help address the housing needs of disadvantaged persons, including:
 - C-Cap (Congregational-Community Action Project)
 - Northwestern Community Services
 - Salvation Army
 - Shenandoah Area Agency on Aging
 - TRIAD
 - Warren County Council on Domestic Violence
 - Warren County Habitat for Humanity
 - Warren County Housing Coalition

Liabilities/Challenges

- ◆ A decreasing owner-occupancy rate of single-family homes can affect the quality and stability of our residential areas.
- ◆ A disparity between local wages and housing values indicates the difficulty of many local workers to purchase their own home.
- ◆ Many older neighborhoods have need for increased maintenance, repair and rehabilitation to maintain the existing housing stock.
- ◆ Poor maintenance of housing in some downtown areas, especially among the older rental stock, is of concern to many.
- ◆ The zoning densities in the R-3 district in the downtown area encouraged the break-up of formerly single-family homes and neighborhoods into multi-family rental.
- ◆ Housing prices have been inflated with the migration of new residents (and commuters) seeking more affordable housing than that available in the Washington Metropolitan area.

Policy Recommendations

- ◆ Safe, decent and adequate housing is fundamental to the citizens of Front Royal.
- ◆ Renovate and rehabilitate current housing units available in a range of prices to meet the needs of all households. Explore future housing needs and develop a planning method to control residential growth consistent with Town goals and objectives.
- ◆ Maintain and improve the appearance of the Town's neighborhoods.
- ◆ Preserve and enhance the integrity and quality of existing residential neighborhoods.
- ◆ Eliminate substandard housing in Front Royal.
- ◆ Provide control over the impacts of large multifamily apartment complexes.

Action Strategies

- ◆ Strive for a majority of single-family dwellings, with some attached dwellings and townhouses.
- ◆ Develop standards to assist property owners in maintaining and improving housing quality.
- ◆ Continually identify and seek appropriate funding for housing rehabilitation to assist low and moderate income households to conduct code-related improvements.
- ◆ Develop a code enforcement program to ensure that substandard property does not contribute to the deterioration of a neighborhood, and that minimum code standards are met for the rental of residential and commercial buildings.
- ◆ Actively condemn and demolish dilapidated buildings.
- ◆ Explore replacing the twice-yearly large item trash pick-up with a year-round program to schedule special pick-ups by appointment only.
- ◆ Develop and implement an educational program to inform citizens of the clean-up program.
- ◆ Actively enforce ordinances dealing with trash, debris and junk cars, not just on a complaint basis.
- ◆ Enhance the quality of new residential areas through landscaping and street tree planting.
- ◆ Explore approaches toward encouraging rehabilitation of existing homes in older

neighborhoods.

- ◆ Permit high-density housing only where direct access is available to streets or highways capable of carrying the traffic that these higher densities will generate.
- ◆ Design streets and circulation to reduce speeding and other conflicts in street use that affect the quality of residential neighborhoods.
- ◆ Allow small commercial development within residential areas only when the commercial uses are designed to serve the neighborhood and the intensity, scale and building design are compatible with surrounding land uses.
- ◆ Stabilize residential neighborhoods adjacent to commercial areas through the establishment of transitional land uses, vegetative buffers and/or architectural screens, and the control of vehicular access.
- ◆ Utilize landscaping and open space along rights-of-way to minimize the impacts of incompatible land uses separated by roadways.
- ◆ Regulate the amount of light and noise produced by nonresidential land uses to minimize impacts on nearby residential properties.
- ◆ Evaluate the cost of new development standards to ensure benefit received by the community is worth any added development cost.
- ◆ Encourage cluster subdivision/development and the planned neighborhood development (PND) concept as a means to enhance environmental preservation when the smaller lot sizes permitted would complement surrounding development.
- ◆ Develop cluster development guidelines for all residential districts.
- ◆ Develop a plan for the transition of existing mobile home parks to permanent affordable housing.
- ◆ Consider zoning appropriate single-family neighborhoods (with smaller lots) to the R-1A classification to allow compatible infill development.
- ◆ Develop zoning standards for new development to minimize the loss of tree cover and natural buffer areas.
- ◆ Inventory neighborhoods and housing in Front Royal to determine areas of substandard

conditions. Seek federal and State funding to assist with housing and neighborhood improvements.

- ◆ Develop standards and requirements for the location, placement and design of large multifamily projects (greater than 25 units) that will address the community service and facility needs/impacts, and the land use impacts of these larger projects.
- ◆ Specifically map areas appropriate for high-density, larger-scale development.
- ◆ Explore incentives used by other communities to create quality housing for local workers. Seek to develop and implement a workable program for the Town.