

Bridging the Conservation and Housing Nexus in Exeter, New Hampshire



Photo of Squamscott Block by AnnMarie R. French

Mention the town of Exeter and the image that most New Hampshire residents visualize is of an historic, well-to-do community whose tree-lined streets are bordered by elegant homes and buildings, including the exclusive Exeter Academy. Yet, one might be surprised to find that the town maintains a diverse housing stock that belies the image described above. In fact, over 20% of Exeter's housing stock consists of manufactured homes. And approximately 40% of homes in the community are rental units, approximately half of which are classified as affordable according to HUD standards (Census 2000).¹

At the same time, Exeter has been able to preserve its natural and historic character, including a vital downtown and hundreds of acres of public, open lands in the Exeter and Squamscott River watersheds.

So, just how has a community with little developable land available been able to meet the needs of working families while also preserving its natural and historic resources? The answer is simple; the town does not rely on a single approach to meet its housing and conservation needs.

The diversity of mechanisms that the town has implemented to preserve natural and historic assets, while enhancing its stock of affordable/workforce housing, include infill development (whereby vacant downtown lots are converted to multiple unit homes), conversion of existing structures into rental units (such as Exeter Mills apartments), mixed use zoning that allows for residential units in the town's commercial district, and a density bonus that allows for more compact development if a developer makes 15% of the number of total units affordable to households earning not more than 120% of the median family income and an additional 5% of units affordable to households earning not more than 80% of the median family income.²

The newly-developed Squamscott Block is perhaps the most notable of Exeter's recent efforts to make housing affordable to working families without sacrificing the town's natural and historic character. This apartment building, constructed by Nathan Szanton, is comprised of 30 mixed-income units and 2,600 square feet of retail space in the heart of Exeter's downtown (see photo). Not only are the rents for 16 of the 30 units set to meet the needs of working individuals and families, but not a single acre of open space was lost for the development, as the vacant lot on which the apartment sits was once occupied by another structure. To boot, the architecture for this so-called 'infill development' is in character with Exeter's historic downtown.

This is just one example of how Exeter has merged the interests of conservation and housing. That is not to say that the town goes without its share of challenges, but it is actively doing something to maintain a diverse community while preserving its natural and historic assets.

¹ HUD defines affordable as gross housing costs comprising no more than 30% of household income.

² Exeter's mixed-use zoning and density bonus are defined in articles 6 and 7 of Exeter's Affordable Housing Ordinances.