

A Short History of Berlin Affordable Housing and a Look Ahead

J Mahoney

2-2022

Berlin Historical Land Use Pattern

Historically Berlin was a rural farming community and that was reflected in Town Plans of Conservation and Development. There were cores of more concentrated residential development primarily in the Kensington, Berlin/Worthington, and East Berlin village areas. Most of the Town was zoned for agricultural use. The Town's plan evolved as small-scale farming became less economically viable and as the demand for housing grew in the post-World War II era. Town plans supported extension of residential areas out from their cores and most of the Town was rezoned from farm use to single family residential use. Permitted densities were generally greater near the traditional Kensington, Berlin, and East Berlin core areas where existing infrastructure existed or could be extended in a cost-effective manner. There was a continuing interest in preserving remaining farms and in protecting open space areas to retain some of the Town's rural character. New Britain and Meriden Water companies also own large portions of land in Berlin that are protected from development.

First Affordable Housing Projects Built by the Berlin Housing Authority in 1978 and 1982

The Town created a Housing Authority and in 1978 and 1982, respectively, it built the Town's first dedicated affordable housing, the Marjorie Moore Village and Percival Heights senior developments. These developments are in single family zoned residential neighborhoods, both have public utilities and good road access, and both are located at larger Town owned sites with multiple public uses (Town Hall and the Library are co-located with Marjorie Moore Village and the Senior Center and playing fields are co-located with Percival Heights at the former Percival School site).

Private Sector Built Affordable Age Restricted Housing

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, developers with an interest in building private sector affordable housing projects began approaching the Town. There was significant development interest in senior housing based on demographic trends and available funding sources for affordable projects. The next affordable housing project developed in Berlin was senior rental housing at Orchard Ridge in 2002. This development is at a location that has good road access and all public utilities available, at the border of residential and commercial zones and not in a residential neighborhood with low densities. Stonebridge and Sage Pond Place projects followed in the 2005-2006 timeframe. These developments followed the earlier pattern of proposing age restricted housing, at a location well served by roads and utilities and not in an existing low density residential neighborhood area. These developments are all mixed income with most of the units being affordable – Sage Pond Place at 92% affordable and Orchard Ridge and Stonebridge at 80% affordable.

Private Sector Built Affordable Housing, Family (Not Age Restricted)

The next projects were Fieldstone Crossing and Rivers Edge in 2011. These projects recognized the need to diversify the Town's affordable housing stock to include units available to a more diverse population. Neither of these developments are age restricted and both are 100% affordable. Both followed the earlier site criteria for location of affordable housing. In 2014, Newport Center, a mixed-use project with mixed income (25% affordable), not age restricted apartments was completed at 848 Farmington Avenue. The one departure from earlier site location patterns for private affordable housing developments is that Newport Center is in the transit-oriented development area across from the Berlin Train Station rather than in the Deming Road, Berlin Turnpike area. The Newport Center site is consistent with the policy in the Town's 2013 Plan of Conservation and Development to concentrate new multi-family housing in the Kensington Village area in the vicinity of the Berlin Train Station.

Age Restricted Affordable Project Planned by Berlin Housing Authority

The next affordable housing approved in Berlin was an age restricted affordable project to be developed by the Berlin Housing Authority on Town land at 143 Percival Avenue. The Housing Authority project is to address the ongoing and growing need for affordable housing for seniors based on the Town's aging population and on the waiting list and demand for the Housing Authority's existing units. The 143 Percival Avenue Housing Authority project follows the location pattern of earlier Housing Authority projects in that it is in a low-density residential area, co-located with other public facilities, and well served by roads and utilities.

Mixed Income Private Sector Housing, Some in Mixed-Use Projects (Not Age Restricted)

The next two approved projects are Deming Ridge (88 units) on Deming Road and 404 Berlin Turnpike (200 units). Applications are pending or expected for three additional mixed-income projects at 550 and 1696 Berlin Turnpike and at 309 Main Street, East Berlin. All these projects fit the site selection criteria for earlier projects. The proposed affordable unit component for these five projects is in the range of 20-30%. The 404 Berlin Turnpike and 550 Berlin Turnpike projects are also mixed-use.

Market Rate Apartments

The Town has also generally recognized a need for more market rate apartments consistent with an increase in households preferring to rent rather than own. The Town has long had zones that allow both commercial and multi-family residential uses including a Planned Office Residential Zone (POR) zone category for a few sites on the Berlin Turnpike and one area on Main Street in East Berlin at the intersection with Mill Street. Condos have been built in these zones, but the first rental project is a 20-unit market rate apartment development that was completed in 2021 at Finishers Court in the East Berlin POR zoned area.

Zoning changes were made to create the Kensington Village and the BTD (Berlin Turnpike Development) overlay zones to allow market rate apartments as part of mixed-use projects under certain conditions. This is part of an overall effort to redevelop and revitalize Kensington Village and the Berlin Turnpike. Mixed-use projects with market rate apartments have been approved at Turnpike Ridge on the Berlin Turnpike and at Steele Center in the Kensington Village TOD area (16 of the 76 approved apartments in Steele Center are now under construction). These projects also follow the site location pattern for affordable multi-family rental projects, good road access, all utilities available, not located in residential neighborhoods with low densities, and concentrated in the Berlin Turnpike/Deming Road and Kensington Village TOD area.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, Berlin should continue to advance the process of diversifying its housing stock and providing more affordable housing units. 9.2% of Berlin's total housing stock is affordable as defined by Section 8-30g of the Connecticut General Statutes. Of the 138 municipalities that have not yet achieved the Statute's 10% affordable housing threshold, Berlin is second closest to reaching the threshold. Berlin has made significant amendments to its Zoning Map and Regulations to support more multi-family and affordable housing development and substantially diversify its housing stock that has been historically dominated by single-family owner-occupied residences. Many multi-family rental projects have recently been approved, of which numerous include affordable housing units. Additional project applications are pending. These projects will more than double the Town's stock of purpose-built rental housing and it will propel the Town well beyond the 10% affordable housing threshold. The Town should continue to monitor and provide support for these projects, as necessary and appropriate, through completion.

Other potential strategies to continue to diversify the Town's housing stock and affordable housing inventory were discussed at meetings of the Affordable Housing Plan Advisory Committee and developed through the POCD update process. Strategies to consider include:

- developing more affordable housing for seniors
- exploring ways to provide deed restricted ownership opportunities for affordable housing. Many Berlin housing units are sold at prices that meet CHFA affordability limits, but it is difficult for individuals or families making less than the median income to purchase these units because of competition from higher income buyers.
- allow greater densities and/or require less parking per unit in the Kensington Village Core 2 overlay district but require that a percentage of the units be affordable
- deed restrict units at the Town owned trailer park
- allow 2 families in zones in which they were previously allowed
- modify Town Zoning Regulations for accessory dwelling units to expand eligibility to additional classes of occupants
- allow multi-family uses in the Worthington Historic District to help preserve historic structures

- add inclusionary provisions for other categories of residential development