

## **LAWRENCE: Housing tour gives officials a street-eye view**

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Affordable housing comes in all shapes and sizes.

That was the take-home message for the 40 or so elected officials, planning and zoning board members and others who took a tour of developments that include affordable housing across Mercer County last week.

The Homes for Everyone bus tour, held May 28, was sponsored by a coalition of agencies that advocate for affordable housing. The coalition includes the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, HomeFront, Princeton Community Housing, Project Freedom and the Greater Mercer County Chamber of Commerce.

Taking a cue from “The Wizard of Oz,” Herb Levine of the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness said, “There is no place like home. We are going to have to make a change in our vocabulary. Everybody needs a home.”

Mr. Levine said that for every affordable unit in Mercer County, there are four or five families that would like to occupy it. He also suggested municipalities could purchase units that have gone into foreclosure and then “get them into the hands” of nonprofit groups that could house homeless families.

Matthew Lawson, a transportation planner in the Mercer County Planning Division, told the group that a transit village is one method of developing affordable housing.

Transit villages are dense developments planned around mass transit stops, such as a train station, Mr. Lawson said. He pointed to the train stations at Princeton Junction and in Hamilton as possible sites for transit villages, but transit villages could be built along bus routes — a concept that is being explored in Denver, Colo.

But transit villages are not new, said architect Richard Carroll, who sits on the board of the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness. He said he grew up in Belle Mead in Somerset County, which was a transit stop in its heyday.

“(The concept of) ‘smart growth’ provides a mix of uses, incomes and demographics,” Mr. Carroll said. “You can’t have sustainable development without smart growth. If you go back to the early towns, many of them were on

rail lines. They were transit oriented.”

The tour bus made a handful of stops, including a visit to Elm Court and Harriet Bryan House, part of a senior citizen housing development on Elm Road. The property straddles Princeton Borough and Princeton Township and is geared toward low-income and very low-income senior citizens, said Sandra Persichetti, executive director of Princeton Community Housing.

Many of the residents worked in the restaurant or retail industries, or for Princeton University, Ms. Persichetti said. There is about an 18- to 24-month waiting list for the 156 one-bedroom and studio units, she said. A one-bedroom unit contains about 540 square feet.

The tour bus also stopped at the original Project Freedom development in Robbinsville Township, which was built in 1990 for the special needs population. Project Freedom built a similar housing complex in Lawrence, off Princeton Avenue near the Brunswick Circle. Rents range from \$675 to \$825 per month.

The tour bus also looped through Pennrose Properties’ McCorristin Square senior citizens housing development in Hamilton Township — the site of a former Roman Catholic convent and parochial school. The developer took advantage of tax credits, said Pennrose Properties’ vice president Tim Henkel.

Pearleen Walters, the chief administrator of Martin House/Better Community Housing of Trenton Inc., pointed out several newly built units in the City of Trenton that were built by the nonprofit agency. The group sold the houses for \$21,000 to families that have 11 years to pay off the no-interest loans, she said.

Providing housing for workers is very important, said Michele Siekerka, executive director of the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce. Businesses are concerned that their employees have affordable places to live, she said.

Ms. Siekerka told the group that a company wanted to transfer an employee from its Pittsburgh, Pa., location to New Jersey, but the employee — who would have earned \$120,000 annually — declined because he could not find housing that he could afford. He was earning \$80,000 in Pittsburgh.

“We look at housing from a different perspective,” Ms. Siekerka said.