

# Housing

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continue to be the most attractive place for people to live. Desires for walkability, a cohesive community and a close proximity to workplaces emerged as themes across all demographics, and a majority of respondents said they preferred to live in the City of Ithaca. The issue lies with the supply.

“The housing stuff always feels like we’re talking about problems, but I think it’s good to remember part of why we have this problem is because it’s a wonderful place we all want to live in,” said Megan McDonald, a senior planner with the Tompkins County Planning Department. “...This is something you might hear about



A house with a “for rent” sign on West Spencer Street, one of several rental properties with vacancies on the street.

young people wanting to live in walkable neighborhoods, but seniors, in some ways, more so.”

## The urban housing market

In the city, vacancies are going up in certain parts of the market, but

there are some major disparities between what’s available and the types of residences people want. Many people want spacious one-bedroom apartments, affordable duplexes and single-family homes, for instance. Others, such as students and lower-income singles, are

willing to settle for lower-quality apartments.

Where some markets are softening, there are also gaps unfilled by new developments in the city, such as the large complexes proposed for downtown and East Hill, which fall out of many people’s price range.

Though development sites exist on the city’s periphery, a struggle exists in finding sites in the city center that comply with the city’s comprehensive plan and philosophy — to increase housing density that is affordable in sites that work. The issue is those sites tend to be expensive.

According to Nels Bohn, executive director of the Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency, in general, 20 percent of a project’s total cost should be in the purchase of a site, after which income on that site would have to justify the capital cost to make building without incentives worthwhile. Given the state of the market as well as other sweeteners to the location, the actual sale price of these sites tend to be significantly higher. Oftentimes, that — coupled with demand — make for higher rents.

According to HUD, a fair-market rent in Ithaca should range from \$769 a month for an efficiency apartment, \$969 for a one-bedroom and up to \$1,571 for four bedrooms. Meanwhile, median rent for all participants in the survey was about \$796 per person per month, or \$1,116 on av-

erage for an apartment of any configuration. For those who own a house, the median monthly payment was about \$1,125, according to survey respondents.

“That’s a real loss for us when someone who works here and wants to be a part of the community doesn’t have access mainly because of our housing costs,” McDonald said. “That means they’re going home and investing in a different community, their kids aren’t going to school where their families are involved, they’re paying taxes there.”

The opinions of some surveyed were that rents were too high (about 40 percent agreed) or taxes were too high (10 percent agreed). Ithaca has an effective city tax rate around the state median (though dwarfed by cities like Cortland, Elmira, and Binghamton) on the whole, the average city resident pays more in property taxes than any other municipality in the county and more on average than cities in the Southern Tier with higher tax rates.

## Competing with students

Of the 1,400 or so students to respond to the survey, more than 91 percent attend Cornell University, which has a shortfall of undergraduate dormitory space, according to figures from the United States Department of Education. And they all

have to live somewhere.

Of all students to respond to the survey (primarily seniors and graduate students), 67 percent live in off-campus rentals, a majority saying they did so because it was more affordable than to live on campus. Though it’s closer to campus, less than half of survey respondents (43 percent) live in Collegetown, while downtown was second at 27 percent.

The type of residences they end up in encroach on the duplex and single-family housing market more suitable for full families and, therefore, limit options for other potential renters. According to the survey’s results, 78 percent of students living off-campus live in duplexes or converted, single-family homes.

“Students obviously impact a lot of the off-campus housing here, and I think most of us who try to find apartments here know oftentimes, you’re competing with students,” McDonald said. “There are definitely less of on-campus or student-specific housing breaching into other parts of the market where the whole community is competing. That can be difficult, because obviously, three to four students might be able to pull together the resources to pay for rent on a four-bedroom apartment a family wouldn’t be able to.”

## Moving beyond the data

As the City of Ithaca continues to grow in its limited space, development will inevitably spread beyond city lines. What remains to be done, McDonald said, is to decide what type of development will occur, how it will occur and, most importantly, where.

Later this year, the county will engage in a housing summit to address the needs presented in the survey, seeking communication and coordination among those making the decisions behind developments county-wide and, potentially, take advantage of pre-existing nodes of population to allow smart development in other communities.

Communities like Trumansburg have developed and Cayuga Heights is looking to centralize its development around places like Community Corners, part of a growing effort to create walkable neighborhoods with easy access to shops and bus routes. While the city is the county’s defacto hub for employment, McDonald said there are other nodes in the county that could be connected for transit and bike paths to provide additional transportation options, allowing people to live their preferred lifestyle without needing to live in the city itself.

Ultimately, the summit will work with input from the surrounding communities to draft an update of the Tompkins County Housing Strategy to help shape its final form.

“I think the housing summit is a good way to start this conversation, and I think it’s really critical for the strategy,” McDonald said. “This effort is really talking about gaps we’re seeing versus what we want to do about it. We could leave it alone and do what we’ve been doing, which is a decision with consequences, or we can decide to try to increase development in certain ways, certain places, and I think we need the whole community to come together to decide what we want to do.”

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LOCAL HONEY

Pollen counts are rising, and millions of people are experiencing allergy-related symptoms: runny nose, itchy eyes, and scratchy throat. Eating local honey has been suggested as a natural allergy remedy. While it is true that honey may soothe a sore throat, there is no scientific evidence that local honey will gradually immunize pollen allergies. In the first place, flower pollen is not a primary allergy trigger. Most people are affected by pollen from grasses and trees, but bees do not collect this type of pollen to make their honey. Second, local honey is not processed and strained like commercial honey; therefore, it can contain both pollen and bee parts that may trigger serious reactions in those with bee allergies.

Normally, the immune system reacts if a harmful substance, such as bacteria, attacks the body. For people with allergies, their immune systems work too hard and react even when relatively harmless substances, such as pollen, are present. The severity of an allergic reaction can vary from mild discomfort to life threatening situations. To schedule an appointment, please call SMITH ALLERGY & ASTHMA SPECIALISTS. We are dedicated to providing the latest and most up-to-date diagnostic treatment options in allergy and asthma care. We are available 24 hours a day.

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