



# The Chairman's Corner

by

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## HOUSING COORDINATOR/TASK FORCE

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As 2022 came to a conclusion, Chris Brown was named to fill the Columbia Economic Development Corporation's newly created position of Affordable Housing Coordinator. This position was created in response to recommendations from the Columbia County Board of Supervisors affordable housing forum conducted earlier in the year.

At that time, it was noted that Brown, working closely with the Board of Supervisors recently appointed Affordable Housing Task Force, would oversee CEDC's efforts to identify solutions to critical affordable housing shortages in Columbia County. His most recent position had been as community planner with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

Among the earliest steps taken upon Coordinator Brown's hire and the creation of the task force included the formation of several task force subcommittees: Outreach, Policy, and Development.

Let's explore the nature of those committees, which meet each month, with Coordinator Brown.

"We determined really quickly that the more important aspects of the work were in the Outreach Committee," he said. "There's kind of a connotation that comes with the term 'affordable housing.' There's definitely a disconnect between the folks who we know can't afford to live here and who people traditionally think of as recipients of affordable housing. We're talking here about teachers, nurses, firefighters – these are the folks that can't afford to live in our communities."

Currently, he added, "Outreach has an employee survey circulating. We hear a lot about employers and the difficulties they're having finding people, but we don't usually hear directly from employers too much."

The Policy Committee "is looking at things like what are some of the really common zoning laws that seem like they could be barriers. Kind of the big one is that the county lacks a lot of organizational infrastructure that other communities throughout the state have. We have a rural preservation company that really only operates in Hudson. We don't have anyone doing home buyers' assistance. We don't have anyone doing landlord training, or anyone doing down payment assistance. We're surrounded by a lot of housing organizational infrastructure but there's not a lot of it active here outside of Habitat for Humanity," said Coordinator Brown.

He noted that "one of the things we've seen as a real necessity is to start to build that housing organizational infrastructure. That's where the idea for a land bank came from. Luckily, there already was an effort underway to create a countywide community land trust, and we've really been supporting that. We see the land bank acting as a hub – it's one of the few programs out there with a lot of funding available."

Formed as the third committee, Pre-Development "is looking at what are some of the actual physical infrastructure obstacles to building. Real boots on the ground stuff such as water and sewer," said Coordinator Brown. "What are some of the funding opportunities that can be used to obviate that? What are the available parcels out there? What are available building areas?" More to come as the work progresses and matures.