

Site Tour #2

Kitchen Roundtable Conversation: Affordable and Sustainable Housing

Summary

Overview:

On June 24, 2025 from 6:30 - 8:30pm, a cross-section of community members with experience in green home construction in Ashfield gathered at Double Edge Theatre for a Kitchen Roundtable conversation to discuss opportunities, challenges, and potential ways to make it easier to build affordable and sustainable homes in Ashfield. This event was hosted as part of the [Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project](#), funded by the Massachusetts Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program.

Roundtable Participants:

- **Rachel Hinkel-Wang and Davis Wang** - Shared their experience buying a lot in Ashfield, getting a construction loan, and working alongside a local builder to build a small, energy-efficient home on a tight budget.
- **Silas Riemer** - Shared his experience purchasing a lot very cheaply that had limited buildable area due to wetlands, and building his own small, all-electric home on a tight budget with reused building materials.
- **Sal Link** - Shared their experience building a mobile tiny house in Ashfield, as a way to live affordably and in line with their values as they went to college.
- **Peter Curtis** - Shared his experience rehabbing several homes that needed a lot of work, and working with builders to build his current home with energy efficient and passive solar features.
- **Phil Pless** - Shared his perspective on housing trajectories and patterns in Ashfield from working as a realtor in Ashfield for forty years.
- **Mary Quigley** - Shared her experience building and renovating over 100 homes in Ashfield over thirty years, with a particular focus on sustainable and energy efficient construction.
- **Adam Bright** - Shared Double Edge's experience converting a garage into a new one-bedroom, net zero accessory dwelling unit (ADU) on Double Edge's campus.

The following project team members listened and participated in the Kitchen Roundtable discussion: Dylan Young, Justin Wellman, and Hannah Jarrell (Double Edge Theatre), as well as Dee Boyle-Clapp (UMass Arts Extension Service).

Themes that emerged related to home construction:

- There's an ongoing question about whether it's possible to meet high sustainability goals and affordability goals at the same time. Data shows that State rebates can greatly lower the cost of building a net zero or highly energy efficient home.
- The cost of land, septic systems, and wells tend to be high upfront fixed costs for building a home in Ashfield (that are hard to obtain more cheaply).
- Many Roundtable participants relied on their own labor, the labor of family and friends, reclaimed and donated materials, as well as bartering or exchanges with other members of the community in order to make home construction financially feasible.
- Sustainability features that Roundtable participants were able to integrate into their homes included well-insulated walls, tight building envelopes, solar PV, passive solar systems, heat pumps and mini splits. Many of the homes were all-electric or used wood stoves for heat.
- Participants highlighted challenges with pursuing composting toilet systems (which were seen as having both sustainability and affordability benefits) based on a lack of clarity around septic permitting requirements and hesitation or pushback from septic engineers.

Themes that emerged related to addressing housing needs in Ashfield:

- The cost of land and housing in Ashfield is increasing. There's a desire to support older residents aging in place, and a desire to attract younger residents and families, but affordability is a barrier.
- Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), which are smaller secondary housing units on the same property as a primary residence, could be one way to increase housing options in Ashfield. As of February 2025, legislation in Massachusetts made ADUs legal by-right. Ashfield can shape certain aspects of the policy – for example, by restricting short-term rentals or increasing the maximum allowable size. The Planning Board is currently discussing how to shape the bylaw to work best for Ashfield.
- ADUs could also be a way to support older residents with being able to stay in their home, with the help of rental income. This would be contingent on residents being able to finance a construction or rehab project to build the ADU. The State is looking to make financing models available (e.g., 0% interest loans) that would break down barriers and incentivize this type of project.

- Cluster housing (which is a form of subdivision development where homes can be clustered in a smaller area than allowable in a standard subdivision in order to preserve more open space and create shared community amenities) was proposed as another potential solution to build homes more affordably. Participants were interested in supporting more co-housing models, while also wanting to avoid creating a subdivision aesthetic. Cluster housing is currently allowed in Ashfield. The Planning Board is currently looking into ways to more effectively enable this in Ashfield.

Other key takeaways and next steps:

- Mentorship played a big role in making it possible to build more sustainably and affordably – and could continue to support others seeking to build their own home or expand housing in Ashfield.
- Storytelling and sharing real life experiences can help serve as education and inspiration to illustrate what's possible and strategies for addressing challenges.
- As part of this project, themes and findings will be compiled and shared with Ashfield boards and committees and made available to the Ashfield community to support future discussions around housing policy.
- There is also interest in compiling and documenting local home construction projects that integrate clean energy and sustainability, as a way to share stories that could guide residents, inspire future builders, and inform local planning decisions.