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## Affordable Housing and Open Space

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Letter to the Editor  
By Andrew P. Borgese

We have, throughout history, faced challenges of meeting new or increased demands of ourselves, our communities, our country, even our planet. Often these challenges are accompanied by a sense of urgency, or crisis, or hope for improved prosperity. The successful solutions seem to be those that preserve the delicate balance of the natural order of things.

Falmouth's struggle with trying to address the dire need for more affordable housing while also attempting to preserve the open space we have left is a picture perfect example of one of these challenges. It has "urgency", "crisis" and "hope" written all over it. As with many heated debates, it appears to have pitted the passionate supporters of both causes against one another rather than focusing on the common goals that each group seeks to accomplish.

Quality of life is what is ultimately at stake. On the one hand, the lives of thousands of working class individuals and families can be preserved, and likely improved, if we afford them the means to live and work year round in our town and contribute to the diverse business base, the school system, the healthcare facilities, and the municipal and public safety systems that support everyone's quality of life. On the other hand, our quality of life is also directly dependent on the unique natural resources that surround us all. The spectacular coastline, the salt marshes, the cranberry bogs, the meadows and farms, the old-growth and not-so-old-growth woods, are natural landscape elements that are not often found together in one place. These are some of the things that attracted many of us to

Falmouth in the first place, or what have led others to fall in love with our town.

I agree that these two causes are at crisis levels and both need to be addressed. I disagree, however, with the approach taken so far. The successful strides of one group, too often, are at the expense of the other. This only serves to fuel the frustration and expand the divisiveness of our town on these issues. We must turn our focus to the common goals and create solutions that work for both causes. Crisis situations often require innovative solutions.

When considering any type of development, affordable housing included, previously developed land is almost always a better choice than previously undeveloped spaces for numerous reasons relating to environmental impact, habitat preservation, utilization of existing infrastructure, and public transportation access to name a few. It is disappointing to witness the percentage of development of Chapter 40B projects that have been constructed, in the name of affordable housing, on previously undisturbed parcels, and for the greater benefit of private developers and the roughly 80% of new market rate homeowners.

The ideal location for affordable housing is literally within our stock of existing houses. The IRS grants tax benefits to heirs of estates that have been donated to charitable organizations. Maybe Falmouth should consider a similar approach which would enable the transfer of private homes and commercial property to the town in exchange for a forgiveness of property taxes. Certainly, this may not appeal to

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some, but it may very well appeal to individuals on fixed incomes with no heirs who have lived much of their lives in Falmouth and feel strongly about preserving the quality of life here for years to come. The town would be able to acquire property for affordable housing, open space, and perhaps other municipal purposes as well without having to expend hundreds of thousands, or millions, of dollars at a time to do so. The slight reduction in our tax base as a result of those who sign on to this program could be monitored and balanced so the financial effects would be minimal. The town could be selective about the number and types of properties to accept into this program based on the projected needs (2-bedroom, 3-bedroom, 1-family, multi-family, etc.) and proximity to major services. There would be no outright purchase of expensive real estate, no disturbance of undeveloped land, no competition for open space, no construction costs, utilization of existing infrastructure (septic or sewer, utilities, roads, etc.), and no destruction of habitat, wildlife or natural resources. The list can go on.

Perhaps this can be part of the solution. Or, it may be that this proposal is not feasible. I think it should be considered, evaluated and discussed further based on its merits and its flaws. More importantly, I believe that Falmouth has an extraordinarily broad and diverse population of concerned and motivated citizens with the knowledge and determination to face these challenges and create solutions that address them in ways that can significantly reduce, or better yet, eliminate any negative impact on our community. As Albert Einstein said, "If we are to solve the problems that plague us, our thinking must evolve beyond the level we were using when we created those problems

in the first place." The time for creativity and innovation is now.

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