

Green Bay an affordable place to live, but not for everyone (11.25.07)

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Green Bay an affordable place to live,
but not for everyone New homes may be too expensive for average families

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David Rusk brings photos of two new homes to his presentations: Both structures are built of brick with two-stall garages and nicely landscaped front lawns. They're across the street from each other in a Virginia neighborhood, Rusk says.

The difference is the barely-noticeable side entrance door on one home. That building is a duplex; across the way is a nearly identical, single-family home.

Rusk, an author and urban policy consultant, advocates for "mixed-income" neighborhoods, where working families live in close proximity to higher-priced housing. Some of Green Bay's older neighborhoods provide an example of how this concept has worked in the past, he said during a recent meeting with the Press-Gazette's editorial board.

"Green Bay is one of the more affordable housing markets in the country," Rusk said, but he added that local builders are building relatively few new units that working families can afford.

Using a formula that compared the median sales price of a single-family home to what the average family can afford to buy, Rusk said Green Bay's "affordability index" is 126, which would rank the city 54th among a group of 150 metropolitan areas. Any affordability index above 100 is considered adequate; Decatur, Ill., is ranked No. 1 at 198 and Orange County, Calif., is dead last with an affordability index of 26.

Although that sounds like positive news, Rusk said a Green Bay family of four making the median income of \$63,700 could only afford the three least expensive among the 53 newly built homes on the market during a recent snapshot. Local builders also aren't erecting many affordable condominiums, he said.

"Condos are the 21st century equivalent of the 900-square-foot bungalows that were built after World War II for young families," Rusk said. "The Green Bay housing market is slowly compartmentalizing by income class, too, with 90 percent of new construction occurring in Green Bay and Bellevue."

The Appleton area's affordability index of 157 rated 20th-best in the nation. Rusk said a greater number of affordably-priced new condos was a big factor in that ranking.

Rusk visited the area to make presentations for ESTHER, a Fox Cities faith coalition that has emphasized housing initiatives, and JOSHUA, a similar group based in Brown County.