

EXPANDING SOUTH COMMON

BY JUSTIN POTTER



Approximate area of town-owned land next to South Common proposed for additional development of affordable housing.

South Common was built about twenty years ago on land generously donated to Kent Affordable Housing by the Town of Kent. KAH now hopes to do something similar again, right next door. With over 60 households now on our waiting list, businesses struggling to find workers, young adults eager to move out of family homes, and empty nesters looking to downsize, the need for affordable housing is great. KAH is eager to create new affordable homes in Kent, and we have a clear plan to do so.

The 2022-2027 Town of Kent Housing Plan, developed by a committee of residents in a public process that provided plenty of opportunity for feedback, and unanimously approved by the Planning and Zoning (P&Z) Commission and the Board of Selectmen, identified town-owned property adjacent to South Common as a potential area for the development of additional affordable

housing. KAH hired Cardinal Engineering, a firm that the Town of Kent works with regularly, to look into the infrastructure capacity of South Common, and the suitability of the adjacent unused land for development.

Cardinal Engineering found that the water and sewer capacity of South Common was more than adequate to serve additional units, and identified an area between the tennis court parking lot, the highway department, and the existing South Common apartments as the most promising area for housing.

Over the course of the spring, summer, and early fall we have had a number of meetings with Rick Osborne of Public Works, Jared Kuczenski of Parks and Recreation, the Board of Selectmen, and the P&Z Commission to discuss a potential acquisition of unused town land by KAH.

On October 4, 2023, members of KAH met with Osborne, Kuczenski, Tai Kern of the Land Use Office, and First Selectman Jean Speck at surveyor Gary Hock's office in the hopes of finalizing the parcel. At this meeting, Kuczenski substantially increased the area he wanted reserved for parking, which proportionally reduced the area our engineers said was needed for stormwater management. As a group, we decided the surveyor needed to identify the wetland soils, and that we would reconvene again to try to get the parcel finalized.

Once the parcel is finalized, the Board of Selectmen will need to again request an "8-24 review" by the P&Z Commission, where they are asked to provide an opinion on whether using the land for affordable housing is consistent with the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD).

EXPANDING SOUTH COMMON CONTINUED...

Once the P&Z Commission confirms that indeed the acquisition is consistent with the POCD, we will be able to schedule a town meeting where a vote by those present will determine whether we can move forward. What will be voted on is a **conditional agreement**, which will allow us to acquire the land if zoning approvals are received.

While we could propose to acquire the property upfront, and then pursue zoning approvals, we feel that having ample opportunity for us to do more detailed feasibility studies, and for the town to weigh in on the development, is important.

At the same time, we want to be assured that if we successfully navigate the zoning process, which will be very expensive, we will gain control of the site.

The zoning process will be lengthy, and will allow for plenty of public input, both before and through the formal process. This is when the design will be developed, and key questions from aesthetics, to the exact number of units, to affordability levels, to stormwater handling will all be dealt with.

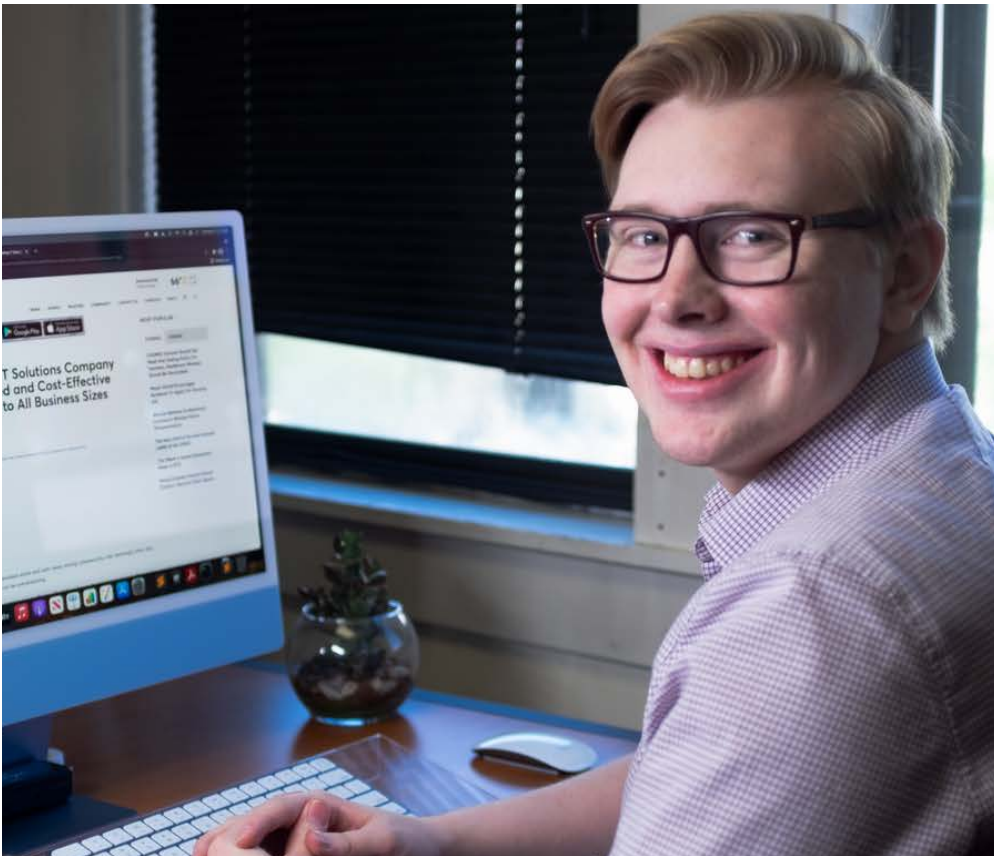
If zoning approvals are received and we gain site control, we can then

submit our proposal to the Department of Housing via their Development Engagement Process, where twice a year, typically in the fall and the spring, they invite affordable housing organizations to begin the process of applying for state and federal funding.

Creating new affordable housing isn't quick or easy, but with the town's help—and your support—KAH has a clear and attainable path to create a meaningful number of dedicated affordable housing units in the next few years.

HOUSING KENT'S FUTURE

BY STEVEN GLEASON



KAH board member and life-long Kent resident, Jonathan Matson.

When people think about the need for affordable housing in Kent, various ages and occupations spring readily to mind—minimum wage earners, for example, or retirees on a fixed income. One group that does not have such an obvious need is young people launching their professional careers. And that is a shame,

according to Jonathan Matson, a 24-year-old board member of Kent Affordable Housing (KAH) and lifelong resident of Kent.

"Young people like myself have so much to offer this community—and so much to gain from living here," Jonathan says. "But they are stymied

by the lack of affordable housing."

Jonathan's story beautifully illustrates how the Kent community and young professionals can develop a relationship of mutual benefit and appreciation. Following his primary education at Kent Center School, Jonathan attended Marvelwood School, where he graduated in 2017. After earning a degree in Computer Technology and Business Administration from Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, Jonathan returned to his native Kent and founded Matson and Associates, which tailors IT services to serve the needs of small businesses and nonprofits. He also became an active volunteer in the community, serving on the boards of numerous nonprofits and civic organizations.

"It's been a wonderful experience for me, and I wish more people could follow a similar path. But I had the advantage of being able to live with my family when I returned from college. Few young professionals have that opportunity, and they find that rental housing options are scarce and quite expensive."

The difficulty in finding affordable rental housing is due in large part to the permanent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the housing market. People wishing to escape congested urban areas were eager to buy or rent properties in towns like Kent, and willing to pay a premium. The result was a steep increase in prices and

reduction of available housing stock that has not been reversed despite the waning of the pandemic. The Zillow home value index for Kent, which shot up from \$368,000 in June 2020 to \$552,000 in June 2022, has since declined only modestly, reaching \$542,000 in June 2023.

In mid-August, realtor.com showed only 17 units for rent for less than \$4,000 per month within a 30-minute drive of downtown Kent. A one-bedroom apartment was listed at \$1,700 per month, compared to a typical rent of about \$1,000 before the pandemic. Most of the offerings were two- and three-bedroom homes, at an average monthly rent of \$2,900. These conditions put housing out of reach for young people starting their working lives, or anyone earning a modest income. For someone working full-time at \$20 per hour—a typical wage offered by employers in Kent—an affordable rent is 30% of gross income, or \$1,040 per month.

Jonathan Matson has witnessed firsthand the effects of high rental costs on his friends and acquaintances. “Only four of my friends from Kent Center School have stayed in the town or come back after college like I did. Rentals are hard to find, and the costs are burdensome. Many of my friends have roommates, and they’re still paying upwards of 70% of their income on housing.”

Jonathan believes that young people settling and working in Kent would benefit the town in myriad ways. They could fill the gap in services that became acute during the pandemic, when the influx of new homeowners boosted demand for contractors, architects, plumbers and electricians. The situation can only grow worse unless local tradespeople nearing retirement are replaced by a new generation of service providers.

When Jonathan launched his IT consulting firm, he immediately saw how strong the demand was for local services. “Until I opened shop, there were not many local, trusted providers of IT solutions in Kent. I got my first account in five days, and soon expanded my portfolio to a number of area businesses and organizations.” It was a win-win situation, with the town gaining a much needed service, and Jonathan growing his fledgling enterprise with ease.

An influx of young working people could also help revitalize business

activity in the town center. “A lot of local businesses like stores and restaurants are not operating on a full schedule, especially in the winter. A larger population of working-age youth would boost demand for their services, while also expanding the pool of job seekers for them to draw on.”

That leaves the question of what could entice a college graduate or a newly trained tradesperson to settle in Kent, foregoing the attractions of a big city like New York or Boston. Jonathan has a host of answers, starting with the incomparable natural beauty of the area and endless opportunities for outdoor activity. Kent and the surrounding communities are full of nature preserves, hiking trails, lakes and streams. The Housatonic River and the world-famous Appalachian Trail traverse the town. The Mohawk Mountain ski area is a short drive away.

For those with young families, the quality of public education is a big draw. According to the website niche.com, Kent Center School, which serves the preschool through grade 8, has some of the best teachers in the state of Connecticut. It ranks second of 288 public middle schools in terms of teacher quality, and fourteenth of 577 elementary schools. Graduates of Kent Center School can move on to Housatonic Valley Regional High School for general education, or Oliver Wolcott Technical High School, which offers training for a wide variety of trades and professions.

The area surrounding Kent boasts numerous venues for arts and entertainment, including the Merryall Center, Music Mountain, Sharon Playhouse, and countless local art associations, galleries, festivals and pop-up performances. For those seeking even more possibilities, New York City is only a two-hour train ride away.

“For me personally, the greatest benefit of living in Kent is the chance to participate actively in the community,” Jonathan says. After returning to Kent, he joined the boards of several non-profits, including the Lions Club, KAH, the Merryall Center, and Kent News Inc., which is working to revive the Good Times Dispatch, a local newspaper that closed in 2009.

“As a volunteer, I am more than just a person running a business in Kent. I meet and interact with people from all

walks of life. I feel seen and wanted in the community, and I’m treated as an adult by people of all ages.”

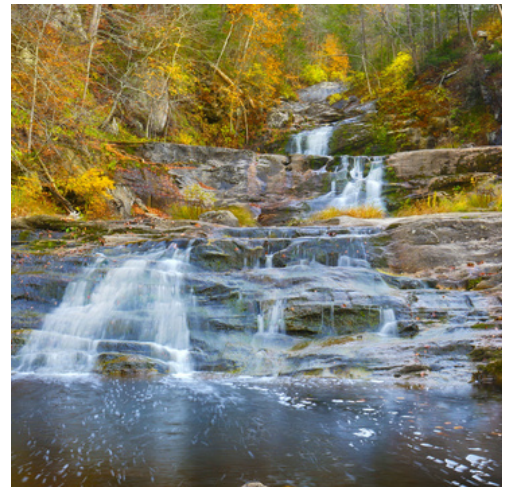
Jonathan considers himself part of a generation that wants to change things. He points out that a young person coming to a small town like Kent can have a voice and help shape the community from practically the day of arrival.

“I wish more people my age would take a chance on Kent—I think they’d find it a fabulous place to work and live. And the town would gain a lot, too. We’d have more businesses, more services, more young families, and more volunteers. That’s a formula for a thriving and vibrant community.”

The dearth of affordable housing casts a shadow over Jonathan’s vision, and that’s one of the reasons he joined the board of Kent Affordable Housing—but not the only one. “Across the board, there’s a strong, unmet need for affordable housing in Kent, with over 60 people on our waiting list. I want to contribute in any way I can to the organization’s mission of developing affordable housing in Kent.”

Jonathan was encouraged to learn that KAH has launched a project to expand the South Common development, adding at least 10 units to the existing 24. That, together with the 13 units at Stuart Farm, will bring the total KAH stock to at least 47.

“It’s progress,” Jonathan says, “but much more needs to be done. Our biggest challenge now is securing land and structures that can be converted into affordable housing. As the point person for communications on the KAH board, I’m hoping to bring that message to the public and enlist support for the further expansion of affordable housing in Kent.”



AS LONG AS IT'S OLD

BY BETTY KRASNE

That might have been the motto of Richard "Dick" James Lindsey. Many in Kent are familiar with Dick Lindsey through his love of old books and old cars, but he and his wife, Charlotte, each had long connections with Kent before they met or were associated with old books and cars.

Dick grew up and went to school in Connecticut, earning a degree in Business Administration and Accounting, which meant that when the Army came calling, they wanted him for the Finance Corps and sent him off to Alaska. On his return to Connecticut, he earned an MBA and that led to a job at the Kent School as Business Manager and Assistant Treasurer.

Despite their familiarity with Kent, Charlotte and Dick met and married in Cornwall, where they both lived at that time. But he was always drawn back to what had been his father's business: buying and selling old books. After he married Charlotte Irving and retired from Kent School, they tried living the life of antique booksellers in Maine, where his father had lived. But before long they migrated back to settle in Kent, where Dick became a mainstay of numerous civic groups and co-chair of the Annual Kent Car Show.

The Lindseys bought the building on Main Street that became both their



Photographs of Dick Lindsey as a younger man.

home, and the home of Richard Lindsey, Bookseller, and Dick could be seen driving around town in his latest old car. But there came a time when running a business and living in their two-story building became too much. Fortunately, Kent Affordable Housing had recently completed Stage 3 of its housing at its Stuart Farm development. It wasn't old, in fact it was brand new, but there was a one-bedroom apartment for which they qualified.

They were the first tenants and appreciated the western view of sunsets and the patio where they could enjoy the garden they planted. On the other side was a parking space for Dick's latest old car. Inside, they brought several bookcases filled with old books and fixed a cozy corner for reading. The apartment was the place where Dick died, surrounded by family, and the place Charlotte now is cheered by the giant sunflowers her daughter Libby planted out front.

NEW COST BURDEN DATA FOR KENT HOUSEHOLDS



A two-family home on Elizabeth Street.

On September 5, 2023, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development released their latest Comprehensive Housing Affordability Data, based on US Census American Community Survey Data from 2016 to 2020. Here's what they found:

Kent had 1,275 households. Of these households:

- 495 (39%) make 80% or less of the area median income and would qualify for affordable housing. This includes nearly 31% of owner households, and over 70% of renter households.
- 447 households in Kent are cost-burdened, meaning they are paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs.
- 128 households in Kent are paying more than a staggering 50% of their income on housing. This figure includes:
 - 50 renter households; and
 - 78 owner households

Looking at this data for people who now live in Kent, it is apparent that the town's goal of creating at least 20 dedicated affordable units in the next five years would meet just a fraction of the need.

KENT WORKFORCE SURVEY COMING

Kent Affordable Housing, likely with the help of other organizations, will be circulating a survey soon for people who work in Kent. People who work here in Kent are a key part of our community, yet unless they are Kent residents, they are left out of most data collection efforts. Anecdotally, we know that many people who work in Kent are driving long distances from where they live.

We'd like to get some hard figures on where people who work in Kent live, and whether they would be interested in moving to Kent if there were suitable housing.

The original motivation for doing such a survey is that the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority has funding reserved for housing or people who work in the

town in which funding is awarded.

Very few organizations apply for this funding, and some years, there are no applications. We think it is likely that we will find that there is more than enough demand for us to apply for this funding. Even if there isn't, this survey will provide some important insight into a critical part of the Kent community.

KAH-KVFD COLLABORATION



Kent's housing situation has made it difficult for organizations such as the Kent Volunteer Fire Department (KVFD) to recruit and retain volunteers. KVFD recently lost a very active member when his rent went up, and he and his family had to move out of Kent.

This fall, KAH has been in discussions with the KVFD to look into the feasibility of developing affordable rental housing that would give preference to KVFD volunteers. The KVFD membership recently voted to proceed with the collaboration. KAH will be applying for a grant from the Litchfield County Center for Housing Opportunity intended to support these sort of cross-sector collaborations.

We look forward to a productive and constructive partnership!

NEW ADU REGULATIONS

Kent's already generous Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) regulations got a bit more generous for affordable housing.

At the August Planning and Zoning Meeting, the commission passed a set of rules that would allow a property owner in the Village Residential zoning districts to build a second ADU, if it is dedicated as affordable for at least ten years for a household making less than 80 percent of the area median income.

This rule change was motivated by a request by former KAH President Virginia Bush Suttman to create a second, affordable ADU on her property. KAH has a long list of qualified renters, and can assist property owners with screening to ensure compliance with regulations.

So what is an ADU anyway? It's basically an apartment associated with a single family home. They are also sometimes called accessory apartments, granny flats, or in-law suites, among other terms.



An Accessory Dwelling Unit in Kent. Attached ADUs such as this are allowed by right throughout most of the town.

APPLY IF YOU QUALIFY!



KAH President Justin Potter and his son.

This is our regular reminder to apply for KAH housing if you qualify! Each unit is designated for a particular income range and household size and consequently, housing is not awarded in the chronological order of the waitlist. If your income and household size are a match for a unit that becomes available, you might get housing much more quickly than you think.

The detailed income limits and applications can be viewed on our website. Both South Common and Stuart Farm have one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments. In 2023, individuals earning \$20,075 to \$64,240 per year, and families of four earning \$28,675 to \$91,760 per year, may qualify for housing. Help spread the word to friends and family who qualify, as well. You or they might end up with an affordable home much sooner than expected!

ABOUT KENT AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The mission of Kent Affordable Housing, Inc. is to develop, sustain, and advocate for affordable housing in the town of Kent, Connecticut. KAH is a 501(c)(3) non-profit founded in 1990. We are an all-volunteer board.

KAH currently owns 37 dedicated affordable rental units, designated for households making 25% to 80% of the area median income. Rents in 2023 range from \$372 per month to \$1,375 per month.

Funding for the overhead of the organization, such as bookkeeping and auditing, comes largely from individuals like you. The development and rehabilitation of affordable housing is funded largely by the state and federal government. Operating expenses for the KAH properties are covered by rent revenue.

KAH paid over \$25,000 in property taxes to the Town of Kent in 2022.

Residents of KAH housing include seniors who have raised families in Kent, young adults who have grown up in Kent, and new neighbors that KAH has welcomed to town.



South Common, a current KAH property.

SUPPORT KENT AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Supporting Kent Affordable Housing is an opportunity to make a tangible difference in our community. By contributing to KAH, you are directly helping families and individuals secure affordable housing, fostering a stronger, more inclusive Kent. Whether you choose to mail a check using the enclosed envelope or explore other giving options at kentaffordablehousing.org/support or by scanning the QR code, your contribution is an investment in the well-being of our community. Thank you for your support!



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