

Affordable housing needed

by Brendan Dunbar

More effort must be put into solving Antigonish's affordable housing shortage, said the organizer of the Affordable Housing Roundtable.

A dozen people attended the event, which was held at St. James United Church on Dec. 8.

"I'm very keenly aware of the difference Antigonish has *vis a vis* housing problems in other rural communities," organizer Katherine Reed said.

She said that the household income limits, which are used to determine housing affordability, don't factor Antigonish's unique labour force into their calculations.

"They don't take into account that we have two labour markets here — the doctors, professors and nurses — and then we have retail," she said.

Reed explained that the household income limits determine how much money a household would have to make in order to spend only 30 percent on rent.

According to the figures for Antigonish, which are based on 2002, a person would have to earn \$19,000 annually in order to afford a one-bedroom apartment.

That figure jumps to \$23,000 for a two-bedroom apartment, and \$30,050 for a three-bedroom unit.

"That's low-balled, because of the university factor. They're not taking it into account," Reed said, given that someone working full-time at the minimum wage of \$7.15 an hour makes about \$14,000 a year.

"One of the real problems that we recognized in this meeting is... that there's very little research done in the way of needs in this community," Reed said.

She said a service learning student from St. Francis Xavier University conducted a telephone survey for the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre in 2003. Two of the survey questions concerned affordable housing.

Out of 92 respondents, 77

agreed that affordable housing in Antigonish was a problem, and 61 said they would support an initiative to build low-cost housing in town.

The government, Reed added, needs to be more responsive to input from the people who deal with affordable housing issues.

"I've tried to raise it with them... I just had to walk away," Reed said about the lack of response she's received.

She said that the town's lack of new land shouldn't hamper any affordable housing initiatives, adding that plenty of older houses are suitable for updating and remodelling.

Affordable housing would address another, more subtle rural problem — homelessness.

"So far, what is really emerging is that... homelessness is much more hidden," Claudia Jahn, director of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, said.

"There's lots of couch-surfing, a lot of staying with friends or family."

The more obvious sign of homelessness — beggars panhandling in the downtown core — that appears in urban settings are missing in rural areas.

Reed said that homelessness doesn't appear to be a factor in Antigonish.

"In Antigonish the problem doesn't look like homelessness. It's people paying way more than they can afford for housing," Reed said.

Reed and Jahn agreed that low-income earners often have to accept substandard housing, which can lead to health problems like asthma, mould and asbestos.

Reed also cited isolation as a problem. People can't afford to move into town and find themselves stuck in remote areas.

"The only sensible way to get out of this problem is to build new, affordable rental and ownership housing," she said.