

# Workforce Housing Design Charrette for Exeter, New Hampshire

Hosted by the



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## Mission

The mission of the Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast is to ensure the development of a range of housing options for the diverse workforce in the communities it serves.

The coalition's strategy is to be a catalyst through creating, sustaining, and nurturing a unity of business, government, and community groups. Through education, advocacy, and community engagement, the WHC communicates the importance of diversified, accessible, and quality housing. WHC strives to bring parties together to ensure that the professional workforce is able to live in the community where they work. Since its inception in 2001, the WHC has continued to serve 54 communities in New Hampshire and Maine and has helped more than two dozen communities improve their housing regulations.

WHC envisions an adequate supply of affordable, desirable housing throughout the greater Seacoast region, providing opportunities for area workers to put down roots, thus creating a more diverse community that benefits us all.

[www.SeacoastWHC.org](http://www.SeacoastWHC.org)





# Workforce Housing Coalition

## Board of Directors



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**Sarah Wrightsman**  
Executive Director,  
Workforce Housing  
Coalition of the Greater  
Seacoast

## Workforce Housing Overview

'Workforce housing' is a term that is used to describe a broad range of owner occupied and rental housing that is affordable to the individuals and families that represent the majority of a diverse workforce. New Hampshire statute R.S.A. 674:58 defines it as "...housing which is intended for sale and which is affordable to a household with an income of no more than 100 percent of the median income for a 4-person household ... (or) rental housing which is affordable to a household with an income of no more than 60 percent of the median income for a 3-person household..."

Workforce housing is permanent, quality housing intended as a primary year-round residence, and is available to households regardless of age. Options that are affordable to moderate- and low-income households include single- or multi-family homes, townhouses, condominiums, and apartments. Workforce housing is based on good design and minimal impact. The housing includes small, mixed-income developments that are distributed throughout a town. Developments in suburban settings are clustered to leave areas of open space; compared to unplanned sprawl, such land use is much more efficient and attractive.

A healthy and vibrant community with strong ecosystems is filled with all generations of the workforce: young professionals to empty-nesters. The face of the workforce often includes healthcare workers, teachers, and skilled laborers. These workers provide the benefits and services we associate with a desirable place to live. Ensuring that there are housing options available to provide the opportunity for them to establish roots and become part of the community where they work will create healthy social, cultural, and economic systems.

# Charrette Mission and Process



The Coalition's signature Workforce Housing Design Charrettes are dedicated to transforming the way people work together by broadening the host community's capacity for collaboration. Each charrette is a hypothetical thought exercise that harnesses the talents and energies of volunteer architects, engineers, and other housing industry professionals. The charrette process relies on the realistic challenges presented by a real site, but allows the community and the volunteers to ask "what if?" We ask community members to describe their ideal community, and our volunteers to bring these ideas to life. The charrette process is intended to be a catalyst, helping host communities identify, and therefore change, local land-use regulations that aren't conducive to the development of financially feasible workforce housing. Volunteers are encouraged to push the host community's existing land-use regulations and present a design that will inspire change.

The lack of an adequate and balanced supply of housing poses a threat to the region's economic health. Addressing this issue requires that a broad range of individuals, organizations, and public officials become engaged in efforts to change attitudes towards housing development, and to identify and amend local land-use regulations in order to better facilitate the development of financially feasible workforce housing.

For three days, planners, architects, designers, developers, bankers, business leaders, property owners, and abutters join forces to cooperatively discuss creative plans for solutions around workforce housing.

## Exeter Charrette Leadership Team

### Hosts

[David Sharples](#), Town of Exeter, Town Planner  
[Darren Winham](#), Town of Exeter, Economic Development Director

### Facilitator

[Maria Sillari](#), Non-profit consultant

### Design Team Lead

[Shannon Alther](#), TMS Architects  
[Robbi Woodburn](#), Woodburn and Company Landscape Architecture

### Design Team

[Jennifer Ramsey](#), SOMMA Studio  
[Vicky Martel](#), Woodburn and Company Landscape Architecture  
[John Chagnon](#), Ambit Engineering  
[Steve Riker](#), Ambit Engineering  
[Mark Batcheldor](#), Seaport Engineering

### Housing Expert

[George Reagan](#), New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority  
[Sarah Wrightsman](#), Workforce Housing Coalition

### Finance and Feasibility Team Lead

[Michael Castagna](#), Castagna Consulting Group

### Finance and Feasibility Team

[Ute Luxem](#), Profile Bank  
[Rachaela Ela](#), Optima Bank & Trust

### Scribes

[Sarah Wrightsman](#), Workforce Housing Coalition  
[Dan Ulrey](#)

### Charrette Planning Committee

[Elizabeth Rollins](#), Ambit Engineering  
[Amy Sharp](#), TD Bank  
[Gayle Sanders](#), Gayle Sanders Home Design  
[Carrie DeGeorge](#), Envoy Mortgage  
[Robin Comstock](#), Workforce Housing Coalition  
[Sarah Garstka](#), Workforce Housing Coalition

### Report Production and Design

[Michelle Samdperil](#), Bluestone Rei Creative  
[Laura Harper](#), Regional Economic Development Center

### Property Owner

[Brian Lortie](#)

## Exeter Housing Advisory Committee

[Molly Cowan](#), Select Board Representative  
[Pete Cameron](#), Planning Board Representative  
[John Mueller](#), Economic Development Commission Representative  
[Tim Roache](#), Rockingham Planning Commission Representative  
[Barry Sandberg](#), Local Realtor  
[Nancy Belanger](#), Citizen at Large Representative  
[Tony Texeira](#), Citizen at Large Representative

Learn more about Exeter's Housing Advisory Committee:  
[exeternh.gov/bcc-hac](http://exeternh.gov/bcc-hac)



# The Exeter Charrette Workshop

The Exeter charrette was intended to be an opportunity for local housing professionals to start a conversation between Exeter residents and community leaders about the city's housing needs and the potential of the selected site. The perspective of local leaders and professionals invested in Exeter, combined with resident input on housing needs and preferences, guided the direction of the leadership team and facilitated the creation of architectural designs for the possible redevelopment of the site.

The project initially began in the spring of 2017 with the intention of focusing on how Exeter might include single-family unattached housing in the downtown area. The original location was later



discovered to have significant wetlands and was replaced by a much smaller site, making single-family homes unaffordable.

The site ultimately selected is a half acre on the corner of Bow and Clifford behind The Blue Moon Evolution. The property is zoned as mixed use and currently hosts a commercial office space; single-family homes surround the property.

Housing diversity is needed in Exeter. The range of incomes, lifestyles, family composition, etc. requires a range of housing types. According to the town's website, the select board created the housing advisory committee "to identify, analyze, and develop recommendations regarding our current housing availability and our future housing needs to aid in our economic development needs and to maintain a viable, developmentally balanced community."

Housing is considered affordable when households are dedicating less than 30% of their household income to housing costs, including their rent/mortgage, utilities, and taxes. Over 900 people work at Exeter Hospital, the town's largest employer. One local employer reported that most of his employees commute over 30 minutes, and he has trouble finding employees due to low unemployment and lack of housing that is affordable to the area's workforce.





# The Site Walk

The Workforce Housing Coalition invited Exeter residents, business people, and local housing professionals to join the leadership team on a tour of the areas involved in the charrette. The purpose of the site walk was to raise community awareness of the charrette process; explain the links between housing, employment, environment, and transportation; address the current state of the area; and discuss how revitalization could positively affect residents and businesses.





# Community Listening Session

October 18, 2017

The listening session gave the design team an opportunity to listen to the ideas, hopes, issues, and concerns of community members. Comments offered by participants aided the work of the design team. Participants were asked: In considering the future of the Bow Street site, what would you like to see? What would you not like to see? What is not compatible with the neighborhood?

## Desirable Characteristics

- Neighborhood feel to foster the sense of community
- Density appropriate to location
- Aesthetics: green space, sidewalks, characteristically compatible construction
- Diversity

## Notes & Quotes

The community listening session was sparsely attended by residents, but the few that joined the conversation offered a variety of perspectives that resulted in lively discussion. While opinions differed regarding exact details of the potential development, the attendees consistently heralded their love of their community and the importance of traditional neighborhood values. As one resident noted, “I know as many of the dogs’ names as I do the people.”

“Affordable doesn’t have to be ugly or have cheap aesthetics.”

Contrast between older and newer mills: “[The newer mills] behave like they are in an urban environment, not a suburban environment.”

“I don’t want to go back in time, but I want to preserve what we have ... at the same time, [we] need to be inclusive of diversity.”



# Design Brainstorm and Discussion

October 20, 2017



The objective of the design workshop was not to create a development proposal, but to generate architectural visions to consider, encourage discussion, and provide a platform to spark ideas.

The design team considered a number of factors raised at the site walk and community listening session in an effort to present three to five options with a budget of \$249,000 to ensure long-term affordability. While the maximum sale price based on the Portsmouth-Rochester HMFA 2017 Purchase and Rent Limits is \$307,500 the target price was altered to ensure that when units are resold in the future they won't exceed workforce housing purchase limits. The adjusted target price of \$249,000 is affordable to a family of four making up to 80 percent of the median area income.

## Considerations

**Density is critical to accomplishing consumer affordability:** The property size presents challenges for workforce housing, so the design options may consist of more units than some people would be comfortable with (8 - 26 units). Designers discarded current zoning and land-use regulations in order to propose possibilities.

**The property is zoned as mixed-use:** It currently hosts commercial office space, but designs can be mixed-use or residential only. Land costs should be low given the presence of existing necessary infrastructure (such as sewer). Designs should represent the character of the existing neighborhood. What are the financial possibilities with current zoning? Designs should demonstrate what zoning and land use regulations will work as compared to what is *not* working, showing reasonable alternatives that are affordable. These designs will provide a model for the town and the advisory committee.

**Designs must be desirable to the developer:** They must be profitable to an investor or developer without tax credits.

## Brainstorming Notes

- Thirteen units with no set backs
- Two stories with 20 units and 30 parking spaces
- Twenty-six units with no garden space
- Rent for commercial use
- Profit with penthouse
- Remote parking options and transportation and/or walking to cars
- Living space above parking
- Set back, zoning, and land-use changes
- Downsized/smaller homes as possible solution

**The only way to attack construction cost is with alternative construction methods:**

- Multi-level: going up
- Friendly town home (with garage)
- Condo-flat (parking under)
- Alternative design (containers, etc.)
- Mixed-use (parking under and street parking)
- Penthouse on top (to allow other units a lower cost)
- Inside stairwell
- Vertical
- Horizontal
- Parking on top
- Parking under
- Garden and yard on roof
- Stacked homes

**Ways to make designs with undesirable characteristics (height and width) more desirable and palatable to the community:**

- Solar
- No carbon fuels other than vehicular
- Containers
- Underground water management
- Historic characteristics with contemporary approach





# Design Options and Financial Feasibility



## Option 1 Townhouses

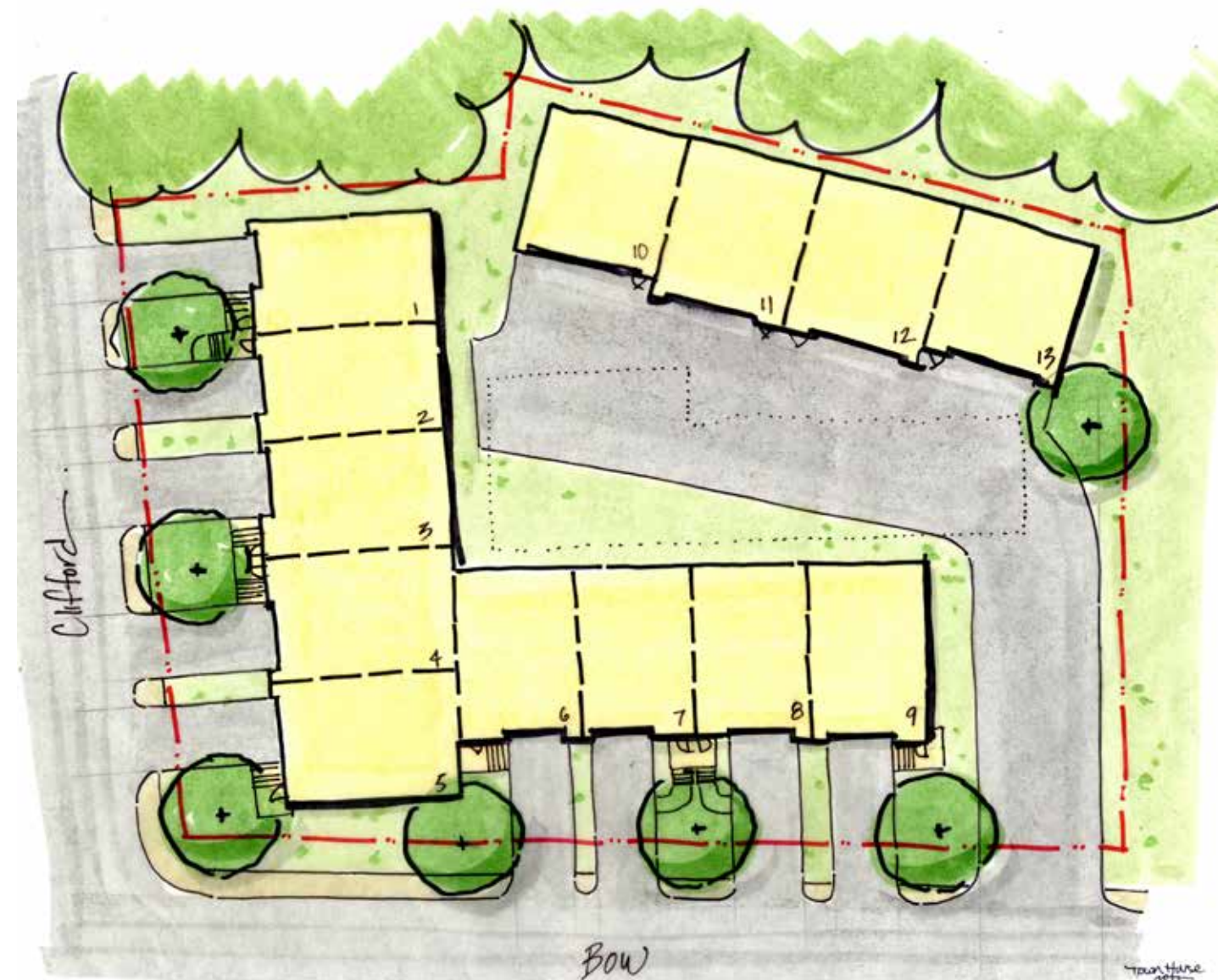
Townhouses: 13 units

Four units located in the back sections of the allotted space.

Three stories total: first floor dedicated to garages for parking; second and third floors dedicated to living space.

First-floor parking made up of two sequential parking spots; second spot located in the garage itself.

Costs of this option could not be considered financially feasible as it was estimated to cost around \$450,000, exceeding the \$249,000 threshold considered for affordable housing.



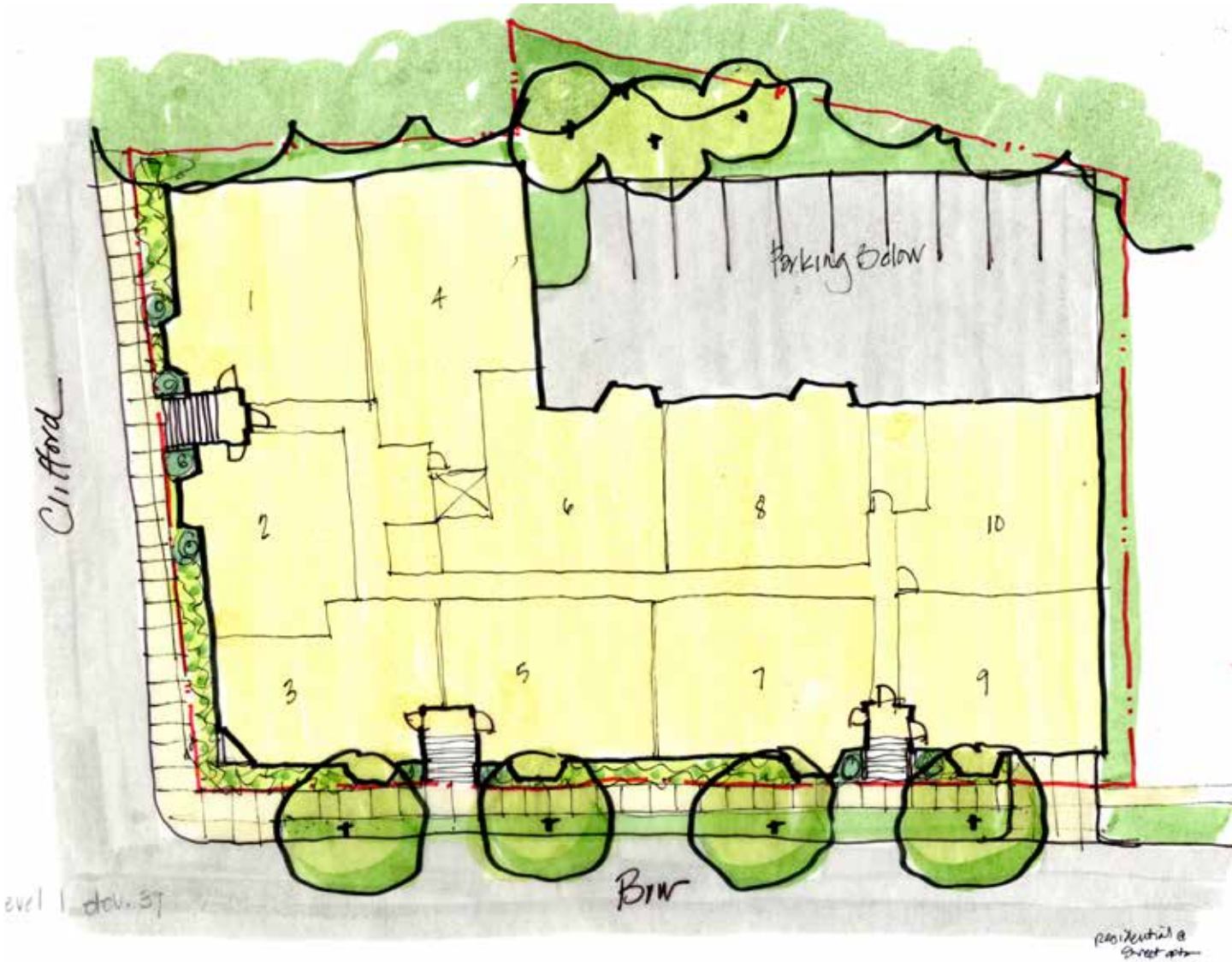


# Option 2 Condo Flats

## Condo Flats

Four stories total: first floor dedicated for parking totaling 44 spaces; three floors dedicated as living spaces with a total of 26 units.

Costs of this option could be as high as \$492,000 dollars, exceeding the \$249,000 threshold.



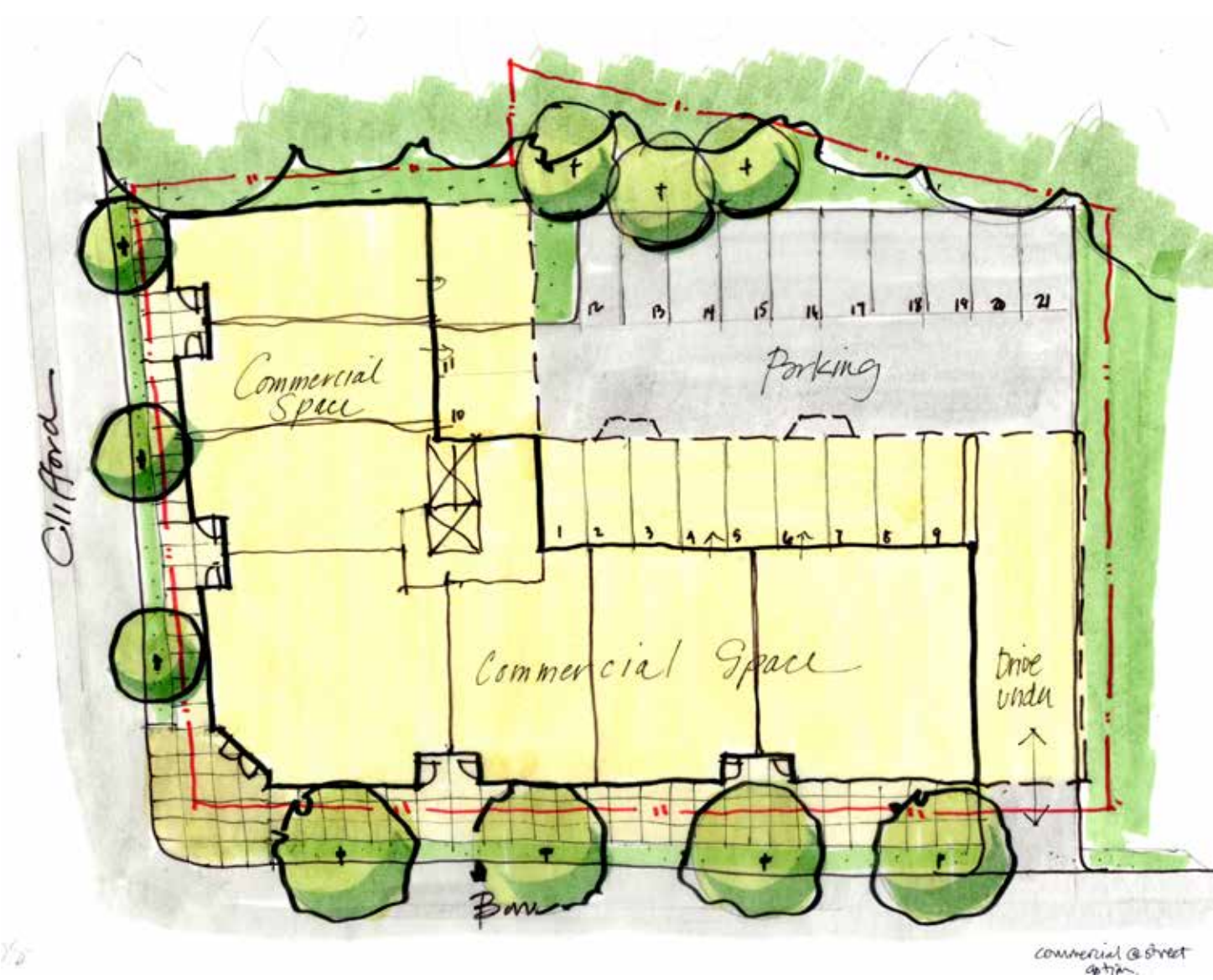


# Option 3 Mixed-use space

Mixed-use space  
First floor and rear parking  
One floor dedicated to commercial space; two floors above dedicated to residential space  
20 units and 21 parking spaces  
Total costs of \$670,000, again higher than the \$249,000 threshold.



Commercial @ Street option



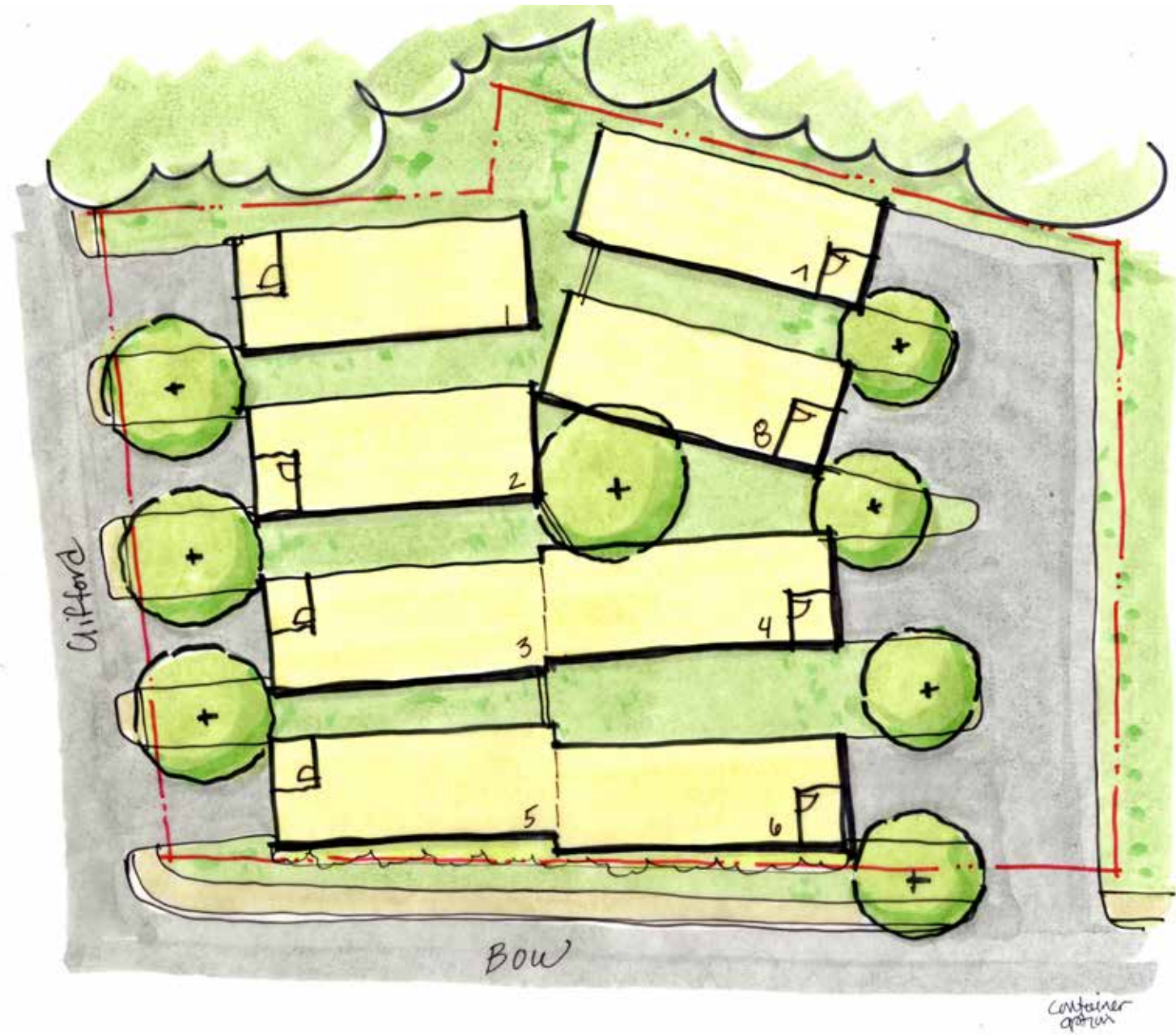


# Option 4 Storage Containers

Two stories  
Eight units

Aesthetically, the units would not line up evenly on the half acre lot, which some residents could consider an “eyesore.” Further, the modern style development could be considered incompatible with the historic area. The alternative construction cost totals approximately \$370,000.

Container Examples:





# Follow Up Questions and Comments

## Zoning Regulations

How many parking spaces were required per resident?  
Two spaces per resident are required.

## Shared Parking

Why did parking not drive the price down in option three?  
It is more expensive to develop commercial space than it is to develop residential space.

## Additional Floors

Would adding floors help the options meet the workforce housing price limits?  
More necessary parking would drive up the cost. For option two, height restrictions potentially prohibit additional floors.

## Aesthetics

How will the design of the building be perceived in a historic district?  
Designing a building to resemble the historic theme of the town would drive the costs of the development up.

The awareness of faults within the lot size will ideally bring future concepts that will make workforce housing possible, as the charrette aims to begin the discussion of the development of affordable housing.



# Director's Note

The Exeter Housing Design Charrette was not without its challenges. Wetlands caused the team to seek a new site just months before the charrette was scheduled to take place, and the new site at 14 Bow Street was significantly different than the original.

When the charrette planning process began, the town hoped the final design would feature single-family homes. The design team adapted their plan to the significantly smaller site, designing four options that included townhouses, condominiums, and storage container units.

The charrette team was tasked with creating options with an initial sale price of less than \$249,000. As you saw, the four design options ranged in price from \$370,000 to \$670,000 - exceeding the target established by the NH Housing Finance Authority.

**Does this mean it is impossible to develop workforce housing on this site?** Probably not, but it is certainly challenging. Perhaps smaller units, increased density, and decreased parking could have brought the unit price below the state's workforce housing maximums, but the untimely site change made balancing the town's vision with the goal of long term affordability an overwhelming task.

Our workforce housing design charrettes are meant to educate and engage community members and examine local land-use regulations. We measure the success of our charrettes not by how many units of workforce housing are built, but by how the town continues the hard work after the charrette is over. In that respect, this charrette was a huge success.

The town of Exeter staff and the Housing Advisory Committee has continued to work diligently to examine the limitations of their current zoning. Less than a year after the charrette ended, the town of Exeter was awarded a Municipal Technical Assistance Grant, a grant program administered by Plan NH. The grant allowed the town to hire a consultant to assist with the process of amending the zoning ordinances in key commercial areas to increase the diversity of housing typologies.

Our charrettes are only one piece of the larger community and economic development puzzle. We hope that this report will serve the town as an educational tool and that the designs created by the talented architects who worked on this project are proof that workforce housing can be aesthetically appealing. The Workforce Housing Coalition will continue to work with the town of Exeter as they work to address housing affordability.

Sincerely,  
Sarah Wrightsman  
Executive Director  
Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast





[www.SeacoastWHC.org](http://www.SeacoastWHC.org)

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The Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast is a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

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