

The City Studied Its Own Housing Policy. Here's What It Found.

Portsmouth hired a consultant (RKG Associates) to test whether its affordable housing incentive actually works. The findings — public for the first time this September — in plain English.

The tax break for housing builders PROMISING	State law lets Portsmouth freeze property taxes on new housing for up to 15 years — in exchange for a legal promise, recorded on the property, that some homes stay affordable. Written well, that promise can last up to 30 years. The city is drafting this ordinance right now.
The city's current affordable housing rule BROKEN	Portsmouth already has a rule meant to encourage builders to include lower-priced homes. The consultant's verdict: it doesn't work — it is “highly unlikely” to produce a single affordable home, because it asks builders to give something up and offers nothing real in return.
“Just build more” MYTH TESTED	In the areas studied, builders are already allowed to build more densely than most ever would. The barrier isn't zoning — it's that affordable projects don't pay for themselves without help.
The city's affordable housing fund TOO SMALL	The fund holds about \$480,000. The consultant priced the help one affordable project needs at \$3.5 to \$7.5 million — roughly \$22,000 to \$46,000 per apartment. Without a steady source of money, the fund can't do its job.
Who counts as “affordable” A CHOICE	The new tax-break draft serves households earning up to about \$84,000 (two people). The city's current standard is about \$63,000. That means more homes, but for higher earners — a real trade-off the city should decide openly, not by default.
The answer hiding in the math THE OPPORTUNITY	The help each apartment needs (~\$22,000–\$46,000) is about what the land under it costs. When the city contributes land it already owns — the model behind the ~90 permanently affordable homes coming at the Sherburne School — the math works, the homes stay affordable for good, and property taxes are not the subsidy.
Timing worth knowing ASK WHY	The study was finished in August 2025. It was shown to the public for the first time in September 2026 — and the draft housing plan never mentions it.

What you can do — it takes ten minutes

Attend the Housing Committee's public hearing on September 24 at City Hall, in person or by Zoom — and speak, even briefly. Two sentences from a resident carry surprising weight. Or write to the whole City Council at portsmouthnh.gov/citycouncil/contact-all-city-councilors and ask for a housing plan that keeps homes affordable for the long term. If you rent — as half of Portsmouth does — say so: the plan has no other way of hearing from you.

“Affordable” here follows the federal standard: housing costing no more than 30% of a household's income. Income figures are 2025 federal limits for the Portsmouth area (two-person household). Sources: RKG Associates, Workforce Housing Evaluation for the City of Portsmouth (Aug. 31, 2025); City of Portsmouth draft Housing Action Plan (July 2026); Sept. 10, 2026 Housing Committee packet. Fund balance as reported to Progress Portsmouth. Full analysis and sources: progressportsmouth.com. Prepared by Progress Portsmouth with AI assistance.