

Housing Availability, Workforce Attraction, and Community Competitiveness in Fayette County, Pennsylvania

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My name is Dana Kendrick, and I am an economic development professional who has worked in Fayette County, Pennsylvania for over 20 years on workforce, economic, and real estate development initiatives.

I currently work with K2 Engineering, Inc., where the firm's owner, John Over, made a very intentional decision to bring an economic development professional onto the team. That vision was rooted in a clear understanding that successful projects, whether public or private sector, require far more than engineering and design alone. They require strategic coordination, identification of the right funding and financing programs, and the ability to connect services across agencies, institutions, and partners to support each project's unique needs.

That vision has allowed K2 Engineering to better serve municipalities and private-sector clients by assisting with business attraction, business retention and expansion, workforce support, and the identification of state, federal, and local programs that help projects move from concept to reality. Importantly, it has also allowed us to see firsthand and repeatedly where systemic barriers exist that no single project or program can overcome on its own.

Throughout my career, I have been directly involved in projects ranging from developing new business parks, manufacturing facilities, and recreation and tourism investments, to business retention and expansion efforts supporting mom-and-pop businesses to Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies. I have worked closely with state, federal, and local financing programs, grant funding agencies, banks, angel investors, and utilized specialized bonding tools, all with the goal of growing Fayette County's economy and creating opportunities to replace the jobs lost with the decline of the coal and steel industries, and to provide meaningful employment for the next generation.

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Based on this experience, I can say clearly and confidently that housing has consistently been one of the greatest obstacles to attracting and retaining businesses and skilled professionals in Fayette County, and across the Commonwealth.

This challenge is not simply about whether housing exists. It is about whether the right *kind* of housing exists, in the right locations, at a price point attainable to working families, and within school districts and communities where families feel safe, supported, and confident raising their children.

I have witnessed companies eager to locate in Fayette County struggle with one critical issue; they need to bring executives, managers, and other skilled professionals into the community to open and operate facilities, and those individuals need a place to live immediately.

Too often, the options simply are not there. Homes that are move-in ready, located in stable neighborhoods, supported by sustainable school districts, and connected to adequate infrastructure are extremely limited. At the same time, many older housing units are affected by blight, deferred maintenance, or infrastructure challenges that make them unsuitable for relocation candidates, particularly those moving with families.

I want to share one real-world example that illustrates both the challenge and what it takes to overcome it. At one point, a Fortune 500 company selected Fayette County to open a new manufacturing facility that would employ more than 100 workers. As part of that process, the company brought in a plant manager from another country to establish operations. The plant manager and his wife made several early trips to Fayette County to evaluate housing options and visit schools.

They came from a country where they had lived in a gated community due to crime and infrastructure issues, and where they paid tuition for private schools to ensure their children's safety and education. Their goal in relocating to Pennsylvania was not luxury, it was stability. They wanted their children to be integrated into the community, attend public schools, and experience life as part of the place where they would live and work.

What they encountered was not a lack of desire to live in Fayette County, it was a lack of options. Finding a highly rated public school district, paired with a home of a type and condition they were comfortable with, proved extremely difficult.

Ultimately, a private developer and a local real estate professional worked with the family to provide a build-to-suit home. This was a success story, but it came at a cost. The process took a long time. The family had to live elsewhere while the home was being constructed, which meant extended commutes, significant travel demands, and strain on the family as they transported their children to the school district where their future home would eventually be located.

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And I want to emphasize this point; this was a family with the financial means and professional support to make this work. Many others do not have that luxury.

Throughout my career, I have seen numerous individuals choose instead to live in Morgantown, West Virginia. Not because they preferred it there, but because housing was immediately available, within their ownership range, and connected to schools and amenities that met their expectations. They could not wait a year or more for a home to be built, nor could they manage extended temporary housing arrangements while trying to meet the demands of a new job.

This issue is not new. I experienced the same challenge firsthand in the early 2000s while working to support the Uniontown Hospital, prior to WVU's acquisition to integrate it into the WVU Medicine health system. The hospital attempted to recruit physicians to serve Fayette County. At that time, there was not even suitable temporary housing or rental stock that met the needs of medical professionals relocating with families. That limitation directly affected recruitment outcomes.

What all of this demonstrates is that housing is inseparable from workforce development and economic growth. And it goes even further. It is not just about housing units. It is about community. People evaluating a move to Fayette County are asking:

- Can I find a home?
- Is it in a safe, well-maintained neighborhood?
- Are the schools strong and sustainable?
- Is there recreation, culture, and quality of life for my family?
- Can I picture myself living, working, and playing here long-term?

When the answer to those questions is uncertain, we lose talent, and with it, investment, job creation, and opportunity.

As the Commonwealth looks ahead, housing policy must be viewed not only as a social or infrastructure issue, but as a core economic development strategy. If we want to compete for businesses, retain employers, and reverse population loss in communities like Fayette County, we must invest in housing that is available, attainable, sustainable, and integrated into strong communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience and perspective. I appreciate your attention to this issue and your commitment to strengthening Pennsylvania's communities and workforce.