Housing, Health, and Sustainability

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In regional analyses, the impact of housing is often given short shrift. Other factors such as the creation of jobs and the development of an adequate infrastructure to produce a continuing stream of jobs capable of sustaining a living wage are frequently in the forefront. Often housing is treated as if it were merely a private good. The crisis in housing in Massachusetts in the last decade has led to the recognition that the limited availability of and high cost of housing is likely to increasingly become the limiting factor on regional economic growth.

Paul Hunter, head of Healthy Homes for the Massachusetts’ Department of Public Health, recently noted that in today’s tight housing market, people have the choice of either affordable housing or environmentally safe housing, but not both. He pointed out that in actuality this usually means that people in communities such as Lowell are living in housing that poses serious health hazards resulting from poor indoor air quality, lead and asbestos contamination and the like. How do we incorporate a concern for healthy homes that are affordable into the analysis now taking place in CITA and elsewhere about developing a sustainable regional economy?

This paper will report on recent innovative work carried out through the Center for Family, Work, and Community’s housing initiative as well as under the New Ventures Environmental Justice Project in which housing as an urban environmental problem has been the focus. Together these two projects, carried out under community-university partnerships, identify the factors that are contributing to the shortage of affordable, environmentally safe housing, suggest next steps in developing a region-wide housing policy, and test out various strategies for heightening community awareness of the environmental threats associated with substandard, aging housing stock built prior to many current environmental laws. Opportunities for incorporating a focus on healthy homes into the city’s environmental policy now being developed will be considered.