

Green River

in, where when they say, 'There is nothing to rent,' that's what they mean," Smoak said. "There's literally nothing on the market at any price."

Green River's population is a little under 1,000, according to the 2020 census, but there are a total of only 437 housing units. Attracting teachers, public servants and other workers to the town is a struggle. Even those who grew up in Green River and have local connections can find it difficult to find a suitable place to live. For outsiders, it can be downright impossible.

Although rural communities like Green River aren't at the center of conversations about Utah's affordable housing crisis, the state and federal government have taken steps to try to help them.

The state of Utah is helping Green River build a 10-unit affordable housing development, for example, through the Olene Walker Housing Loan Fund and spearheaded by the nonprofit Epicenter. The city of Green River donated 4 acres and on May 25, the project finally broke ground.

The project's supporters hope the 10 new units will not only bolster Green River's housing supply, but on average young people who have left to come home and strengthen the town's economy and workforce.

The state also has partnered with the nonprofit Self Help to assist very low-income earners purchase homes, according to Brad Bishop, the organization's executive director. Self Help offers support for rural Utahns interested in building single-family homes and connects them to funds available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Although with construction and land prices rising, those dollars don't always go as far as they once did.

"I've seen more effort these last couple of years" to help rural Utahns, said Bishop.

RURAL UTAH'S HOUSING WOES REQUIRE UNIQUE SOLUTIONS

In the late 1800s, the railroad catalyzed the first population boom at Green River, just off the banks of the 750-mile epicurean waterway. People moved to the town to establish small ranches and farms, with the train nearby to carry their offerings to larger markets. To day, most stands still dot the road into town in late summer.

The desert landscape has plenty of red rock but few trees, and early residents used old rail road ties to build livestock sheds.

A lot of these early families literally had to bring a horse with them from wherever they were previously," Smoak said. "There's no way to build your own house in Green River unless you bring in the resources from outside."

More than a 100 years later, Green River's remote location still makes it difficult to build



SANDRA SALVAS / Epicenter



Epicenter

Top » Green River residents break ground late last month on a housing project on land donated by the city and primarily funded by the Olene Walker Housing Loan Fund. **Above** » A rendering of phase one of Green River's affordable housing project.

there.

"It's really hard for outsiders to come in to develop anything in a rural place," said Maria Sykes, director of the nonprofit Epicenter. Epicenter had to act as its own developer for the affordable housing project. "There's no interest there," Sykes said, "because to keep [the project] affordable, it's not a big money making venture."

And the price of construction can be higher in rural Utah—from extra infrastructure needs to transportation costs. Bishop said the state has helped with some of the expenses that come with turning a piece of farmland into a new development.

More than two decades of experience has helped him continue developing affordable homes in rural Utah, Bishop said, but "if we were to start today, it would be super, super difficult."

High infrastructure costs are just one reason why home building in rural areas is unique, said Tara Rollins, executive director of the Utah Housing Coalition. Ensuring that rural Utahns are included on the state's Commission on Housing Affordability could help tailor programs that are more specific to their needs, Rollins said.

KEEPING AND ATTRACTING WORKERS

High costs of construction aren't the only

problem. The homes that are available in Green River are also more expensive now.

While the tourism industry and market for second homes and Airbnbs hasn't reached the same levels as in Moab, homes are now mostly out of reach for the people working there.

That's especially true for teachers, said Kayce May-Riches, the principal at Green River High School. She said one new teacher had to live in a motorhome for two years before they found a place to live.

"It used to be easy to live in Green River," said May-Riches, who grew up in the town. "Property and housing was cheap."

But when Moab real estate prices rose, so too did land in Green River.

When she moved back to Green River, May-Riches moved into her family home. People like her with ties to the community generally have an easier time.

"The high school is trying to bring alumni back to our school to work [here]," May-Riches said, and is working to "bring more people, more professionals back to Green River."

But to do that, they'll need a place to live.

"What comes first? Jobs or homes?" Rollins said. "As we're building our economy we need to have homes."

A DELAYED SOLUTION FINALLY UNDERWAY

The town's new affordable housing

project has been in the works for years but the COVID-19 pandemic and soaring construction costs delayed its execution.

The first phase will consist of five rental houses. The two-bedroom units will rent for \$746 a month and the three-bedroom ones for \$992.

The second batch of homes will be for sale. "If more people lived here, there would be more options for new businesses," Sykes said, "or maybe better workers in some cases, or just more workers."

It could help people like Smoak, who manages five full-time employees.

"I'm going to have a staff turnover here, coming up 'his summer,' the museum director said, "and it does make it incredibly difficult to recruit from outside the region."

After six weeks in a hotel, Smoak finally found a place to call home, but it took connections. The town manager started asking around on Smoak's behalf and eventually found a house she could rent. In the year and a half since she moved to Green River, Smoak said, she's only seen one other house come up for rent.

Despite the challenges, she still thinks it's a great place to call home.

"It's the perfect small town environment where you know your neighbors, and you say hello to each other," Smoak said. "You don't lock your doors. It's just a really safe and very nice place."

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