

George Mason University and Virginia Housing Strengthen Affordable Housing Through Education, Planning, and Real-World Engagement

...Education as a Catalyst for Affordable Housing Solutions...

P. David Tarter, Center for Real Estate Entrepreneurship



Costello College of Business
**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN
REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT**
George Mason University®



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The George Mason – Virginia Housing Partnership

- Mutual commitment to housing solutions and workforce development in affordable housing.
- Build leadership capacity statewide.
- Offer educational pathways for professionals at all stages.
- Serve as a neutral platform for collaboration and innovation.
- **Virginia Housing's mission aligns with Mason's educational expertise.**



George Mason's Real Estate/Housing Education Ecosystem

- **Master's in Real Estate Development Program (MRED):**
 - Created in partnership with industry.
 - Graduate degree in Business School.
 - Multi-disciplinary approach – real estate development, finance, law, design, construction, and sustainability.
 - All professors have real-world expertise.



George Mason's Real Estate/Housing Education Ecosystem

- **Center for Real Estate Entrepreneurship (CREE):**
 - The outreach and professional education arm of the MRED program.
 - Provides non-degree professional training.
 - Hosts conferences, short courses, and networking events.
 - Conducts research.
- **MRED and CREE together: a bridge between academia, industry, and practice.**



Underlying Housing Pressures

- Approximately 1 in 3 Virginia Households are “cost-burdened” – spend over 30% of their income on housing.
- 73% of Virginians say the state lacks enough affordable homes to rent or buy.
- Housing supply isn’t keeping up with the demand – population growth and urbanization.
- Wages haven’t kept up with housing inflation.
- Zoning and land use regulation.
- High construction costs.
- Transportation.



Multi-Disciplinary Challenge

- Housing affordability isn't one problem – it's a system-wide challenge.
- Confluence of land use, urban planning, regulation, finance, politics, community engagement, etc.
- Few places bring these areas together.
- Many practitioners lack comprehensive knowledge.
- **Without shared understanding, even well-intentioned policies can misfire.**



Affordable Housing Stakeholders

- Community.
- Developers.
- Elected Officials.
- Governmental Staff.
- Neighbors.
- Non-Profits.
- Taxpayers.
- Academics.



The Knowledge Gap

| Sector | Knows Well | Needs Understanding of |
|------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Planners | Regulation & land use | Deal Structure |
| Developers | Finance & deals | Policy & community |
| Nonprofits | Mission | Financial feasibility |
| Lenders | Underwriting | Design & entitlement |

We need to connect the silos.

How Did You Learn About Affordable Housing...

...On The Job?



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Education, a Bridge...

- Housing Affordability – one of the most complex challenges in the U.S. – driven by supply/demand, policy, social forces, and politics.
- Education breaks down complex problems into more understandable components.
- Provides the connection – translating passion and advocacy into informed action.
- **Better knowledge = Better decisions.**



The Value of the Honest Broker

- Affordable housing debates are often polarized and politically charged.
- Immediate neighbors versus broader community, public versus private, market versus mission, growth versus affordability, etc.
- Lose credibility when try to both educate and advocate.
- Neutrality encourages participation from all sides.
- As a university, George Mason serves as an impartial source of data, research, and solutions.
- **Education can bring together what politics often separates.**

Education's Role...Overlapping Purposes:

- Develop Practical Tools: Build financial, legal, and regulatory literacy and understanding.
- Create Cross-Sector Dialogue and Collaboration: Facilitate dialogue across public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- Information: Provide accurate, unbiased data and knowledge of housing markets, policy, and finance.
- Skill Building: Equip professionals with tools to analyze deals, understand the regulatory framework, craft policy, and engage communities.
- Professionals leave with knowledge *and* networks.
- **Housing education – not just professional development – it's civic infrastructure.**

Some Recent Brainstorming at our Programming

- Centralized online hub with model ordinances, training materials, etc.
- Regional Housing Dashboard.
- Comprehensive community engagement toolkit.
- Zoning standardization/flexibility.
- Align transportation investments with housing priorities.



The Education Continuum: From Degrees to Discussions...

Master's in Real Estate Development Program (MRED):

- 33-credit graduate degree program.
- Hands-on learning.
- Case studies, site tours, guest lectures, etc.
- Core Classes include: The Development Process, Design & Construction, Financial Analysis and Valuation, Brokerage and Market Analysis, Affordable Housing, Sustainability, etc.
- All professors have real-world experience – developers, engineers, architects, etc.
- Can be completed in one year.



George Mason's Affordable Housing Certificate

- Four graduate-level courses:
 - **Fundamentals of Affordable Housing:** Overview of affordable housing industry, housing needs, subsidy systems, regulatory frameworks, housing markets, key terms, etc.
 - **Affordable Housing Finance:** Overview of equity, debt, and financial structures, LIHTC, capital stack, financial modeling, tax-exempt bonds, tax credits, etc.
 - **Affordable Housing Policy:** Overview of federal, state, and local housing policies, inclusionary zoning, density bonuses, incentives, etc.
 - **Fourth Class from MRED Program:** Law & Entitlements, Market Analysis, etc.
- Designed for industry practitioners (affordable housing professionals, advocates, government staff, non-profits, developers, lenders, etc.).
- Classes are offered in evenings to allow for work.
- Remote.
- Advance career.
- January through August.

Short Courses/Practitioner Workshops

- Several hours to several-day courses.
- Stay current with evolving practices and policies.
- Practical skills – Excel modeling, tax credits, etc.
- Networking.
- Cost-efficient training.
- Record sessions to create an online repository.



Fundamentals of Affordable Housing Workshop

- Two full-day course – October 23 and 24.
- Sponsored by Virginia Housing.
- Introduction to policies, programs, and funds for affordable housing development.
- Case study tour – Terwilliger Place.

FUNDAMENTALS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

October 23 & 24, 2025
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
GMU Mason Square, Arlington



Organized By

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Virginia Housing

Day One Speakers



Jill Norcross
Executive Director
NVAHA



Michael Spotts
Director
Habitat for Humanity
D.C. & Northern Virginia



Mark Hassinger
Professor
Costello College of Business

Day Two Speakers



Steve Wilson
President/Principal
SCG Development



Shelley Murphy McCabe
Former President & CEO
Wesley Housing



Kanesha Brown
Community Outreach Regional Manager
Virginia Housing



Ryan Nash
Senior Project Manager
True Ground Housing Partners

Panels

- Brings together experts from different sectors.
- Multiple viewpoints.
- Encourages critical thinking and dialogue with audience engagement.
- Interactive and conversational nature of panels makes subjects more accessible.
- Connects policy and practice.



GMU/Arlington County – Missing Middle Panel

- Majority of local elected leadership present.
- How loosening zoning regulations could encourage more affordable homes.
- Panelists included developer, advocate, economist, etc.
- Ultimately, led to Arlington's Missing Middle legislation.



Housing Symposium 2025

- Co-hosted with Northern Virginia Regional Commission – October 6, 2025.
- Sponsored by Virginia Housing, NVAR, etc.
- 150+ attendees, including elected officials, non-profit, government staff, etc.
- Breakout work sessions with recommendations for action.
- Solutions-based symposium.
- Follow-up work session by regional elected body to implement recommendations.



Facilitated Discussions/Community Engagement

- Include community voices.
- Builds consensus for solutions.
- Democratizes housing education – ensuring all voices are heard.
- Bridges theory and lived experience.
- Partner with local governments, civic associations, etc.



Community Engagement – West Falls Project

- Largest project in Falls Church's history.
- Hotel, office, apartments, affordable housing, micro units, condominiums, senior living, retail, etc.
- Monthly community meetings for years.
- Ultimately, so many opportunities to be heard, no one showed up at the final hearing – unanimously approved.



In-Person vs. Remote Affordable Housing Education

In-Person:

- Allows site visits, relationship building, empathy, etc.
- Generally costs more, smaller reach, travel time, inefficient use of time.

Remote:

- Wider access – rural areas, worldwide participation.
- Can feature global experts.
- Flexibility.
- Limited experiential learning.
- Reduced engagement/relationship building.



Looking Ahead: Evolving Affordable Housing Education

- Full Master's Degree in Affordable Housing – Inter-disciplinary approach (planning, public policy, architecture, finance, law, etc.)
- Data-driven analysis of housing policies, incentives, and tools.
- Hybrid/online formats to reach rural/local staff.
- New modules on green affordable housing, community land trusts, and anti-displacement strategies, etc.
- Connecting housing to climate, transportation, and economic development.

Closing Reflection

- Education builds the foundation for every affordable home that gets financed, approved, or designed.
- Leadership in housing begins with learning.
- Thank you.

