Rethinking housing for work force

When I started my campaign four years ago, the economy was driving many working families in Eagle County away. We lagged years behind in preserving options for those who built our resort economy to remain as community builders because of an imbalance in housing opportunities.

This is still a difficult place to get a foothold for working families, but much has changed in this market, and the challenges are different.

Those changes have put additional burdens on those who remain. Today the problem isn’t the lack of properties at a reasonable price point. There is plenty of affordable housing stock on the market, and there’s even more in a shadow market of stock waiting in the wings for the most distressed properties to clear.

The year before I started, the Eagle County commissioners set an aggressive program to help keep pace with that explosive growth and provide a portion of new product at an affordable rate.

The county had been reeling from 10 percent growth with 40 percent of our work force involved in building or development — a pace and portion that wasn’t sustainable.

Most builders didn’t bother with providing stock at the low end.

That plan responded by establishing that 35 percent of all upcoming projects be set aside for work-force housing. It was a historic response to a historic gap.

If the plan had been in place 15 years earlier, the Eagle Valley might have had plenty of work-force housing.

It was a great vision, and yet today it already seems a relic. A plan left over from yesterday’s battle.

Today Eagle County is asking: Should we ignore these changes and continue our work-force housing policies established at the height of the market?

It would be easy to stay the course.

I would argue that we cannot both have a high bar and allow the housing market to rebound in any way under today’s conditions.

Development of housing — any housing — by those who choose to take a risk in developing land or homes is not easy.

It never really was. Any such realistic effort by the private sector to get projects on track should be welcomed with expectations in light of today’s realities.

I believe that we need to soften our housing guidelines in the near term.

I want to be clear that this is not to say that any development should be allowed in any location without a vision for all those amenities we have come to expect — access to public lands, open space and rivers; wildlife mitigation; sidewalks; pedestrian and transit connectivity; quality public spaces.

A metro district’s proposal to pay for these and other basic amenities ought to be carefully scrutinized.

There are many such districts and towns struggling right now. We should not lower our guard to simply allow anything, anywhere, just because we are desperate.

The Eagle River corridor was built on high expectations. Those expectations for the quality of life of such a future project require more oversight than ever.

Projects should not be less than what we would expect from a world-class community.

That said, this is becoming a lost decade for the work force in many ways. I think it is time for adjusting our approach. I believe we must revise our housing guidelines downward.

Yesterday’s public-sector gatekeeping will not get work-force housing built in today’s market. My take is that there will be great competition in the next decade for entry-level housing and that we don’t need to regulate it so aggressively — at least not like we thought in 2008.

Recently, the Eagle County Housing Authority began a conversation with developers and local jurisdictions about how best to reposition our expectations.

I believe those regulations established at the height of the market must be revised for the new reality.

Please send your comments to me or to Jill Kloserman, Eagle County’s housing director. Your input is welcomed and much appreciated.

Jon Stavney, of Eagle, is an Eagle County commissioner.