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## **More opt for renting than owning homes in BG**

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The city's percentage of homeowners versus renters is not necessarily a bad thing, according to a real estate consultant.

What is more important over the coming years is making sure that there is enough affordable and reliable housing for both renters and homeowners, Todd DeLong of Real Estate Research Consultants told city commissioners last week.

DeLong estimated that slightly less than 48 percent of Bowling Green housing is owned versus about 53 percent that is rented; while that is well above the national average of 35 percent to 40 percent, DeLong said that is not unusual for a college town.

DeLong's firm was selected by the city to survey the housing market and provide a document that the city could use both for its Community Development Block Grant program and for Realtors, builders and others in the community, said Alice Burks, director of Housing and Community Development for the city.

"Affordability is the key," Burks said.

DeLong found that in 2000, nearly 30 percent of residents were "cost burdened" by their housing needs - more than 30 percent of their income went toward housing costs. More than 14 percent were "severely cost burdened," meaning those same expenses took more than 50 percent of their income. That compares to a state average of 22 percent cost burdened and 10 percent severely cost burdened.

Burks said the higher cost here is a combination of factors, including the low availability of lower-cost housing, as well as average wages that could be higher.

"Obviously, right now it's the economy," she said. "And prior to that, it was because about a quarter of our population gets its income primarily for something other than wages, such as Social Security and disability payments. Typically, the cost burden is greater for people who have fixed incomes. And we have many single-parent households.

"And we have a huge chunk of young adults, a lot of them college students or just out of school, so they have a higher cost burden."

DeLong said he suspects there are many more residents aged 20 to 24 living in the city than a census would account for; many of those are students, who still count their parents' residence as their home address.

The average single-family home price went from \$113,000 in 2000 to \$142,000 in 2007.

"There has not really been a big boon, and I expect you won't really see a big bust," he said.

DeLong said about 2,500 new housing units have been added since 2000, compared to 1,400 the previous decade. But that number is about right to keep up with projected growth, Burks said.

"We are building at a proper rate," she said. "We just need to spread it out over the kinds of units available."

Burks said she sees a lack of affordable housing for such groups as the disabled, teens aging out of the foster care system and large families.

"We are probably getting enough units on the ground, but our job as a city is to make sure that we have enough affordable housing for all those groups," she said.

Burks said she doesn't see the findings of the study as being in conflict with a push by Mayor Elaine Walker and other organizations toward home ownership.

"I think there is room for both home ownership and rental," Burks said. "The value of having a home ownership emphasis is that it does create wealth for families and stabilizes the neighborhoods.

"There is value in continuing to increase our home ownership. But that said, it is important that we recognize the need for rental housing and do our best to make sure we have affordable and decent units out there available."