

Dialogue on housing must be open to all

Builders are tired of being treated like the bad guys.

That complaint emerged clearly, if not loudly, during a recent meeting with our editorial board where a half-dozen representatives of the Massachusetts Home Builders Association, including local members William Ward of Attleboro and John Bryson of North Attleboro, asked for support for their legislative agenda.

Where builders are in the business of supplying a basic human need — shelter — that complaint deserves serious attention at any time, but particularly so in this political season when housing occupies a place near the top of the Statehouse agenda. Gov. Paul Cellucci put it there in his state of the state message and House Speaker Tom Finneran made it a high priority last week when he announced his goals for the year.

The debates are not likely to be clean and simple. There are too many cross-currents. While Republican Cellucci — as well as heir-apparent Lt. Gov. Jane Swift — and Democrat Finneran seek increased housing construction and lower costs, they are likely to be looking for political advantages by proposing different answers. Meanwhile, a number of legislators from suburban districts are pressing for legislation aimed at weakening the state's anti-snob zoning law, in effect making it easier to limit housing development.

This is an issue most Sun Chronicle area residents will want to follow closely.

On one side, the United Way of the Greater Attleboro-Taunton area has named the shortage of affordable housing the region's most pressing problem. Along with its obvious human dimensions, the shortage is a detriment to the state's economy,

posing an obstacle to attracting qualified workers. And despite earning some of the highest wages in the nation, Massachusetts ranks 47th out of the 50 states in disposable income. Paying the third highest housing costs in the country eats up a regrettable share of paychecks.

On the other, there are grass roots efforts across the area to preserve open space, as well as governmental bodies intent on discouraging population growth and avoiding increases in school population and other demands for tax-supported services.

Balance must be achieved between open space preservation and expansion of affordable housing. To achieve that end, the dialogue must be open. And none of the players should be demonized. Not builders. Not environmentalists. And certainly not people needing a roof over their head.

With that in mind, we were pleased to learn the builders' group also had a meeting this month with one of their traditional rivals, the Massachusetts Audubon Society. It's evidence that there are areas where development and preservation interests coincide.

One attractive intersection of these interests is through the greater use of cluster or planned unit developments. The builders are advocating a state law that would allow cities and towns to create zoning districts where PUDs would be allowed as a matter of right. Passing this would be a wise move.

It would, however, be only one small answer to the housing question. Finding the others will depend in part on cooperation between the various interest groups. There are no bad guys in the mix, only some very difficult political problems.