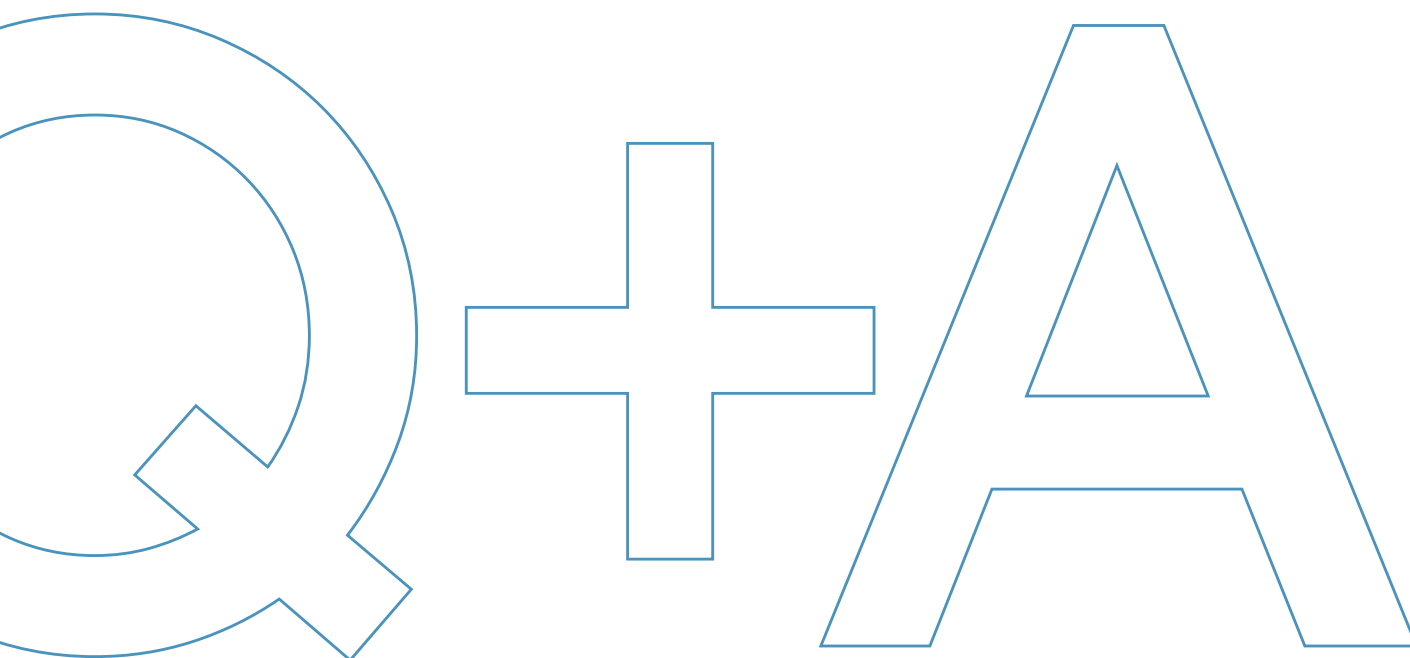


Greg Payne

Development Officer, Avesta Housing





Housing for everyone

When it comes to affordable construction in Maine, Avesta Housing is literally a household name. The nonprofit developer started almost 50 years ago with three employees and a shoestring budget. Today, their staff of more than 250 manage 100 properties, 2,700 apartments and two assisted living facilities. Their future-tenant waiting list exceeds 3,000.

Avesta's development officer, Greg Payne, joined the company in 2007, managing multifamily rental projects from concept to completion. He also wears a second hat as director of the Maine Affordable Housing Coalition, a diverse association of more than 135 private and public sector organizations committed to ensuring that all Mainers are adequately and affordably housed.

Payne brings more than twenty-five years of experience on issues related to housing and homelessness, including work at the Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless and the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. He is the former board chair of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition.

Think Wood recently spoke with Greg about Avesta's latest affordable senior living project, Wessex Woods, as well as broader advocacy efforts in Maine.

THINK WOOD: Thanks for joining us, Greg. Affordable housing is one of the biggest challenges facing the U.S. today. What motivates you—and Avesta—to tackle this issue?

GREG PAYNE: An affordable home is the foundation from which everyone seeks to build their best lives. The quality, location, and affordability of our housing determines so many outcomes—from our health to education to employment—and we want to do all we can to ensure that every Mainer has access to a safe, affordable place to call home. This work isn't easy. There are so many enormous hurdles to overcome, including low wages, high rents, rising construction costs, and overly restrictive zoning and land use rules, to name a few. But we sense a growing popular understanding of how critical it is that we all work together to meet these challenges.

Your recent project, Wessex Woods, was the first in Maine to use mass timber for the stairwells and elevator shaft. What drove this design decision?

GP: Our architect [CWS Architects] designed a great building, and we put it out to bid, but rapidly rising construction costs caused the project to be hundreds of thousands of dollars over budget. In Maine, we have cost caps on affordable housing, so even if you can find more money, you have to reduce the overall project cost. CLT was not initially in our consciousness, but as we dug into the idea, we discovered that it would actually save us time and money while allowing us to build a more climate-conscious project. We saw savings of about \$75,000 using CLT, even when you deduct the \$40,000 cost of shipping from Montana.

Beyond mass timber, Avesta is innovating within all aspects of affordable housing design. What unique features do your projects offer?

GP: In addition to designs that accommodate walkers and wheelchairs, amenities for Avesta's senior housing typically include a community room with Wi-Fi and a telemedicine room where residents can communicate virtually with providers. There are laundry facilities that text you when your wash is done, and a community garden with raised beds gardens that residents can use. We also are starting to design and wire our buildings for solar panels, to help reduce the long-term operating costs of the building. We would love to start exposing mass timber as an architectural detail. All of a sudden people would be starting to say, 'Wow, what is that? Why did you choose that approach?'

You mentioned the future of solar panels. How does sustainability play into the Avesta's developments?

GP: From Avesta's perspective, we want to make sure that people have quality homes and feel good about where they live. We also want to make sure that while we're doing that, the buildings are energy-efficient and help us better address climate change. In Maine, when we build affordable housing, we have to commit to keeping the affordability provisions in place for at least 45 years—so it is critical that our projects are built in a way that allows us to keep our operating costs in check. We also believe that we could make a huge impact on the environment by completely transitioning to wood.

Tell us more about your work with the Maine Affordable Housing Coalition.

GP: MAHC's purpose is to give Maine's housing practitioners and advocates the opportunity to advocate for policy change with a common and amplified voice. We recognize that each of us can do good work on our own, but the scale of the housing crisis requires us to work together to better address critical, statewide needs. Over the past decade we have had a great deal of success in promoting key policies like bonding for energy-efficient, affordable housing for families and seniors. Maine has also implemented a state affordable housing tax credit and a series of new laws to better protect children. Key to that success has been cross-sector partnerships and bipartisanship, but we know there is so much more that must be done.

“Every single one of us needs and deserves an affordable place to call home. The sooner we can make that a reality—especially while creating new jobs and the kind of buildings that more effectively respond to our changing climate—the better off we will all be.”

From an advocacy perspective, what is wood's role in Maine's affordable housing economy?

GP: Our Governor Janet Mills is highly focused on addressing climate change. She created the Maine Climate Council in 2019, which includes a focus on housing and infrastructure, and we are excited to be part of that important conversation. One of the principal recommendations we are making to the Climate Council is to incentivize the use of building materials like CLT and wood fiber insulation, to help support the renewable resource economy in Maine. We also hope to see a CLT factory get sited in our state soon, as the prospect of using Maine timber and Maine workers to help supply building materials for affordable housing development up and down the East Coast would be a great step forward on so many levels.

ABOUT GREG PAYNE

Greg lives in Portland, Maine with his wife and two high-school age children. He is preparing for the long winter ahead by taking in as much baseball as possible and finding safe places to hide whoopie pies, the official state fruit of Maine.

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