

Report for the Initiative for Public Deliberation's Open Forums on Affordable Housing

Clark College, Vancouver, WA, April 2, 2015

The Affordable Housing Forum held at Clark College in Vancouver was the last of six forums conducted by Washington State University Vancouver and The Thomas S. Foley Institute's *Initiative for Public Deliberation*. The forums were sponsored by The Community Foundation for Southwest Washington and Identity Clark County. One hundred individuals participated, with an average of seven participants at one of fourteen tables led by a facilitator/note taker or facilitator and note taker. Conversations at each table were captured by audio and written notes, and comments were later transcribed without attribution to ensure anonymity. Throughout the discussion the facilitator sought to find areas of commonality and disagreement among the group. Following is a summary of the main themes, some unique findings, and concluding thoughts.

When asked if they would support government-provided incentives for developers to begin new affordable housing projects, participants were divided in their opinion. Roughly equal numbers expressed support or opposition regarding this option. For example, when asked about incentivizing developers through government subsidies for development fees, those that opposed this policy response disliked the fact that such an option would shift the financial burden to local taxpayers. Conversely, those that supported government subsidies for development claimed they took no issue with having to pay an additional sales tax or property tax if doing so would help increase the amount of affordable housing opportunities for others in their community. Moreover, a number of participants supporting government subsidies for new affordable housing stated that if this option were pursued, there must be strict regulation and oversight by the government throughout the process.

For those participants that discussed reducing or waiving the various impact fees associated with the infrastructure costs developers must pay when starting new affordable housing projects, 23 out of 27 participants providing their opinion strongly opposed making any changes to the current impact fee requirements. According to these participants, one of their main concerns was the potential loss of revenue for improving city infrastructure, including roads, parks and water treatment, as well as financial support to law enforcement and fire departments. One option for incentivizing the development of affordable housing that did receive overwhelming support among those groups that discussed it was expediting the permit and paperwork processing to reduce delays for developers to actually begin new projects. Twenty-five out of 28 participants providing their opinion on this issue believed that not only are the current application and permitting fees too expensive, but that the processing of such paperwork takes far too long given the current demand for affordable housing for low-income community members. While these participants did acknowledge that overdevelopment of affordable housing could be a potential negative consequence to expediting permit and paperwork processing, many believed that at this stage in the affordable housing crisis, it would be better to have too many low-income housing and apartment units available than too few. Among all participants, however, there appeared to be a general consensus that regardless of what type of developing incentives are provided, that it is extremely important to know which locations are most and least suitable for future

developments in terms of their proximity to the mass transit system and important services like grocery stores and healthcare facilities.

One policy response to address the affordable housing deficit which received significant support was a local government inclusionary zoning ordinance requiring a percentage of new construction to be affordable to families with low or moderate income. Of the 43 participants providing an opinion, 39 strongly felt that inclusionary zoning was a good idea and the government should either require or persuade developers to voluntarily include this requirement to incentivize development. Some participants felt particularly encouraged because inclusionary zoning would help prevent the gentrification of the community where low-income families are displaced to live in areas removed from moderate to high-income neighborhoods. The chief concern for those opposed to inclusionary zoning was the potential decrease in property values if the affordable housing units developed were of poor quality.

Most participants that addressed the possibility of increasing government assistance income thresholds to expand the eligibility pool for affordable housing expressed reservations about this idea. Indeed, 24 out of 30 participants expressing a view argued that it would be a bad idea to increase the income threshold and expand the eligibility pool when there is inadequate affordable housing for those in the current pool. Instead, these participants proposed that we must first find a solution to increase revenue for a new supply of affordable housing developments before there is any consideration of increasing the pool of demand. Two groups of participants also suggested loosening the current federal restrictions on Section 8 eligibility that provides additional economic assistance to tenants for low income housing. More specifically, these participants argued that the current definition of “adjusted income” under Section 8 of the 1937 Housing Act needs to be re-evaluated and possibly redefined in order to expand that pool for rental or home purchase assistance.

A large number of participants took seriously the option of establishing some type of housing trust fund to help pay for subsidies that go to new affordable housing developments. Of those expressing a perspective, initially 36 out of 43 participants supported establishing a housing trust fund. When these discussions continued however, many expressed several concerns. For example, some participants did not support the idea of having to create a tax levy to finance the trust fund, while others maintained that to fully support such a trust fund, they needed to know specific long-term and short-term details, including how one would benefit from contributing to the trust fund, whether there would be requirements for developers and property owners to contribute to the fund, and how much the state and local governments would have to regulate the distribution of a housing trust fund. While most participants liked the general idea of having an affordable housing trust fund that future developers and owners could use for investment of new projects, it appears they would need to see more specific details on the trust fund before it would be fully endorsed.

The participants as a whole expressed mixed opinions regarding whether existing regulations that effect housing development should be reduced. For those participants that discussed development regulations in general, 23 out of 44 endorsed the reduction of regulations because they believed they tend to be unnecessarily burdensome and expensive for developers, such as zoning regulations that hamper creativity and diversity in development appearances. The strong

minority of participants that opposed reduction of regulations argued that they are necessary to protect community health and safety and that they serve as a deterrent to unethical behavior on the part of affordable housing developers and owners. Rather than support or oppose reducing development regulations in general, many participants wanted to discuss specific regulations one at a time. For example, when asked if there should be changes to current development regulations to allow for smaller units or lot sizes, 35 out of 49 participants claimed they would support the development of smaller units because it could quickly address the affordable housing deficit, it might be more cost-efficient, and would encourage smarter, communal lifestyles for those living in high density areas. The remaining participants that did not approve of the development of smaller units expressed concerns about how it could negatively impact one's overall quality of life, as well as the potential political backlash from establishing high housing density areas in our community that could turn into concentrated, low-income "ghettos."

Participants that discussed the option of limiting or reducing parking space requirements for each new house or apartment complex development appeared hesitant to endorse this change. More specifically, 25 out of 37 participants discussing this regulation argued that for this to be successful, there would need to be a massive culture change where individuals were not dependent on having one or more cars per household. Those that supported the reduction of parking space requirements believed that it would encourage future residents in these housing developments to explore the benefits of carpool networks, which would save them money in the long run and help reduce the high emissions from having so many cars on our roads. Significantly, most participants that opposed reducing parking space requirements for future housing developments expressed a larger concern about how it would impact an already insufficient mass transit system. Indeed, nearly 70% of all participants discussing this issue agreed that the current state of our mass transit system, particular C-Tran bus lines, is severely inadequate and far too expensive for low-income individuals and families. This is why many believed that there could not be any reduction of parking space requirements for new affordable housing developments, because a majority of current affordable housing is not close enough to public transportation options. One group of participants felt very strongly that before any new affordable housing developments begin, the community must first try to improve its inadequate mass transit system. Another group proposed that future affordable housing complexes should offer C-Tran bus pass packages to its low-income residents. Overall, most participants wanted to see an improved mass transit system in their community and have any new affordable housing developments be as close to current C-Tran bus lines as possible.

Many participants were able to think creatively about the affordable housing problems in their community and offer alternative solutions to those proposed by the discussion "placemat." Twenty-five participants among four different groups suggested that something should be done with all the vacant residential and industrial lots, store fronts, and homes throughout the tri-county area. These participants believed that these empty, wasted spaces could easily be rezoned and remodeled for temporary housing for low-income individuals and families. Another alternative suggested was to relax current regulations on multiple families living in a single home to encourage group living situations. Nineteen participants from three different groups all agreed that the community should embrace having multiple roommates and multi-family living under the same roof. And, sixteen participants from three different groups recommended that we consider redirecting certain funds from other government spending to dedicate to new affordable

housing developments. These participants particularly supported the idea of taking some funding from Washington State's prison program to help finance affordable housing and reduce homelessness rates, following the successful model used in Salt Lake City, Utah.

A significant percentage of participants asked that we rethink how we are educating community members about issues like affordable housing and homelessness. Over a third of participants across six different groups clearly expressed their concern that the community is not doing enough to educate its citizens on these issues. In fact, several groups used terms like "an education revolution" or "a grass-roots movement" to express the dire need to start informing the community about why so many of their fellow citizens are either homeless or struggling to find, and keep, affordable housing. This desire to educate the community about these issues may very well help explain why participants in almost all the groups took the time throughout the forum to express their concern that, in focusing on affordable housing only, we may be ignoring the larger issue of homelessness in our community. In fact, when asked what voices were missing from these discussions, almost all participants agreed that in addition to greater input from government officials and nonprofit and for-profit developers, we needed to include the voice of the homeless in our community to hear first-hand what they need in terms of assistance and housing support.

This compassion toward the homeless in the region may also help explain the fact that when participants were asked by the facilitators, "who owns this issue?" almost all claimed that affordable housing is an issue that is undoubtedly owned by the entire community, not just the government elected to represent that community. Indeed, many participants expressed serious distress about the overall lack of attention to community values oriented toward a vision of helping others instead of demonstrating apathy toward the issue. Some even consider affordable housing a moral issue that demands a higher degree of community involvement to dissuade some individuals' tendency to put themselves first and to fear change in their community for the sake of improving the lives of others in desperate need. Throughout the discussions, there appeared to be an underlying theme that no matter which solution is ultimately implemented to address affordable housing needs, there must be a stronger focus on valuing the diverse cultures in the community and bringing together representatives from each to work together.