

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

Camas High School, Camas, WA, March 31, 2015

The Affordable Housing Forum held at Camas High School in Camas, WA was the fourth 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. Thirty individuals participated, with an average of six participants at one of five 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.

In their discussions on whether the government should offer subsidies for developers to incentivize starting new affordable housing projects, almost all participants expressing an opinion on this option opposed the idea if issuing the subsidies meant an increased burden on tax payers. Of the eighteen participants offering their perspective, fifteen agreed that the government would have a difficult time finding the money to offer these subsidies, and they were unwilling to see an increase in taxes to pay for it. They also believed that others in their community would share this belief. Similarly, many participants opposed reducing or waiving impact fees as another option to incentive new affordable housing. Since most impact fees generate revenue for infrastructure such as roads, parks and water treatment, eleven of the eighteen participants suggested they would be unwilling to sacrifice an already under-funded infrastructure system. They argued that removing current sources of revenue generated from impact fees would unacceptably shift the burden onto others, like local taxpayers. For the seven participants that expressed support for waiving impact fees, their support was contingent on local government making sure that it would lead to developers hiring more workers for new projects and ensuring that the savings for developers transferred to the property owners and renters.

For the two groups that discussed incentivizing development by expediting the permit and paperwork process that often causes delays in starting new affordable housing projects, five participants in one group argued strongly that this should be a top priority because it would greatly reduce the time to start building new developments and therefore reduce overall costs. Conversely, the other group of three participants claimed that they could not see how this would be an incentive since local counties are already relatively expedient throughout the permit and paperwork process when housing development projects are pursued.

Participants expressed little support when asked if their county should enact inclusionary zoning regulations requiring a percentage of new construction to be affordable for families with low to moderate incomes in existing neighborhoods. Of the thirteen participants who discussed the idea of mixed housing developments in their community, all argued that while it could work in some areas, it was not something that most Camas citizens would support. According to one group specifically, the potential loss in property value typically associated with inclusionary zoning would be unacceptable for those in the community who have high value, quality housing. Most

of these thirteen participants opposing inclusionary zoning were similarly opposed to the idea of passing a tax levy to create a housing trust fund that would help pay for affordable housing subsidies. The main reason nine out of the thirteen would not support a tax levy is because it would mean an increase in taxes for everyone else in the county. One group suggested that it would be easier to support tax abatements for developers who pursue affordable housing projects than increasing taxes to fund a separate program. The four participants who did express some support for a tax levy believed that if those in the community were properly informed on the merits of a housing fund, a marginal property tax increase that “shares the wealth” is something that could garner support.

Almost all participants appeared extremely hesitant to reduce any housing development regulations currently in place, even if those regulations tend to burden or delay the start of new affordable housing projects. Of the thirteen participants who expressed an opinion on the issue, only four wanted to see some flexibility in current federal, state, and local government regulations that cause unnecessary delays. The other nine participants however, recognized that while regulations may be excessive in some areas, they are nevertheless necessary to protect the health and safety of individuals and families from self-interested developers and landlords. This support for maintaining current housing regulations helps explain why all thirteen of the participants who discussed allowing the development of smaller units or lot sizes strongly opposed the idea. For one group, the main concern in allowing a higher density of smaller units in a given area is the potential safety issue it could create in the very hilly Camas landscape. Another group focused more on how building smaller units has the potential of threatening a certain quality of living all people deserve. These participants had a difficult time supporting a new housing development that would force a large amount of people to live in a very small space. The final group that opposed building smaller units and smaller lots feared it could lead to the development of “slums” and introduce a higher amount of street-side parking near those developments, which presents its own public safety issues.

These same thirteen participants also expressed little support for the idea of reducing parking space and lot size requirements for homes and apartment complexes. According to one group, doing so would similarly increase street-side parking and present the same public safety issues as the development of smaller housing lots. This group emphasized the problems local fire departments could encounter if the streets are flooded with parked cars. Nine participants from the other two groups agreed that the more serious consequence of reducing parking requirements for new developments would be the increased dependence on a severely inadequate public transportation system. Since there are already very few public bus routes going through the rural Camas area, they did not believe it would be a good idea to begin new affordable housing developments that did not provide future tenants with the space to park their cars.

The only other alternative policy issue one group of participants discussed focused on a landlord’s unregulated ability to increase their tenants’ rent on what appeared to be an annual basis. According to the participants in this group, even if certain complexes start out as affordable housing, landlords are allowed to increase the rent for their properties at rather high percentages because they recognize there are limited options available, and assume that tenants would rather pay a higher rent than move further away. This group suggested that local government should do a more effective job regulating the constant raising of rents to keep

housing affordable for low-income individuals and families. Having this opinion also explains why these participants, among the others, believed that there were a variety of voices, like landlords, missing from the discussion on affordable housing. Participants would have liked to hear from members of the Vancouver Housing Authority who are often blamed for having too many obstacles in place that burden new development, the Council for the Homeless, and the different state and local level agencies responsible for granting housing assistance and development permits. For one group of participants, it would be very important to include members of the banking and financial industry in future discussions since they provide the monetary support for low-income buyers and renters when the government does not.

Most groups discussed the difficulty of pursuing new affordable housing development in the Camas area because the core values and beliefs of its citizens are not focused on the issue. Participants believed that most citizens' perspectives on community values were oriented toward improving parks, libraries, and public schools, which explains why it has been comparatively easier to rally support for increasing taxes to fund new projects in those areas. Furthermore, it appeared evident that when discussing important community values, the conversations tended to include a discussion about the role of government in pursuing those values on behalf of the community. While most participants believed the government could easily work with community leaders, several participants however, held strong opinions that the government should not play any role at all. In the end, a prevailing value among most participants was to have the community help those in need pursue a certain degree of stability in their lives. Stability was perceived to be important to everyone in any community, and for these participants, having affordable housing opportunities would certainly help achieve that goal.