

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

Wind River Education Center, Carson-Skamania, WA, April 1, 2015

The Affordable Housing Forum held at the Wind River Education Center in Carson, Skamania County, was the fifth 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. Twelve individuals participated, with six participants at one of two tables led by a 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.

Overall, both groups highlighted the difficulty of incentivizing the development of affordable housing in their county relative to others. They believe that, because of the very low population and limited buildable land available, it would be difficult to arrive at a consensus on how best to incentivize developers and determine where new developments should be built. Furthermore, current affordable housing issues in the area indicate that even if new developments are built, they will more than likely remain too expensive for rural low-income individuals and families. While participants agreed that finding a solution to the affordable housing problem in their community is an important issue, there was nonetheless mixed support toward the idea of placing the burden on local taxpayers. Equal numbers among both groups appeared skeptical of actually being able to incentivize developers to build new affordable housing projects, and were therefore hesitant to support a tax increase to finance any new programs. The remaining participants, however, claimed they would have no problem paying a small tax or seeing an increase in their property tax to help incentivize the development of new affordable housing.

Another option for incentivizing the development of affordable housing that received mixed support between the two groups was reducing or waiving the impact fees imposed on developers for starting new projects that help generate revenue for local infrastructure costs such as roads, parks, and water treatment. One group believed that waiving the impact fees was a great idea if it would be implemented primarily for apartment buildings and low-income housing developments, rather than all new developments. The other group expressed strong opposition toward waiving impact fees in their county, specifically because it would likely result in a loss of much needed revenue for important infrastructure maintenance. If the loss of revenue for infrastructure were to occur, this group argued that county citizens would become less supportive of future attempts to incentivize affordable housing developments. Furthermore, they claimed the county had actually waived impact fees roughly ten years ago, and there has been little new affordable housing development since that time.

The mixed opinions on incentivizing the development of new affordable housing coincide with some participants' anxiety about the possibility of overdevelopment. One group argued they were unconcerned about the overdevelopment of affordable housing units, and that the county

should focus more seriously on building more housing for low-income citizens in the area. The other group appeared more hesitant to support building more affordable housing. They argued that since the population is so much lower in their county, the end result of building a large number of affordable housing units that may not be sold or rented would be perceived as a waste of taxpayer money. To avoid this result, this group strongly advocated more pre-development funding to facilitate collaboration between the various agencies, community members, and developers who make the important decisions on how and where new affordable housing projects begin.

Both groups supported encouraging mixed housing developments through the enactment of inclusionary zoning ordinances where a portion of new construction is affordable to families with low or moderate income. The participants believed this was a good idea and suggested offering tax credits to developers who choose to build low-income housing in the mixed housing developments. When the issue of a potential decrease in existing property values as an unintended consequence of inclusionary zoning was raised, one group of participants dismissed this possibility, arguing that there was no quantifiable evidence to show that existing property values actually decrease with the addition of affordable housing units nearby.

Participants were more divided however, on whether there should be an increase in the income thresholds for the current government housing assistance eligibility pool. One group appeared rather adamant about not increasing the income thresholds, primarily because it is already difficult to find affordable housing for those currently eligible. They believed that expanding the pool to include more in need would only exacerbate the problem. During the other group's discussion, there was a great deal of skepticism in the ability of doing this at a local level since there are several different state-level agencies involved in the process of providing assistance to the low-income and homeless citizens, all with very different standards and requirements. This group believed that such a course of action would therefore cause even more administrative delays in providing government assistance to those eligible. While hesitant to increase the income thresholds for government assistance, this group did, however, express support toward the idea of implementing a new property tax levy to build a local housing trust fund. With proper advocacy and education about a new housing trust fund, they believe it could be successful at a relatively low cost to taxpayers.

The two groups expressed mixed opinions toward reducing the various regulatory protections in place that potentially burden affordable housing development. For example, one group argued that developing smaller units would not work for large families and we should be hesitant to constrict living spaces any further for sake of protecting a certain standard of living. Conversely, the other group supported the development of smaller units or lot sizes because doing so would help reduce the costs for builders and make housing that much more affordable for those in need. This group also discussed the option of reducing the parking space and lot size requirements for the development of new homes and apartment complexes. While recognizing the various cost benefits of having smaller or fewer parking spaces for both builders and future property owners or renters who do not drive a car, these participants argued that any reduction in parking requirements would have to occur in lock-step with improving the insufficient methods of public transportation in the county. The group suggested that poor public transportation in the area was an important issue that must be addressed when discussing the development of affordable

housing. These participants argued that while it may be expensive, it would be necessary to, at minimum, increase the number of C-Tran bus routes in Carson-Skamania.

All participants agreed that there were several voices missing from the discussion on affordable housing that must be included in future forums. They noted that it would be beneficial to hear from actual developers on how best to incentivize them to pursue these projects; low-income and homeless citizens in the area to better gauge their housing needs and what they can actually afford; and landlords who rent their property to low-income individuals and families to determine their concerns about the rental market. The group that expressed serious concern about the potential impact of affordable housing developments on existing property values suggested hearing from local realtors who have the knowledge and experience in estimating property values once affordable housing is introduced into existing neighborhoods.

In the end, participants recognized the difficulty of balancing individual rights with values encouraging a strong community. While it was easy for participants to acknowledge the affordable housing problem in the community and express general support for a variety of solutions for the sake of providing everyone with a high quality and safe place to live, a degree of apprehension was evident once the participants thought more critically about the possibility of having to sacrifice something as an individual for the sake of their community.