

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

**Washington State University Vancouver, Vancouver, WA, March 26, 2015**

The Affordable Housing Forum held at WSUV in Vancouver was the third 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. Sixty-four individuals participated, with an average of seven participants at one of nine 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.

Most participants expressed little support for having local government offer subsidies to developers to help pay for the various fees necessary for new affordable housing developments. In fact, 26 out of 37 participants offering their opinion believed that while this approach to incentivizing development initially appears to be a good idea, they did not approve of having to bear the financial burden of having to pay for it. Many also believed that community members would show similar opposition to an increase in their taxes to help finance any new incentivized development plans. Instead of creating another tax, one group of participants even suggested this is such an important issue the government should not have to offer subsidies at all, but rather force the most wealthy developers to devote a minimum amount of their time and resources to starting new affordable housing projects instead of selecting only those projects that would yield the highest profits. As for the small number of participants who supported paying a tax to finance new affordable housing, including, possibly, a way to offset development costs, they nevertheless wanted to know more specific details on what this would look like, such as the type of tax, how long it would be in place, and how the funds would be spent.

Participants expressed mixed opinions regarding reducing or waiving the impact fees local governments impose on new development projects that generate revenue for infrastructure-associated costs including parks, roads, and water treatment. Of the 40 participants that discussed waiving impact fees, 21 were skeptical of the option and most argued that they were unwilling to sacrifice any decrease in revenue currently being generated for an already insufficient and under-funded infrastructure system. However, the other 19 participants shared their view that impact fees were too expensive and unnecessarily deterred developers from starting new affordable housing projects, and that removing this obligation would more than likely encourage new developments. Others wanted to hear more details about the current impact fee program and to explore which fees could be reduced or waived. One group of participants suggested that the current impact fee system should be more equalized, meaning that the fees imposed on low-income housing developments are too high compared to the fees on other types of housing developments. Additionally, some participants who expressed concern regarding how impact fee waivers might effect the local infrastructure suggested that the fees simply be deferred in order to get people into affordable housing more quickly. Overall, most

participants agreed the local government's role would have to be much more significant in any future incentivized development program because of the need for regulation and oversight of developers, property owners, and landlords to ensure that all subsidies and waived fees were actually going toward building affordable housing developments and filling them with low-income residents.

Participants also expressed varied opinions regarding use of inclusionary zoning ordinances requiring a percentage of new construction to be affordable to families with low or moderate incomes throughout different communities and neighborhoods. Fourteen out of 34 participants who expressed a position on this matter strongly encouraged inclusionary zoning as a means to improve the socio-economic diversity of all neighborhoods and emphasized the benefits of having citizens of all income levels living within the same community. Conversely, seventeen others offered concerns about the potential negative impact of having affordable housing built in existing moderate to high-income neighborhoods, which may contribute to decreased property values for those that had already invested to be a part of a particular type of community. One group of participants also expressed a fear that inclusionary zoning may potentially introduce drugs and higher overall crime rates into neighborhoods and contribute to public safety concerns. This could, they argued, force moderate to high-income families to move out of these neighborhoods, resulting in an increase in vacant homes and lots. The other three participants who expressed no opinion on inclusionary zoning did so because they believed it was an option that could not be applied to all communities, but only within certain communities who adhere to and encourage the values consistent with having a diverse neighborhood.

Many participants also expressed opposition to the idea of increasing the income thresholds currently used to determine who is eligible to receive government assistance to access affordable housing opportunities. Twenty out of 26 participants expressing a view strongly believed that expanding the eligibility pool for affordable housing assistance would only worsen the current housing problem by increasing the demand in an affordable housing market that is currently unable to accommodate those in need. These participants argued that the focus should remain on finding ways to create new, or at least improved existing affordable housing developments before there is any consideration of expanding the pool of low-income individuals and families that could qualify for affordable housing.

When discussing use of a tax levy to create a housing trust fund to pay for new affordable housing subsidies and assistance, the conversation focused on how this option would shift the burden to local taxpayers. But the data on the need for a housing trust fund was mixed; of the 37 participants providing an opinion, 22 supported the creation of a new trust fund devoted to affordable housing developments. Some even suggested that state and local governments should adopt regulations that would consolidate a new affordable housing trust fund with government subsidized projects that included inclusionary zoning. Other participants who supported an affordable housing fund suggested that we look north to Seattle and Bellingham to see if their successful tax levy models would be supported in Southwest Washington. However, a strong minority who discussed this issue, 15 participants, were primarily concerned with taxpayers having to pay for affordable housing developments through creation of a housing trust fund.

In general, participants appeared hesitant to reduce the regulations on developers as a means to encourage new affordable housing projects. For participants who supported limiting or reducing regulations, they still believed it was important to focus only on those excessive, unnecessary “red tape” restrictions that obstruct or drastically slow-down the facilitation of new developments. One specific example discussed was amending regulations to allow for the development of smaller housing units or lots sizes. In fact, 35 out of 45 participants addressing this option supported the development of smaller units to lower the overall costs of purchasing and renting affordable housing, so long as the smaller houses still satisfy a high standard of living and are being built close to public transportation and services such as grocery stores. The ten participants who strongly opposed allowing the development of smaller units or lot sizes focused on housing density problems as something that must be avoided because of health and safety issues that arise with a large number of people living closely to one another in such a small space.

While most participants supported amending regulations to allow the development of smaller housing units, they were opposed to reducing the different parking requirements for lot sizes and number of space per household developers must adhere to when building new homes or apartment complexes. Of the 45 participants who weighed in on this issue, 32 opposed a reduction in parking requirements, arguing that doing so would not only require a massive culture change from a high dependency on cars, perhaps more importantly it would require a significant overhaul of our mass transit system that is perceived as inadequate, especially in rural areas. They noted that a reduction in the number and size of parking spaces and lots would force people to use the C-Tran bus to get to work and access important services, and they believed there was already an insufficient number of bus lines throughout the area. Another problem raised was that a reduction in parking spaces and lots would contribute to a higher density of street parking, which potentially introduces safety issues for bikers and drivers. The few participants who could see themselves supporting a reduction of parking requirements claimed they would do so only if these new developments were close to existing mass transit lines.

When participants were asked to offer their ideas on other potential solutions for the current affordable housing deficit, roughly 29 participants across five groups suggested that the community should start encouraging multi-family, multi-generational, and multi-roommate living situations. For example, one group proposed that a social service roommate match system be established where people living on their own in a home with rooms to spare (i.e., senior citizens or “empty nesters”) and are willing to rent out space to low-income individuals or families could be paired together based on a variety of compatibility variables. They suggested that this type of group-home living situation could at minimum be a temporary solution while new affordable housing is in development. Twenty-one participants from four different groups argued that, at its core, the affordable housing issue is essentially linked to lower wages; more specifically, that there is too large of a discrepancy between the current minimum wage and the actual living wage required to provide food and shelter for an individual or family. And, sixteen participants among three groups suggested that there needs to be a massive restructuring of the federal Section 8 voucher program in southwestern Washington. Even though this program provides assistance to low-income tenants and private landlords to rent their property as affordable housing, these individuals believed the supply and size of current Section 8 vouchers

in the area was severely insufficient, and that most landlords would not accept third-party checks to pay for tenants' rent.

Finally, 32 participants from six different groups all agreed that no matter how we attempt to solve the different affordable housing problems in the area, it is vitally important to encourage a culture of better informing the community to prevent it from getting worse. Some focused specifically on educating the homeless and low-income citizens on how to best use government assistance more efficiently in order to become self-sufficient in the future. Others argued that the younger generations should start learning about the responsibilities of renting and owning property through a public class before they are allowed to sign leases or home loan contracts. One group of participants also encouraged better educating churches and non-profit organizations on how they can help provide temporary housing for the homeless and low-income citizens while new affordable housing developments are in progress. Several groups of participants recommended that local governments could learn best practices from other areas that have successfully addressed this issue, such as Salt Lake City, UT and New York, NY, which have implemented positive solutions to address their affordable housing problems, to determine if these models could work in southwest Washington.

Overall, participants agreed that affordable housing is an extremely important issue that the community must address immediately. There were multiple suggestions that future discussions include additional voices that were not heard among the participants present at this forum, such as state and local government officials, the homeless, and developers and builders who could potentially start new affordable housing projects. Because this is such a community-wide issue, many participants believed that it is necessary to supplant some of our own individual desires and needs to show greater concern for others. While these participants recognized it would be difficult for many to focus more on what one group of participants called a "culture of community," they nevertheless believed that it was necessary to restructure our values system to do more to help fellow citizens in severe need of affordable housing.