



Final Report for the Forum at the Library Deliberation on Affordable Housing

On March 3rd and 10th, Vancouver Community Library's series Forum @ the Library and The Thomas S. Foley Institute's *Initiative for Public Deliberation* held the event "Affordable Housing: Personal Problem, Community Problem, or Not My Problem?". This event was split into two parts. In the first week participants listened to a panel presentation on the issue of affordable housing in the Southwest Washington community. Part two of the event took place one week later when 76 community members took part in a deliberative discussion. During this discussion participants were split into small groups, with the average group size being approximately 7 individuals, in order to explore various viewpoints on the topic of affordable housing. Questions for conversation were designed to raise awareness and broaden the participants understanding of the root causes of the affordable housing problem as well as possible ways to address this complex issue. The following is a summary of the main themes, ideas, and concluding thoughts on what was discussed during this event.

The forum began by seeking to identify the persons responsible for solving the problem of affordable housing; specifically, is affordable housing a personal problem, community problem, or not my problem. Of the 76 overall participants 70 felt that affordable housing is primarily a community problem and should be addressed as such. 6 of the participants felt that affordable housing was a personal problem for those in need and all participants expressed that the issue was not their personal problem to tackle. However, the general consensus among participants was that affordable housing is a need within Southwest Washington, and an issue that needs to be addressed immediately.



Whose problem is affordable housing? This question was presented to participants quite early in the deliberation event. Many participants felt that there is a significant lack of community involvement to help those in need of affordable housing, and several expressed feelings of disappointment towards political leaders and community organizations who are tasked with serving the Southwest Washington community. Participants often suggested that a coalition must be formed between the community political leaders as well as community organizations, in order to properly tackle the affordable housing problem on all levels. The majority of participants agreed that a collective action should be taken to secure housing for those in need.

The deliberation process continued with addressing the issue of housing as a basic human right. Many tables often began by attempting to collectively define human rights. Many participants focused on the distinction between a human right and a basic need. One group discussed this by saying that housing is a need that individuals have but that government should not feel obligated to provide it for them. In the end approximately 80% of participants agreed that under the basic premise of having a roof over one's head, housing should be deemed a human right. For many tables, the conversation progressed to the details of the types of housing that citizens should be able to expect. The question elicited several civil disagreements, prompting all participants to engage. Most participants agreed that the right of housing should extend only to renting and that owning should remain the choice and therefore the responsibility of the individual. A few participants disagreed, saying that there should be no restrictions to the type of housing provided if housing is in fact a human right. These individuals stated that



government is obligated to provide shelter for those in need, period. Overall, the consensus amongst the participants was that housing should be categorized as a human right for everyone.

Participants justified classifying housing as a human right most often because they saw it as necessary for basic survival. Many participants argued that in order for people to pull themselves out of difficult times they must first have all their basic human needs met; shelter being one of those needs. Over the course of the discussion a few disagreements arose with this idea however, as a few participants questioned whether housing is a universal want of those in need. These participants argued that people should have the right to opt out of housing if they so wish, and that the government should not be able to force people into housing. Many participants also expressed concerns regarding government involvement in the issue of affordable housing, saying that it would put a great obligation on them to solve the problem. The majority of participants however concluded that this obligation would cause the government to begin to tackle the issue and result in change if housing is classified as a human right.

Over the course of the conversation, participants discussed what they believed to be the root causes of the housing problem in Southwest Washington, and four common causes began presenting themselves amongst the groups. The first commonly identified root cause was the lack of a living wage. Many participants argued that wages have become stagnant causing many people to be unable to afford their rent. Participants generally felt that wages should allow individuals to be able to afford basic necessities such as housing, regardless of economic conditions. The second root cause that many groups cited was the lack of inventory. Many participants argued that market rents are currently too high and that there should be certain locations or a mandated number of units within a complex marked specifically for affordable



housing, as seen in major cities, like New York. Several participants brought up concerns that builders would not be willing to designate these units as it would result in lower profits, however most participants saw it as a necessary change to be made by builders to accommodate the growing population of individuals that require affordable housing. Several participants suggested offering government incentives for builders who make these adjustments. The third common cause that was discussed revolved around the rising costs for higher education and the levels of debt that result. Participants agreed that this puts the younger generation at a disadvantage and many discussed the high rates of college graduates who move back home due to high costs of housing. This situation then causes a burden for those families who were recently empty nesters. The fourth most commonly identified cause of the housing problem was the population increase that has been taking place in Southwest Washington. Many participants discussed the influx of people from Portland moving to the area and commuting to work every day. There was a general concern that the demand for housing may simply be too large and that it will be difficult to fit everyone in the area without extending boundaries and altering city zoning restrictions.

While all groups spent most of the conversation on root causes of housing around these four issues, several groups also mentioned alternative causes of the problem. A few participants discussed their concern over the poor planning of neighborhoods. They stated that many low income areas are not in a convenient proximity to essential resources and that public transportation to these areas is often inadequate. Several groups also noted that the 2007 financial crisis created a long lasting ripple effect on the county's housing market, leaving landlords to focus primarily on their profits as opposed to providing those in need with affordable housing options.



Participants expressed concerns that affordable housing options have not been properly keeping up with the needs of this diverse community. Many possible solutions and ideas were proposed among the participant groups. Rent control was an idea that approximately 72% of the participants agreed should be explored. Many were uncertain that rent control could be applied in Southwest Washington but thought the idea should be researched nonetheless. Participants agreed that rent control should be enacted for individuals who are on a fixed income, such as the disabled and the elderly, as well as individuals in a temporary state of need, such as in transitional housing. Tax incentives for builders and landlords to supply low income housing for those in need was also discussed as a way to convince those in the private sector to help solve the housing problem. Many participants were hesitant that providing incentives would be enough to convince builders and landlords to do this, however. A few participants also suggested increasing the amount of mixed use communities by having businesses and housing share buildings and supply more multi-generational housing options within the community.

One unique idea that was brought up in 3 participant groups was to build smaller housing options to rent at more affordable rates; these units were commonly referred to as IKEA housing. According to participants, this form of housing might consist of small 400 square foot apartments that would include scaled back kitchens, bathrooms, and living spaces. One group said that in order for this type of housing to catch on, the public would have to change their expectations of what affordable housing looks like, keeping in mind the ultimate goal of providing a safe and clean space for individuals to live, regardless of square footage.

Several groups mentioned the idea of repurposing unused land and empty buildings into affordable housing complexes. This option was brought up as a way to utilize the resources that



are already at hand. There was a group consensus that wherever affordable housing is placed, those locations need to have better access to public transportation options in order to provide the means for individuals to access various resources. One group also discussed that if affordable housing itself does not become more abundant, government should begin offering tax benefits for parents who house their adult children. Participants generally agreed that there was no one perfect solution and that it would most likely take several efforts to fully rectify the issue of affordable housing.

Participants in the deliberative event also discussed ways for the community to come together to address affordable housing as a collective. The discussion centered around how the community should help to provide education and resources to its citizens about home ownership as well as resources that are available to those who need extra assistance. Groups also commonly discussed how the state and local governments need to increase their cooperation and collaboration with housing developers to incentivize the private sector to build more affordable housing options. A few participants thought that the local government should work to lower fees on these builders so their outputs are higher. A few participants voiced their concerns that certain regulations and fees are in place for a reason and to reduce such rules could possibly reduce the quality of housing. Several participants also mentioned that if the process of acquiring the necessary forms and permissions were simpler and better organized, that could also improve relations with city planners and builders.

Several participants also discussed how church organizations and other nonprofit organizations that do not contribute to taxes need to come together to find ways to help house the homeless and those who are struggling to pay rent. The idea of allowing more areas for people to



sleep in their cars overnight was suggested by a participant, stating that this would be a short term solution to shield many individuals from the elements at nighttime. One group also discussed creating more day shelters for temporary housing, though a few participants were concerned that this would not solve the problem, only mask it for a short period of time. Many participants argued that there needs to be a greater civic discourse to encourage individual communities to work to solve the issue of housing amongst themselves, though several participants believed that the problem should be addressed by a larger audience. This led to the issue of how to best engage the public which was discussed by all the small groups, and many concluded that the first step to do this would be to declare housing a human right.

Participants identified that it would be difficult to meet housing needs in Southwest Washington while still balancing the need with economic developmental profits and private investment. The idea of providing tax incentives was introduced back into many of the conversations with the same concerns still presenting themselves. An incentive for cooperation between public and private organizations was also proposed by several participants to help strengthen ties between builders and those who represent individuals in need. Many participants agreed that the responsibility of providing affordable housing should be placed on the local government but put the task of creating affordable housing on private industry so that they receive the economic benefits of providing additional housing options. A few participants suggested promoting fundraising in the public that would go towards housing assistance, as well as encouraging members of the public with empty rooms or homes to rent out to college students or those in need.



Groups in the event also discussed the feasibility of simply building more housing to provide a greater amount of options to members of the community, but location then reentered the discussion. The majority of participants determined that this could be a viable solution if certain factors are met, such as altering zoning laws to allow for higher density housing, as well as encouraging local nonprofits to join in to help with the cause. Many participants disagreed due to the concern over increased taxes. Those who did not find it to be a viable solution also expressed concerns with overcrowding. Participants discussed how the feeling of community would be lost and that Southwest Washington would see an influx of homeless people looking for housing options. A few participants were worried that doing this may create a sense of entitlement among many people that housing will always be provided for them regardless of work status. Concerns also grew surrounding an increase in traffic as well as a decrease in available parking in the city.

As the conversation progressed a few other solutions were proposed among the group for how to tackle the issue of affordable housing. Many participants wanted to see greater political representation for those concerned about this issue as well as more coverage of the issue in the mainstream media. Overall participants agreed that the community needed to get rid of the idea of “not in my backyard” and realize that affordable housing is an issue that impacts the community as a whole.

In conclusion, the issue of affordable housing remains an open and very complex problem for Southwest Washingtonians. While clear options were presented, many were met with an equally valid tradeoff that did not sit comfortably with all participants. While community resources and organizations have helped to spread the message that affordable housing is a



problem in this area, the message is not spreading far enough, nor is it being spread loud enough for those in a position to help- to actually help. There are many areas within Southwest Washington that are in desperate need of housing and several options mentioned would definitely require the government to reallocate funds. These funds would instead be used to encourage cooperation between builders, landlords, communities and families taking in their adult children. None of the groups reached the same conclusions, though many were similar. In the end, participants left the deliberation with more information, feeling heard, and with enthusiasm that if more minds converge on this issue, it can be solved, not only in Southwest Washington but also nationally.