

Sisters citizens explore affordable housing issues

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

The question of housing affordability looms large in Sisters and across the Pacific Northwest. Last week, 28 people explored the topic in Citizens4Community's December Let's Talk session.

City Manager Cory Misley provided an overview for the participants on the affordable housing picture in Sisters, including data on housing in Deschutes County from the Oregon Housing Alliance.

There is a serious shortage of affordable housing in Deschutes County. For every 100 families with extremely low incomes, there are only 13 affordable units available. To meet the need, 3,525 units are needed countywide. One out of four of all renters are paying more than 50 percent of their income in rent. Three out of four renters with extremely low incomes are paying more than 50 percent of their income in rent.

Countywide, a one-bedroom apartment requires a yearly wage of \$29,320. A household must earn at least \$34,289 to afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. The mean renter wage is \$13.06 an hour. In order to rent a two-bedroom apartment they would need to work 64 hours a week.

Home ownership is out of reach for many. The average home sale price in 2017 was \$437,107 up 8.2 percent

from 2016. The average home price an individual can afford includes \$163,526 for a construction laborer and \$298,991 for a teacher. A person earning the area median income for Deschutes County (\$59,152) could afford a \$288,673 home.

Misley explained the impact of Oregon land-use laws that were instituted to avoid urban sprawl into agricultural lands. The tension now exists between the goal of preserving rural land versus the increasing demand for buildable land all over the western U.S.

He described the role of the City Comprehensive Plan, which contains 12 goals for the City which was last updated in 2005. Comp Plans are required by the state. In 2005, Sisters citizens voted to annex lands in the Urban Growth Boundary to be brought into the city, and it is those lands that are currently being developed. The citizens in Sisters are required to vote any time annexing of land into the city for development is proposed.

In 2010, a Housing Plan was created which included how the City could play a part in affordable housing. A Housing Policy Advisory Board was also established to advise the City Council and Planning Commission on housing issues. Planning documents are currently being reviewed for clarity, relevance, and needed changes.

When the Transient Room

Tax (TRT), which is charged on hotel/motel/short-term rental units, was increased by 0.9 percent, a percentage of that 0.9 percent was earmarked for an affordable housing fund. It amounted to about \$40,000 last year. The City is offering an affordable housing grant program in 2021 to assist builders who want to build affordable housing in Sisters. The grant proposals are due next spring and will be awarded in Fiscal Year 2021.

In small-group discussions last week, participants shared their perspectives on affordable housing, followed by a large-group summarizing of perspectives discussed. The object of the exercise was to develop and practice nonjudgmental listening skills and civil conversation, not to find solutions to the problem of affordable housing.


Some of the perspectives reported out included:

- The lack of affordable housing in Sisters is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- The lack of affordable housing impacts all ages and stages.
- The cost of living in Sisters is an issue for many people.
- Everyone deserves shelter/housing.
- There are often a number of underlying issues surrounding the unaffordability of housing, including healthcare issues and expenses, student debt, mental-health issues, transportation expenses, and more.
- Everyone agreed that terms need clear definitions for affordable housing, low-income housing, and workforce housing.
- How do we know when enough affordable housing has

been built?

- Everyone needs a home. Not everyone needs a house.
- People want growth to be a thoughtful process, providing for a mix of housing and not concentrating affordable housing all in one place.
- Increase density within the city, don't expand out.
- City-owned housing.
- The problem is bigger than just shelter.
- Why are third-party investors who aren't part of the community involved in affordable housing? What does that say about our culture?
- What makes a healthy community?

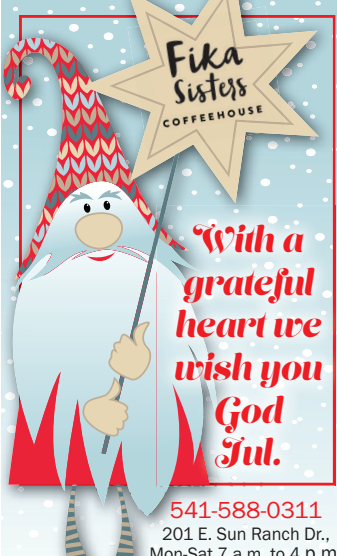
Citizens4Community is looking for more people to serve as group facilitators and skill builders for their activities. If interested, visit citizens4community.com and share your name, email, and message.



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