

HOUSING

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Boquist noted the lack of upper-middle and upper-end housing creates problems in La Grande. The expansion of Grande Ronde Hospital or Eastern Oregon University, for example, can create more jobs and a need for housing in the upper-income category. If these homebuyers or renters end up living in housing they wouldn't otherwise have chosen, the next level down in the middle income range has to do the same. This leads to lower-income housing being less available for those who need it based on their salary.

This is a problem that has little possible solutions other than building more homes.

The April joint work session looked over a memo from Cascadia Partners, a consulting firm based in Portland. The goal of its plan was to present strategies for La Grande's Housing Production Strategy, which Boquist said he hopes will go before the city during the summer.

One of the most prevalent proposals is lowering the minimum lot size for single-family detached homes, townhouses, triplexes/quadplexes and multi-family developments. This would allow the city to reduce the land cost per unit and still be compatible with existing lot sizes and density patterns, according to one strategy at the work session.

The work session also proposed reducing barriers to cottage housing developments and accessory dwelling units to open up more space for housing. ADUs are units that can be located on an owner's property and rented. One action proposed the city should allow ADUs to exist on a site with a duplex as well.

The Housing Production Strategy recommended amending unnecessary codes to limit barriers on construction in existing buildings. This would allow existing buildings in downtown La Grande to be developed into housing units and save money while doing so.

Several other elements of property development were addressed in the work session, including the city basing water and sewer con-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A for-sale sign sits outside a small home on Jefferson Avenue in La Grande on Monday, May 17, 2021. The city has seen the housing market dry up with prospective homeowners competing for a thin market and new renters finding difficulty in establishing housing.

nection fees on the size of lots and not size of homes. The HPS encouraged scale development fees that are proportional to the unit size.

Boquist pointed out a single-family house versus a duplex or triplex on the same plot of land will pay the same fees on the same connection to get water.

"That's something we have to look at to see how easy it would be to change," he said. "How do you then implement that across the board so it's fair?"

The remaining sections of the strategy report focused on implementing new partnerships and supporting local partners in acquiring land to improve the housing setup. The sections point out that organizing public resources can improve the development of housing units and reduce funding through the modification of previously funded infrastructure.

"We could figure out how to do a public-private partnership or if public works can use some of their resources to help with some of the water-sewer-street infrastructure in order to reduce costs for development," Boquist said.

Another major influence in the shortage of housing is Eastern Oregon University students who want to live off campus. In EOU's guide to off-campus housing and information document on its website, the school states that finding off-campus housing is a challenge. The market for affordable housing in La Grande is usually tight and competitive.

With that added presence of prospective renters, the market becomes less flexible in La Grande.

"We house a majority of our freshman students, then after that they tend to want to move off campus," said EOU Director of Residence Life Jeremy David Jones. "We currently have 120 beds that are slated for upperclassmen."

EOU houses approximately 400 students, which means only about 25% of that group is upperclass students. The remaining upper-class students find housing options off campus, which dips into the overall tightness of availability.

Finding a place to live in La Grande also can be difficult for prospective renters who have lower incomes but do not meet the income requirements of subsidized housing. That leaves them with a scramble to find a living situation to accommodate their price range.

Basic apartment search websites typically only have one or two available listings, then a large number listed with no availability. Timing can be an issue in La Grande, depending on the urgency of the move-in date with new renters or buyers.

"For homes for sale, there is a shortage of properties because there are more buyers than sellers," said Valley Realty principal broker Anita Fager. "Prices are rising because of that supply shortage."

Many times, listings for rent may be three-bedroom units or larger, making it difficult for solo renters. In

those bigger units, either families or groups of students will usually look to rent.

"Students are known for partnering up, and they'll put three or four students in an apartment to share that rent, while the average person in town isn't going to do that," Boquist said.

Even though demand and availability for units is an issue, La Grande's cost of living is well below the national average and the average in the state of Oregon. With the national average being 100, BestPlaces rates La Grande's cost of housing at 76.9 compared to 148.9 for the state of Oregon.

The correlation between low housing costs and lack of availability seems to point to the opportunity for many new residents if more units were available.

Construction on La Grande's newest apartment complex, Timber Ridge Apartments, is set to begin in July. The \$23.7 million project will open up 104 units for low-income renters on East Q Avenue between 26th and 27th streets.

"I suspect that's going to have a pretty significant impact on our housing experience," Jones said.

Phase 2 of the 2019 Housing Needs Analysis entails a fully prepared housing production strategy, which Boquist anticipates the La Grande City Council will see by July. This will consist of a detailed list of strategies and approaches to improve La Grande's housing shortage moving forward.

MERA

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Stanhope cut and provided, also have live-edge siding.

Elijah Romer, a member of the Blue Mountain Singletrack Trails Club, said the shelter's siding helps it blend in perfectly.

"Instead of looking like an eyesore, it looks like it is meant to be there," Romer said. "I told Forrest it is a work of art."

JOSEPH

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the city's parks director, Dennis Welch, that led to him taking eight weeks off for health reasons related to the alleged harassment. Welch returned to work Sunday, May 16, after discussing the matter with Eckstein.

Braden speaks

The interim administrator spoke to the Chieftain the same day he talked to Braden to hear his side of the story. However, Eckstein said, Braden didn't get specific about the type of harassment or who he considered guilty.

"He loves the community; he loves everyone here; he wants his family to be able to walk down the street without any kind of harassment," Eckstein said. "He just wants to walk away from it."

Since Braden's resignation letter only mentioned harassment, it was not known if he considered it a legal issue. But Eckstein got a sense of what Braden meant.

"It was borderline more toward the legal level," Eckstein said Thursday. "Taking in his initial complaints today, he didn't really give a lot of clarification to the council or anyone, for that matter, on how he was harassed. All he gave was what was in his letter. To be honest, he didn't go much farther than that letter of resignation with me."

He said Braden doesn't appear to want the issue to devolve into mudslinging.

Romer said the shelter will serve many functions. He said he plans to take his family there for picnics and may teach outdoor classes there. He also said it will be a great place for people to stay while they wait for help to arrive if they have a bicycle breakdown or such, or get caught in a storm.

Bill Gerst, a member of the trails club network, said the shelter has a reassuring presence.

"It is comforting to know it is there," he said.

Investigation outcome

But Eckstein's investigation has uncovered sufficient allegations to prompt the May 27 session with Baum.

"I do have enough situational evidence to proceed with an executive and open session with the city attorney," he said. During this week's executive session, Eckstein said he anticipates discussion of particular council members — or the mayor — and their actions in relation to the alleged harassment. He and Baum expect to make recommendations as to punishment that the council must take action on in open session.

Possible repercussions

"Obviously, we can't force anyone to resign, but we can make a strong recommendation," Eckstein said. "There can be things like censuring, restrict their right to vote, pull them off committees, you could lock them out of city hall — there's a couple different options, and I've seen about every one under the sun get exercised. ... (The council is) going to have to decide on those recommendations."

Eckstein said he hopes the May 27 actions begin to resolve some of the issues that have plagued Joseph city government.

FOSTER

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education and insight on foster care.

"The idea is that everyone can do something. And with every engagement we hope they learn more about fostering," she said.

Every Child also provides a portal for those who are interested in learning more about becoming a foster parent.

To learn more about Every Child, go to every-childneoregon.org. There is also a Facebook page.

CASAs

CASA of Eastern Oregon covers Baker and Union counties. It is led by Mary Collard.

Taggart is program director of Wallowa County's court-appointed special advocate program. It is a nonprofit program mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Collard explains CASA like this: "to recruit, train and support citizens to advocate for the best interests of children who have been abused and neglected who are in the dependency court system and experiencing foster care."



Erin Taggart/Contributed Photo

Erin Taggart said court-appointed special advocate Liz Tarrant, here with Taggart's son Marshall in 2013, "helped bring Marshall forever home."

When a judge appoints the CASA program to a child's case, a CASA volunteer is matched to that child (or children, in the case of siblings).

The advocate then researches the case information, gets to know the child, and makes connections with the people in the child's life, including teachers and doctors.

"Helping the judge having eyes and ears on the child," Collard explained.

The monthly time com-

mitment averages between two and 15 hours.

The CASA then "makes a recommendation to the judge regarding the best interests of the child," Collard said.

In simple terms, the court-appointed special advocate represents what the child needs. By contrast, Collard said, an attorney represents what the child wants.

CASA volunteers complete a 30-hour national curriculum. The next

training, offered through Zoom, begins June 1 and is held Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:30-8 p.m. for four weeks.

For more information, send an email to info@casaeo.org or apply for the training at casaeo.org.

District 13 — which includes Baker, Union and Wallowa counties — has a total of 42 court-appointed special advocates.

Collard said more trained advocates are needed because there always is a list of children waiting for a CASA in Baker and Union counties.

"Our goal is to always have trained advocates ready and waiting," she said.

This can be challenging in smaller towns.

"We want to match an advocate and child and make sure there is no conflict of interest," Taggart said. "We need a diverse pool of individuals."

"Just because a volunteer is available, they may not be a good fit," Collard said.

The goal, she said, is for a CASA to stay with that child's case for the duration — until the child returns home or is placed in a safe, permanent home.

Health guidelines due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges over the past year. To stay connected, advocates have visited children in an outside location, or connected through an online video platform to do activities or work on puzzles.

"It's not ideal, but it's still some connection," Collard said.

CASAs are required to see the child at least every 30 days.

"Everyone has had to be really flexible," Collard said.

Overall, she said, everyone involved in a child's case has a common goal: "We're partners. Everyone wants the same thing for this child — a safe, permanent home."

Grants

Grant funds assist nonprofit organizations in supporting foster children and foster families.

A grant from the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization is earmarked to support, recruit and educate foster parents, especially with specialized training. It has also funded a part-time foster parent liaison who makes contact immediately when a foster

child is placed in a home and can help arrange meals or gather needed supplies.

Grant funds also help with appreciation events to recognize foster families and advocates.

How to help

Monetary donations are always welcome to support the mission of Every Child and CASA of Eastern Oregon.

For information on how to donate to CASA, visit casaeo.org or send a donation to CASA of Eastern Oregon, 2024 Main St., Baker City 97814.

To support Every Child NE Oregon, go to every-childneoregon.org or send a donation to Building Healthy Families, Attn: Every Child NE Oregon, 207 N.E. Park St., Enterprise 97828.

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