

Speaking out: Seattle Housing Authority residents protests rent increases

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More than 300 people packed into a conference room at the Yesler Community Center to hear Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) Director Andrew Lofton explain Stepping Forward, a proposed program that would gradually raise the rent on low-income tenants while providing workforce training to help them find better jobs.

The September 17 meeting was the second of five that SHA officials are holding around the city to present the program to residents and ask their input. In particular, officials said they want to know how to draft a hardship policy, a process for residents to appeal a rent hike because of difficult circumstances.

Most of the crowd was not interested in discussing the plan's details, but in questioning its foundations: that the future Seattle employment market would provide enough jobs for SHA tenants; that higher rents would motivate residents to look for work; and that residents who speak English as a second language can compete for higher paying jobs.

"We don't agree with you," said Fadumo Isaq, a Yesler Terrace resident.

Stepping Forward would apply to 4,600 of SHA's residents who are considered "work able," meaning they are younger than 61 and do not have a disability that prevents them from working.

SHA's seven-member Board of Commissioners will vote on the plan after Jan. 1. If passed, the policy would not go into effect for another year and will be phased in over three years.

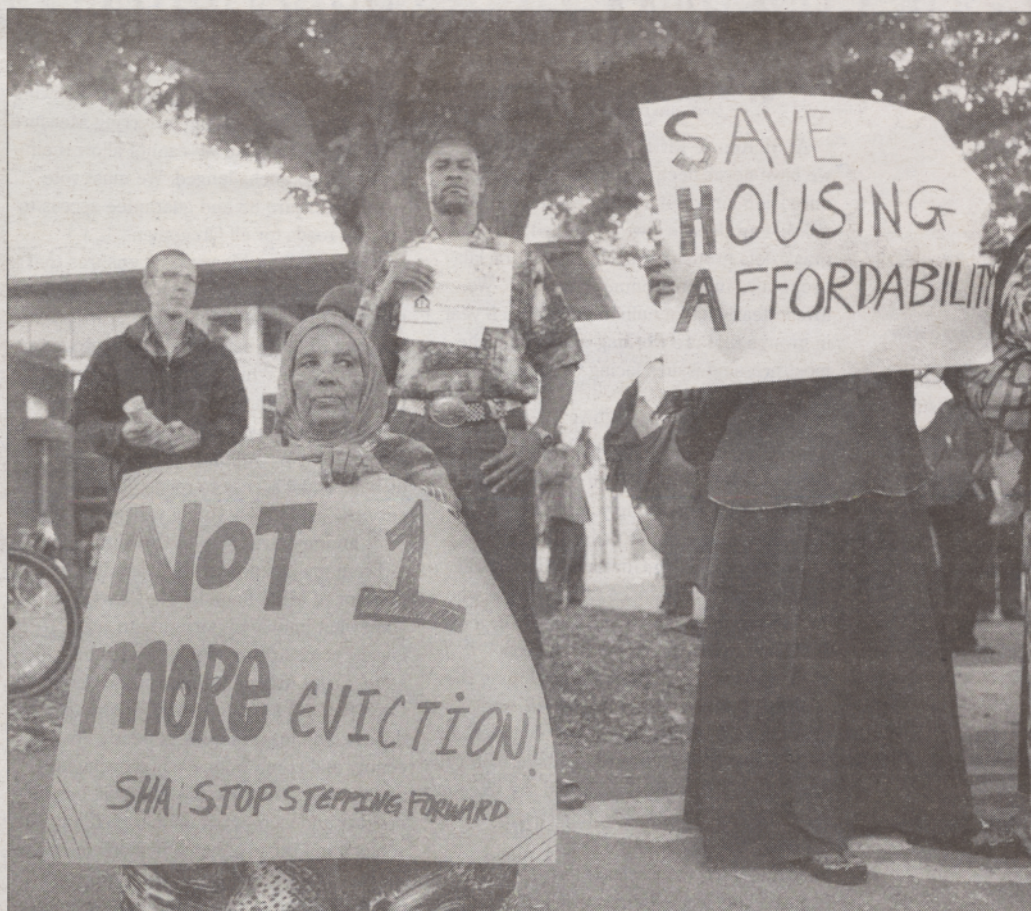
At the meeting, people vocalized strong opposition, shouting at Lofton and booing as he explained proposed policy changes. The energy of the group seemed to carry over from an earlier protest held on Yesler Way and organized by the Tenants Union of Washington.

The protest drew residents from all over Seattle as well as elected officials, including Seattle City Councilmembers Kshama Sawant and Nick Licata. Jess Spear, a \$15 Now organizer running against Rep. Frank Chopp for a seat in the Washington State Legislature this fall, also attended.

High demand, higher rents

SHA officials proposed the Stepping Forward program earlier this summer as a way to address the high demand for housing and diminishing federal funding. SHA serves more than 13,000 households. Another 9,000 are on a waiting list to get into housing. To get a Section 8 voucher, which provides a subsidy to rent market-rate housing, people have to enter a lottery to get onto a waiting list. The last time SHA opened the waiting list, 24,000 people applied for 2,000 spots.

Under the Stepping Forward proposal, a



studio apartment would cost \$130 a month in the first year and increase to \$680 in the sixth year. A four-bedroom apartment would start at \$180 and increase to \$1,060 in the sixth year.

Per current federal policy, SHA tenants pay 30 percent of their income. But the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has included SHA in Moving to Work, a program that grants a small slice of the nation's housing authorities the ability to set different rent structures and housing policies in the name of efficiency. HUD created the program in 1996 for housing authorities to try new policies that could serve people better and help them move out of public housing.

Some housing authorities under Moving to Work have set residency term limits, capping a tenant's stay in public housing at five years. Seattle's proposal would let people stay indefinitely, but incremental rent increases would prod residents to pursue education and find higher paying jobs.

The jobs are a key component to the program. A resident who has been in public housing for six years will need to earn \$16 to \$19 an hour to afford the rent, according to SHA.

SHA expects the increased rents to bring in \$13 million annually, which it will spend on the workforce development program, addressing a backlog of building repairs and housing 600 additional families, said Deputy Executive Director Anne Fiske-Zuniga.

The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County will provide employment training and education to SHA tenants if Stepping Forward is adopted in January. Marléna Sessions, CEO of the council, explained to the crowd that the region is projected to see 60,000 job openings annually over the next five years through new job creation and retirement. She said the region can expect 54,000 openings annually for the five years after that.

"We're starting into a different cycle for sure," Sessions told Real Change after the meeting. "That's hard for some people to believe and realize."

The jobs would pay between \$11 and \$50

an hour.

Community says 'No'

Tenants Union Director Jonathan Grant disputed the council's figures. He said low-wage workers who have gone through Work Source's workforce development programs get jobs paying about \$12 an hour, well below the \$16 an hour people will need to afford SHA's top rents.

Ellesia Wood, 45, an SHA resident at Harvard Court on Capitol Hill, said she has gone through workforce development training with no success. She said there aren't enough jobs in Seattle and King County for SHA residents.

"I have two degrees, I have four certificates, I have 12 years in medical records experience," Wood said to SHA's Lofton during the meeting. "If I can't get a job, how are these people going to get a job?"

Several attendees said Stepping Forward would lead to gentrification, pushing more immigrants, low-income residents and people of color out of Seattle.

"This is not a proposal that is founded in gentrification," Lofton said. "It's a proposal that's founded on individual success. What we're doing is creating an opportunity for people to achieve their individual goals. It is not about throwing people out of housing."

Few were convinced. Jean Harris, 71, a former Yesler Terrace resident, said SHA is going about this the wrong way. Instead of asking how to improve the program, Lofton and others should ask whether people want the program at all.

"I think that's a dangerous place to begin, because that assumes that we have bought into this proposal," Harris said during the meeting. "I grew up in Yesler Terrace; my mother died in Yesler Terrace. If we had been forced to function under this, I don't know where we would be today."

Sawant of the city council asked the crowd if they wanted the proposal. They shouted, "No."

"Mr. Lofton, what else do you need to know?" Sawant said. "You have the community's input."