

City's rapid changes demand we act fast on housing

BY JOHN MULVEY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Urban renewal is the most powerful tool Portland has to direct development in the ways that we as a community want. Without it, we are at the mercy of private forces that we can't control. But when we harness the resources of urban renewal, we Portlanders are able to put development to use to address the community's needs.

Since the adoption of Oregon's urban renewal law in 1957, the program has done some amazing things and some horrible things. In the 1960s, clearing the "slums" that were the vibrant centers of Portland's African-American and immigrant communities was a tragedy for the cultural life of our city. But urban renewal dollars were also a vital part of creating the modern transit system that today makes Portland a world leader in the movement away from carbon fuels.

These examples show that urban renewal, and its revenue-generating mechanism of tax-increment financing (TIF), can do good or it can do bad, depending on how we and our elected leaders direct it.

We believe that current conditions dictate that our city again reprioritize TIF funding and direct it to where it's most desperately needed: affordable rental housing.

Portland today is in the midst of a crisis in housing affordability. Last week, the Community Alliance of Tenants declared a

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Renters' State of Emergency in the city. Escalating rents have displaced long-term renters from their homes and made large areas of the city unaffordable to all but the highest-income Portlanders.

Even people making middle-class incomes have been feeling these impacts. According to the City's 2015 State of Housing report, single mothers earning the median income have almost no chance of renting a home with more than one bedroom in Portland today.

For people of color, the situation becomes much worse. The same report shows that in almost every neighborhood in the city, a median-income black household can't afford to rent anything bigger than a studio apartment. There are only two of Portland's 95 neighborhoods where median-income Native American households can afford a studio apartment.

And very low-income people have no affordable, private housing options left anywhere in the city.

The crisis is tearing apart the character of our community, while inflicting pain, humiliation and stress on our neighbors and

friends. The effects reach into every area of our city's life, from the educational impacts of uprooting our kids from one school to another, to the diminishing air quality that comes from the extended commutes of the working poor.

Recognizing the unprecedented scale of Portland's housing problem, the city's Housing Advisory Commission recently recommended that the city and the Portland Development Commission direct 50 percent of all urban renewal spending to support affordable housing. We support that proposal and call on the mayor and City Council to enact it.

By any metric, the current commitment of 30 percent has been inadequate to address the problem. Taking just one example, in the Lents Town Center Urban Renewal Area, PDC claims to have funded 135 affordable rental units – a meager total of only eight units per year over the 17 years since the urban renewal area was created.

And even those numbers are inflated and misleading. The PDC's figure includes 31 affordable units at the Greenview Apartments at Southeast 148th Avenue and Stark Street – a project that is two miles away from the Lents Town Center and which received no TIF funding.

Town centers like Lents are where we as a community are hoping to see residential growth, and we've made significant public investments there to accommodate that growth. As a result, the Foster/Lents area

has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the city. We all have the right to ask why the development of affordable housing hasn't kept pace.

A Housing Bureau analysis shows Lents and the surrounding neighborhoods as particularly vulnerable to gentrification and displacement in the next few years. As a community, will we learn from our mistakes and act now before it is too late, or will we replay what happened on the Williams/Vancouver corridor along Foster?

To be sure, increasing the TIF set-aside won't, by itself, fix the housing emergency in Portland. The crisis demands a concerted effort along multiple fronts, including reasonable regulations on private rentals, commitment of new resources, and stepped-up efforts to remove misguided state preemption laws such as the one prohibiting inclusionary zoning.

And without a doubt our mayor and council must demand more public accountability and transparency in how affordable housing funds from urban renewal are allocated and accounted for.

But right now we as a city have only one significant source of public dollars dedicated to affordable housing: urban renewal. When we as a city commit to creating and funding urban renewal areas, we have every right to insist that those public resources benefit the broader community and serve our whole community's goals. In our fast-changing city, there is no more critical public goal than ensuring affordable rental housing.

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Find us at these locations:

City Team, 526 SE Grand Ave.
Oct 7.....8-10 a.m.
Oct 21.....8-10 a.m.

Clackamas County Transition Center
1024 Main Street, Oregon City
Oct 14.....1-3 p.m.
Oct 28.....1-3 p.m.

Lloyd Center, 2nd Floor by Cinnabon
Oct 7.....11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
Oct 21.....11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

P:EAR 338 NW 6th Avenue
Oct 9.....11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Portland Rescue Mission,
111 W Burnside
Oct 1.....8-10 a.m.
Oct 8.....8-10 a.m.
Oct 15.....8-10 a.m.
Oct 22.....8-10 a.m.
Oct 29.....8-10 a.m.

Virginia Garcia Newberg
2251 E. Hancock St. Newberg
Oct 10.....11 a.m.-2 p.m.

Union Gospel Mission, 3 NW Third Ave.
Oct 20.....2-4 p.m.
Oct 27.....2-4 p.m.

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