

'SOMETHING BOLD'

Housing advocate Janet Byrd says the Legislature's response to Oregon's crisis must be powerful. And she's optimistic.

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

More than 300 people packed a conference room Saturday afternoon at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization in outer northeast Portland.

They were there to talk about affordable housing. And evictions. And drastic rent increases that have displaced hundreds of Portlanders from the neighborhoods they want to live in.

Among the attendees were 17 state lawmakers who represent the Portland metro region, including House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-North Portland); Senate President Pro Tempore Diane Rosenbaum (D-Southeast Portland); and Sen. Richard Devlin (D-Tualatin), co-chair of the Legislature's Joint Ways and Means Committee.

For two hours, seven panels of speakers testified about how the housing crisis is affecting Portlanders.

One person spoke of a friend who deeply valued the solitude, stability and peace his home gave him. The stress of a no-cause eviction notice and attempts to find a new home he could afford led him to commit suicide.

Another person talked, through tears, of the rent on her home – close to where she works and where her son goes to school – taking up more than 50 percent of her income.

Two hours of stories that conveyed profound stress, trauma and despair. Legislators got the message.

"I'm just mad," Kotek said at the end of the forum. "I am mad because this is not what we want our state to be. I don't want to hear these stories. I don't want people not to have affordable, stable housing. We have a problem, and we need to solve it."

Legislation to stem the housing crisis is expected to be a top priority of the month-long legislative session that begins Feb. 1. Bills will be introduced to prohibit no-cause evictions, provide tenants with longer notice of future rent increases, and allow inclusionary zoning, which would require any new development to include affordable units.

The Oregon Housing Alliance, a statewide nonprofit collective of local governments, housing authorities, developers and housing



PHOTO BY SASH PHOTOGRAPHY

Janet Byrd is the executive director of Neighborhood Partnerships and chair of the Oregon Housing Alliance. The Housing Alliance's 2016 legislative agenda includes bills to prohibit no-cause evictions and require new developments to include affordable units.

advocates, is calling for those measures in its legislative agenda. Its agenda also calls for more funding, including \$60 million for a general obligation bond program to build more affordable housing and \$10 million for the state's Emergency Housing Assistance program and State Homeless Assistance Program, which provide short-term rent assistance to prevent or end homelessness.

Janet Byrd, the executive director of Neighborhood Partnerships and chair of the Housing Alliance, spoke to Street Roots about the housing crisis and the upcoming legislative session.

Amanda Waldroupe: *One thing that was emphasized repeatedly during the housing forum is the emotional stress and trauma caused by being evicted, facing a rent increase, being displaced, or having to move. It hurts to have to worry about this stuff.*

Janet Byrd: Even for the legislators, who

are very much our allies, it increased the urgency. It's awful for people now. We've got to stop the craziness in this market.

Fundamentally at the root of no-cause evictions is the fact that I could enter into a business relationship with you and rent a home from you, and you could terminate that business relationship without giving me a reason. It's a business relationship. People are allowed to come in and go out of that relationship without any concern for the tenant and impacts the eviction causes.

What's the reality if you get a 30-day eviction notice? Think of all the things that you have to rearrange in your life. You have to think about where your kids are going to be enrolled in school. What about your babysitter or your after-school care? You have to figure out new bus routes, transportation to and from work, to and from wherever the kids go. It's a huge impact.

A.W.: *Do you think people realize the*

impacts of living in stable housing, or not? Is the importance of having a home something that is in our collective unconscious, so to speak?

J.B.: When you say it to people, I think they say, "Yeah, of course that's true." But it's a leap we haven't yet taken to say that housing is primary. We talk a lot about investments in health, investments in education, but all of that is going to be of limited impact if we don't pay attention to where people live and whether they have some assurance that they're going to stay stable. Legislators are starting to get that. There's growing awareness. The devastation on employment, education and health are important things to keep hammering home. Housing is too important to take it lightly and treat like an insignificant business transaction.

A.W.: *What do you think can be accomplished within a month?*

J.B.: You know, I am optimistic that we can make progress on all parts on the Housing Alliance's agenda. It's going to be hard, but I'm optimistic. There is energy behind all of the concepts. There's growing awareness of the issue. I think legislators are seeing that we need to do something bold.

A.W.: *What makes you so optimistic?*

J.B.: I am confident that there will be boldness. Legislators need to keep hearing these stories. I think the question for me is that even if people are really bold in February, this problem isn't going to be solved in a single legislative session. I think the devastating impacts on individuals are going to keep getting worse. We already see so many people sleeping outside, so many people camping. We've got to turn this around. But it's going to take a while.

A.W.: *What do you think are the most important actions to take that would immediately help tenants?*

J.B.: Tenant protections are at the top of the Housing Alliance's agenda. Tenants need

See BYRD, page 11