

Lawmakers poised to make real progress in housing

Talk of addressing the region's housing crisis has taken the form of several bills heading through the Oregon State Legislature this short session. Among them are several that raise the issue of inclusionary zoning, each promising various intentions and outcomes.

Other efforts center on giving renters more time when hit by no-cause evictions or rent increases.

All are facing an uphill battle – against well-entrenched and well-healed forces in Salem.

Inclusionary zoning is that tool local governments across the

country use to ensure residents have a spectrum of affordable housing in their communities. In Oregon, in 1999, the state legislature banned it, joining Texas as the only other state in the nation to do so.

Senate Bill 1533 – developed after lawmakers' sessions with housing and development advocates throughout Oregon – repeals that ban, and would let local governments require new developments to include up to 30 percent affordable housing. It lines up with HB 4001, which mirrors the 30 percent maximum, along with renters rights against short-term, no-cause evictions. The House Bill also includes incentives to developers, such as density adjustments, fee waivers or reductions, and property tax abatements or exemptions.

In the other corner, is Senate Bill 1575, which drops to 10 percent the maximum amount a city could require a developer allocate to affordable housing. It would also permit Metro to designate up to five subregions for consideration for urban growth boundary expansion.

A third bill also categorized among housing relief options simply opens up the urban growth boundary – not necessarily for anything affordable, just development at will. That's not the problem. We need smart development, not reckless sprawl.

Given the grave need for apartments and homes for low- to middle-income families, the elderly, the disabled and the working class, SB 1575 – with an anemic 10 percent requirement – can only be considered a collection of bargaining chips from the Oregon Home Builders Association, which has been staunchly against lifting the inclusionary zoning ban. (This is the same group that has opposed raising the minimum wage, and employer provided retirement plans. Who exactly are they building for?)

Sure – bargaining chips are part of the game in Salem, but if lawmakers want to claim they understand the housing crisis, they won't water down one of the few tools that can actually help correct it.

In a region where we're already short an estimated 40,000 affordable units, a 30 percent requirement would only just begin to move toward a balance. Bring on the incentives for developers, bring on the variances to promote density and in-fill. If lawmakers drop back to 10 percent it will be inclusionary zoning in name only, and a land grab to boot.

And remember, this isn't just a Portland problem. Smaller communities, with fewer resources and incentives to offer, are feeling the housing crunch as well.

In hearings last week, lawmakers heard from city representatives of Corvallis, Hood River, Bend, Eugene and the League of Oregon Cities – all in support of inclusionary zoning.

For that reason, we don't need a list of specifics. We need a tool that provides flexibility for local governments to craft their own form of affordable housing to suit their markets.

Intentional zoning for essential, affordable housing has widespread support from housing organizations, residents and developers. This is what we should be building upon.

At the same time, we need to hit this housing crisis at both ends. While inclusionary zoning will be a long-term, structural correction to the housing imbalance, a proposal around renters rights will provide more immediate relief.

We've always supported modifications to the no-cause eviction process to give renters more than a 30-day notice to vacate units. The argument for it is simple: This market is at near zero vacancy rates, rental rates are rising through the roof – far beyond wage increases – and 30 days isn't enough time to find an affordable, comparable apartment.

No-cause evictions, as the name suggests, are simply a way of landlords to clear an apartment regardless of any violation of terms.

Lawmakers are considering a bill to raise the 30-day notice period to 90 days – only for no-cause evictions and only for month-to-month renters.

"Seniors and other low-income tenants all over our city are receiving no-cause evictions even after 20-plus years of stable tenancy for reasons of: sale of property, requesting mold clean-up and repairs be made, etc.," said Marih Alyn-Claire with the grassroots Tenants Priced Out From Portland. "Landlords are evicting good tenants just to replace them with higher paying tenants (many from out of town). Local rents have been raised hundreds of dollars beyond the subsidy amounts for Section 8 vouchers and once stable residents are being priced out of their apartments."

It's important to note what this bill does not do. Contrary to the claims of some apartment management companies, this rightfully leaves evictions for problem renters intact. That's what for-cause evictions are for, and they can be applied to remove a tenant on even shorter notice, in some cases, than no-cause measures. Landlords need that recourse.

Pamela Martin is a resident of Eugene who testified to her own financial limits as a Social Security recipient, trying to stay in her apartment. Her rent has gone up three times in the past two and a half years, she said. She fears she will become homeless if the pattern continues.

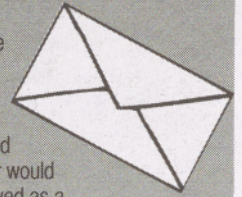
"Good tenants should not fear suddenly losing their homes or facing large rent increases, both of which can have devastating consequences, including homelessness," Martin said in her written testimony to lawmakers.

"Tenants should have at least 90 days' notice for no-cause evictions and rent increases, and be protected from retaliation," Martin said. "We also need to allow cities to choose inclusionary zoning as a local solution to create more affordable units and diverse communities."

Indeed, Ms. Martin. We couldn't agree more.

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