

The chorus rises: Act on housing now!

Housing and homelessness have become staples in Portland's recent election cycles. But this year it has reached a fever pitch.

Renters rights, affordable housing and ending homelessness are rightfully the center planks to nearly all the candidates seeking election to local office. But the discourse is nearing a boiling point among the voters and the residents feeling the

pain. People are losing their homes to exorbitant rent gouging. People are losing their neighborhoods, their schools and their city. They're mad as hell and taking their message to the halls of government, saying that this is an emergency in more than name only. Let's treat it like one.

Demonstrations and public actions have made headlines and started tongues wagging – unfortunately it's often more for the spectacle than the solutions that are called for. But regardless of what you think of the protestors' tactics of disruption, the anger is real and their message sincere. And they represent many, many more than those able to carry a sign on a sunny afternoon.

The fact is, what is needed isn't sensational at all. We need more protections for renters, and there's a slew of options that can do that. We should be adopting policies used in other cities to cap or at least stabilize rents, and replace no-cause evictions with just-cause evictions. Enact a rent freeze to halt the runaway pricing that is pushing families, small businesses and nonprofits out of this city. This isn't the time to contemplate 20-year plans or grand visions about our region's livability. This is the time to take drastic action to save people's housing – right now. The best way to end homelessness is to prevent it from happening to another man, woman or child.

This week, the City Club of Portland's Committee on Housing released its report, *Housing Affordability in Portland – its 2016 version*. It's not the first housing report produced by the City Club – the organization has been monitoring the city's housing needs since before World War II. In each incarnation of the study, the lack of affordable housing is a major problem up against the influx of new arrivals to the city. In 1942, the report touts avoiding the "shanty towns" that were appearing in other cities. Many years later, in 2002, the committee called for new policies focusing on low-income renters and the poorest

among us.

Today, in 2016, we have those shanty towns. And the friction in our neighborhoods surrounding homelessness is also reaching a fever pitch.

Today we have middle-income, working-class families being priced out of the city. Today we have entire buildings being cleared out of long-time residents to replace them with renters with deeper pockets.

And while the market frenzy drives costs skyward, wages among middle-income workers remain stagnant. Rents are not just high, they are at unhealthy economic levels for many people, with rent too often consuming 50 percent or more of a person's income.

This is no longer a fringe issue. It's a widening fracture undermining our socioeconomic stability. Sure there is construction – but it's not for the people who live here now. It's for those who will move here in the coming decade. Last year, Portland had a 2 percent vacancy rate in our rental market – well below the national average of 7 percent.

But we're not going to be able to build ourselves out of this problem on the open market. Street Roots is hoping that a possible November ballot measure can help create several thousand new affordable housing units in Portland. Still, the solution has to be more comprehensive, spanning local and state government and private entities.

The City Club committee recommends multiple solutions to change course. They include securing dedicated federal funding to create more affordable housing. The recommendations also call on the city to set aside funds to purchase foreclosed and discounted properties during economic downturns, and updating the city's zoning code to foster more infill development.

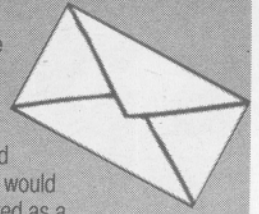
But among the most immediately impactful is the committee's call for lifting the state preemption of rent control. Rent control and similar stabilization measures are banned in Oregon, while no cause evictions that clear buildings are allowed. But there is room to make changes, even at the local level, and this emergency demands real changes be made.

At the end of the day we are talking about people's lives. Creating smart and fair housing policies will help support residents throughout our county and state. We're looking of our leaders to lead and find any possible means necessary to make sure poor and hard working Oregonians are not left behind. The moment is now. Let's seize it.

EDITORIAL

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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