



State of crisis

It's not just a Portland problem. Cities throughout Oregon and the West Coast are taking measures into their own hands to make a real impact on the affordable housing and homeless emergency.

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Portland is experiencing a dire shortage of affordable housing, but not one that is unique to the city. The “housing crisis,” as it has become known, is a regional issue of historic magnitude that is felt throughout the Pacific Northwest. “The lack of housing opportunity is impacting communities throughout Oregon,” Jenny Lee, housing policy director at Neighborhood Partnerships, told Street Roots in an email.

“The number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness is rising steeply, not only in cities like Eugene, but along the coast and in rural areas. A growing number of people have no option but to live outside in tents or RVs. This winter, a man experiencing homelessness died of hypothermia in Medford. In Roseburg, almost two-thirds of renters are cost-burdened, meaning families struggle to make ends meet. In Tillamook, businesses worry that they cannot retain workers due to housing costs. In counties from Columbia to Wasco, many families receiving housing assistance can’t find a rental on the market.”

The real estate, housing and construction industries have rebounded since the end of the recession. That, combined with population growth in many West Coast cities, has created a white-hot housing market driving up rental costs and home prices. Vacancy rates – the measure of how many rental units are available – have

dropped to unheard of rates of less than 2 percent. People are being displaced from homes they may have lived in for years, increasing their commutes to work and school, and other low-income people are unable to find a home they can afford at all.

Urban homelessness and poverty has existed in large numbers since the 1980s, but, by and large, cities and counties have done little to preserve existing affordable housing or build more.

Putting a levy on Portland’s 2010 ballot to create an affordable housing fund was discussed among some elected officials and housing advocates. But there was worry that an affordable housing levy could not compete with renewing the parks bond, and the effort failed.

Hesitation to fund affordable housing no longer exists.

“It’s come to an undeniable head on the West Coast. It’s freaked out such a broad swath of people. The problem is so clear and undeniable,” said Michael Anderson, a consultant with the Center for Community Change who has worked with cities and jurisdictions throughout the country to find sources of revenue for affordable housing. “There is appropriate urgency now.”

Marty Kooistra, the executive director of Seattle’s Housing Development Consortium, an advocacy organization, said the organization thought about creating a public awareness campaign about the importance of affordable housing. “We don’t feel like we need to do that anymore,” Kooistra said.

“It’s talked about everywhere now.”

Cities and counties throughout the West Coast are putting bonds, levies and other property tax measures on their local ballots to create a dedicated revenue stream to build affordable housing – an unprecedented effort on the part of local governments to fund housing that is affordable to their communities’ lowest income and workforce residents.

“You have to have a crisis before you solve it sometimes,” Andy Silver, executive director of Vancouver’s Council for the Homeless, said. “It’s always been an issue before, but it’s just gotten worse.”

Bend is the fastest growing city in Oregon, and the shortage of affordable housing in central Oregon reflects that – Bend’s vacancy rate is less than .5 percent. “It’s almost non-existent,” Jim Long, the city’s affordable housing manager, said. “There may be 20 units available to rent.”

The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Bend is \$1,600 a month.

“It’s more than a mortgage,” Long said. Over half of the renters in Deschutes County pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing costs, the federal standard for housing affordability, and about a third of renters pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing, which is considered rent-burdened.

“People want to be here,” Long said,

citing the city’s recreational opportunities and natural setting. “Even during the economic downturn we grew by 3 percent. Not a single multi-housing permit was built down here then, but people kept moving here. People with money are moving to Bend, but what that’s creating ... is that you’re priced out of a place to live here.”

Between 2014 and 2015, the number of homeless people living in Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties nearly doubled.

According to the Central Oregon Homeless Leadership’s Coalitions Point-in-Time Count conducted in January 2015 – the most recent data – there were 2,087 people who slept outside, couch-surfed with friends or family, or lived in their car in Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties. In 2014, there were 1,217 homeless people living in Central Oregon.

Long said that nearly 90 percent of Central Oregon’s homeless population are from the area. “(The shortage of housing) is pushing them to the margins,” he said.

He said Bend’s city council has taken aggressive steps to build more housing. The council passed a construction excise tax that generates approximately \$1 million dollars a year. The city encourages building more densely, building smaller, cottage-style housing communities and making it easier for homeowners to build accessory dwelling units, or ADUs.

See **STATE OF CRISIS**, page 5