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norm through the 60s and 70s. By the 1980s, however, government was retreating wholesale from public housing, and instead encouraged the private market to invest more in housing through tax credits and bonds – subsequently increasing long-term debt obligations.

Today, every state in the country has a shortage of housing for extremely low-income renters, according to the 2017 Affordable Housing Gap Analysis by the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Oregon ranks third in the nation for the size of this gap – behind Nevada and California and tied with Arizona – with only 26 units for every 100 extreme low-income renter households.

But on the higher end of the economic spectrum is the “missing middle,” as reported in multiple communities, where people make good money but still can’t afford to live where they work.

“Employers are having difficulty finding people,” Wooden said. “You see these wanted posters all over the place; they were nonexistent five years ago. Boat and RV dealership can’t hire techs. That’s what we hear from employers. They’re struggling – your nurse, your police officers, your firefighter. It’s really hard to hire because the housing is so difficult.”

Oregon Housing and Community Services, the state’s housing bureau, is in the process of developing its next five-year statewide housing plan. The bureau is working with Gov. Kate Brown’s office on a new initiative, the Workforce Housing Pilot, to develop creative strategies to overcome barriers to building affordable housing in rural Oregon. Those barriers include the fact that – the cost of construction being equal – developers will gravitate to the more profitable market in Portland and other large cities. The economies of scale simply don’t exist in small towns like they do in metropolitan areas. Nor do small towns have the heft to implement local funding mechanisms, such as tax increment financing, to further incentivize development.

OHCS Executive Director Margaret Salazar said they anticipate having communities selected for the pilot by February. Meanwhile, all eyes are on the actions of Congress, a tax reform proposal that threatens housing funding mechanisms, and the future of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature created the LIFT program to fund housing for underserved populations, specifically in rural communities and communities of color. It approved \$40 million in 2015, and a historic \$80 million for 2017. For rural communities, which lack the economies of scale and the funding mechanisms dense urban areas can tap, the financial infusion is a vital resource.

Yet even that could be unraveled by proposed changes in the tax reform bills in Washington, D.C. The state funding simply isn’t enough to cover the gap in rural housing needs without the federal tax credit support, Salazar said.

“The federal climate,” she said, pausing for words, “it’s really hard right now.”

This is the first report in our Housing Rural Oregon series. Look for more articles in upcoming editions of Street Roots, and visit news.streetroots.org to learn more.

Portland’s rental commission begins

The advisory panel will make landlord-tenant policy recommendations and serve as a forum for public discussion

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
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Portland’s Rental Services Commission held its inaugural meeting Nov. 22, breaking ground on the city’s first permanent public body tasked with making policy recommendations on rental housing regulations.

But it will be some time before anyone can say whether the advisory commission will have a meaningful impact on policy related to rising rental costs and renters’ rights.

The Portland City Council created the commission in October, at the same time it extended a housing state of emergency, first declared in 2015. The council also extended the sunset date for an ordinance mandating relocation assistance, including moving costs and security deposits, for tenants who face rent increases above 10 percent a year.

When the City Council created the commission, Mayor Ted Wheeler said the city is taking an “increasing role in tenant-landlord affairs.”

“We needed to create a setting for the public to discuss these regulations and for a body to advise the city on these regulations,” Wheeler said in October.

City Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, who has championed renters’ rights, expressed hope that the commission will balance the power between landlords and renters and address the housing instability many renters face.

The committee is made up of tenants’ rights advocates, Portland Housing Bureau staff, developers, property managers and other representatives of the rental housing sector. In addition to advising on landlord-tenant housing regulations and programs, the commission is charged with providing a

forum for public input on the rental housing market.

Katrina Holland, a member of the commission and the executive director of the advocacy organization Community Alliance of Tenants, said she hopes the commission can “delve deep into the nuances of local tenant protections law and to craft a really solid, equitable policy.”

Nearly half of Portlanders are renters. More than half of those renters are considered rent burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent.

Rental housing prices are unregulated in Oregon. A person’s monthly rent can increase at any amount, at any time. Oregon also allows no-cause evictions, which give landlords the right to evict a tenant without giving a reason for the eviction. Tenants’ rights advocates say such evictions are an unfair practice and disproportionately affect individuals and families who are lower-income or racial or ethnic minorities.

House Bill 2004, a high-profile and controversial piece of legislation that would have banned no-cause evictions and allowed for capping rent increases, died when it failed to gain enough support in the Oregon Senate.

And there is little data about Oregon’s rental housing stock. Landlords are not required to register their rental units with the city of Portland and many other cities in Oregon. Such information would include how many rental units exist and where, and possibly even how much rent is charged for the unit.

The cities of Milwaukie and Gresham require all rental units to be registered. The registries are the basis for how each city conducts random housing inspections.

“They have a solid picture of (their) rental (market) through their inspections program,” Holland said. “That’s something Portland could learn from. We have that data for homeownership rates, right? You can look it up on Portland Maps. We should have that data for the rental market.”

There is no shortage of work the commission can take on, but it remains to be seen how meaningful the work the body does will be. The commission has no legislative or decision-making authority; its only role is advisory.

The commission has also been designed so that consensus is not required to make decisions or recommendations. It’s expected that the commission will produce majority and minority reports, an indication that there will be contentious debates on some topics. The commission will decide at future meetings how testimony will be given, which may include submitting anonymous testimony, written testimony or video-taped testimony that masks a person’s voice.

The pressure between landlord and property owner groups and tenants’ rights advocates has been building for years. A committee at the state level – made up of landlords, property managers and owners, and tenants’ rights groups – existed for many years to develop consensus legislation related to landlord-tenant law and rental housing. The committee fell apart earlier this year over House Bill 2004, just as the 2017 legislative session was to begin. The group has not met since.

“Housing is an emotionally charged issue,” Holland said. “It undergirds our entire livelihood.”

There were hints of contention during the Nov. 22 commission meeting, especially regarding how public testimony will be given. Concerns had been raised prior to the meeting that tenants may stop themselves from publicly testifying out of fear or retaliation from their landlords.

Christian Bryant, a member of the commission and the president of the Oregon Rental Housing Association and the Portland Area Rental Owners Association, expressed concern that landlords could also face retaliation.

“We can’t deny that there is a housing issue,” Bryant said. “We do need to try to create fixes that will solve the problem for the long run, as well as the short run.”

