

Contractor changes essential for rural housing

Like Portland, rural communities across Oregon are experiencing a shortage of stable, affordable housing, most notably for low-income families.

But unlike Portland – where cranes loom large in neighborhood after neighborhood – finding someone ready to build in rural areas has proved a significant challenge.

What is a boon to developers in the City of Roses, doesn't even pencil out in a smaller, less competitive

community such as Cave Junction, for example, nestled in Josephine County where the poverty rate reaches nearly 20 percent. Or in Junction City, where in this edition we talk with people scraping to make ends meet, and using food pantries to fill the gap.

In addition to suppressed wages and job opportunities leftover from the Great Recession, and on top of a housing void left when the bubble burst and construction came to a halt, rural communities are having a hard time finding someone simply to do the work. The fallout? There are home improvement grants to rehabilitate housing for rural communities through the USDA, but they go nowhere if a homeowner can't get the required estimates to apply. And the limited number of those workers available causes project delays and increased costs as subcontractors travel across the state to reach worksites.

"Across the state, but particularly in areas outside of the I-5 corridor, the counties and cities have heard that there are fewer licensed sub-contractors to bid on work for housing developments," according to a statement from the League of Oregon Cities, which testified in Salem in support of a new policy. "This shortage has two impacts, one is that the cost to hire these licensed trades is higher than normal, driving up construction and housing costs, and second it delays projects moving forward as developers look for available trades to provide plumbing and electrical installments."

This week, lawmakers advanced a bill that seeks to put more electricians, plumbers and other subcontractors to work in rural communities. House Bill 4144, championed by Gov. Kate Brown's office, will waive some licensing fees for qualified, experienced contractors and provide a path of financial support for small business owners provided they contract outside of the Willamette Valley. The ultimate goal, according to the governor's office, is to expand the industry workforce along with the availability of affordable housing. Another goal is to spur small businesses and contractors to hang their shingle in small communities across the state.

This is an important step forward, and one that will not cost taxpayers a penny. This isn't charity, but a bureaucratic adjustment to the systemic and national nature of our housing crisis, one that counters the popular notion of measuring housing support according to the deserving or the undeserving.

For many families, money is part of the problem, but so is simply having access to safe and stable housing. Whereas 5 percent is considered a balanced vacancy rate for rental units, rural counties such as Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson, are seeing rental vacancy rates at less than 1 percent, according to a state audit.

There are market forces, indeed, but there are also stagnant incomes for life-long Oregonians due to a lack of economic

opportunities. The disparity between household income and the price of housing is far greater in rural Oregon than the rest of the nation as a whole, according to the state Office of Economic Analysis. And across Oregon, people are aging into an expensive future with incomes frozen in the past. This isn't about pulling up a bootstrap or two – this is a systemic problem.

In this edition, our report on the Lane County food pantry and the Oregon Food Bank highlights why this is more than a local problem. The pressure of housing instability pushes against all

of our resources. The charitable services intended for what were once temporary extremes are now stretched to cover a new normal. What was adequate before, is inadequate today. What supporters gave last year, won't cover what is needed in the next. Fundamentally, crisis assistance cannot absorb the large-scale failures in our housing market.

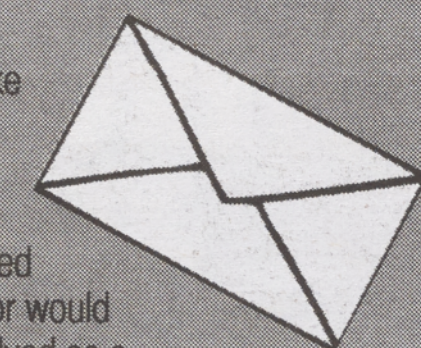
The success of the subcontractor initiative can be amplified by additional actions now waiting the Legislature's approval. Lawmakers can bolster this work by passing an increase to the document recording fee from \$20 to \$60. It is the state's only ongoing, stable source of funding for affordable housing and was recently a key source for allocating nearly \$9 million dollars to build housing for Oregon veterans.

We take another step forward with House Joint Resolution 201, recently passed by the House. The resolution refers to voters a constitutional amendment that would create an exemption for affordable housing around local bonding laws, giving local governments the flexibility to combine funding sources to house low-income individuals and families.

It's common sense for local governments to be able to leverage the maximum funding available to support one of our most pressing needs: housing.

EDITORIAL

The pressure of housing instability pushes against all of our resources. The charitable services intended for what were once temporary extremes, are now stretched to cover a new normal. What was adequate before, is inadequate today.



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 Executive 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.

Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots? Email Andrew Hogan at andrew@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Kaia Sand
kaia@streetroots.org
Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org
Development Director Andrew Hogan
andrew@streetroots.org
Senior Staff Reporter Emily Green
Operations Director Sarah Beecroft
Program Assistant Caelin Miltko, Jesuit Volunteer
Vendor Assistant Scott Jackson, Alex Gillow-Wiles
Development Assistant Rosemary Wilson
Editorial Producer Monica Kwasnik
Reporters Sarah Hansell, Leonora Ko, Emily Prado, Jared Paben, Amanda Waldroupe, Thacher Schmid, DeVon Pouncey, Helen Hill
Photographers Diego Diaz, Arkady Brown, Celeste Noche
Ganvasser Desmond Hardison

Board of Directors

Chairman Brad Taylor
Vice-Chairman Rachel Langford
Treasurer Heather Stadick
Secretary Dan Jones
Directors Michael Anderson, Sandra Hahn, John Brown, Nels Johnson and Alison Hallett

Volunteers

Jan Bayer, John Barker, Stacey Heath, Anjali Rathore, Dennis Hogan, Lucas Hawthorne, Thomas Buell Jr., Jason Cohen, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jon Raymond, Diana Richardson, Paul and Madeline Gefroh, Mary Anne Joyce, Brooke Anderson, Gillian Floren, Mark Oldani, Bianca Butler, Camber Hansen-Karr, Miranda Woods, Henry Brannan, Helen Hill, Mary Emerson, Brooke Anderson, Kathleen McFall, Robb Hengerer, Maile Yeats-Rowe, Erin Parsons, Faye Powell, Jon Raymond and Megan Pickerel-Winer. If you're interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or you can call for more information at 503-228-5657.