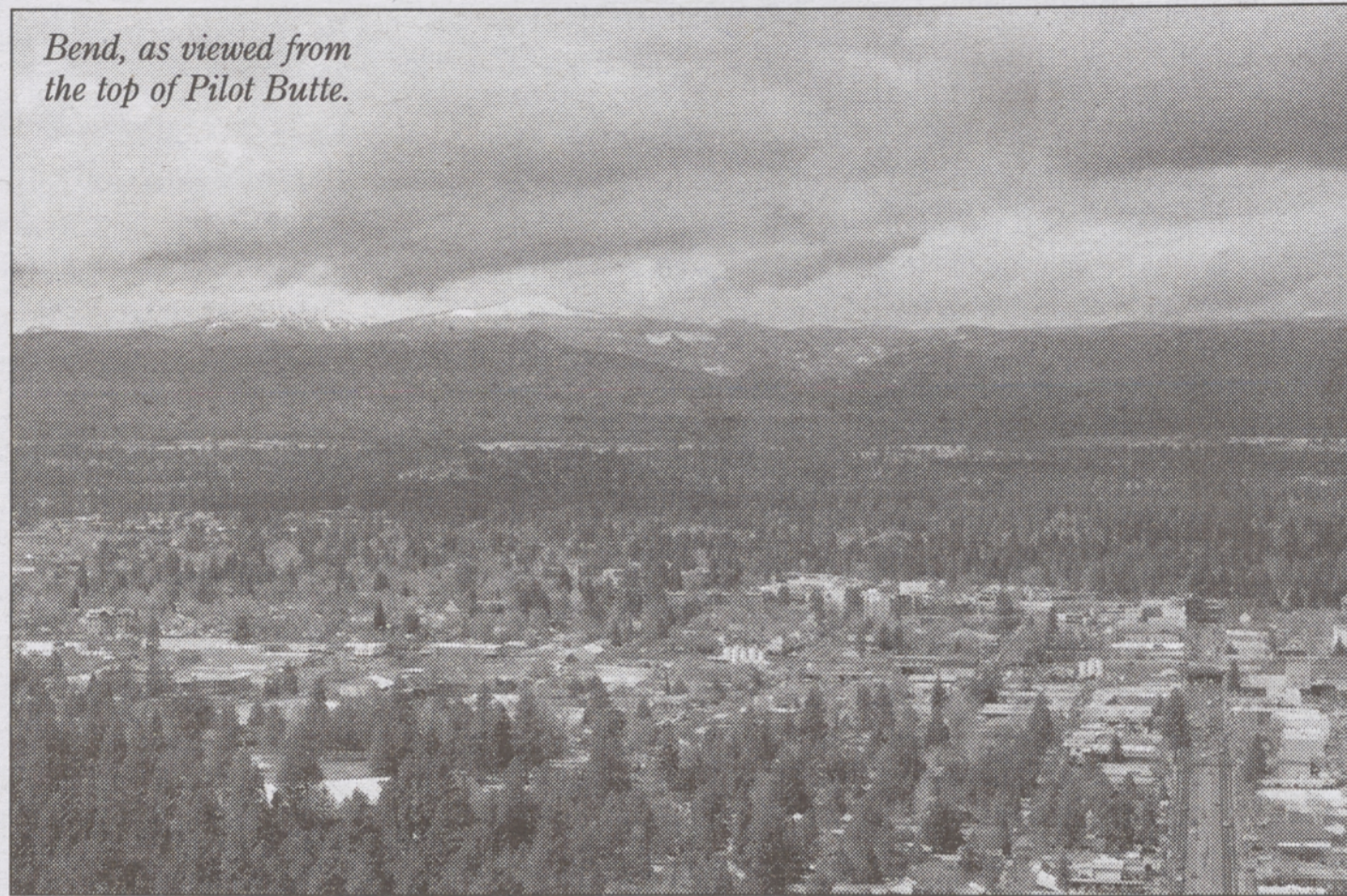




Housing Rural Oregon

Bend, as viewed from the top of Pilot Butte.



PHOTOS BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

BEND, OREGON – Sarah Kelley is exponentially busier than she was four years ago.

Kelley is the executive director of Thrive Central Oregon, a nonprofit based in Redmond that helps impoverished people access services they need to become more self-sufficient, including free clothing for school-aged children, emergency food boxes to help food stamps stretch, and providing assistance with utility payments.

When Thrive opened in 2014, Kelley saw less than a dozen clients a month. The nonprofit now helps 175 people each month, Kelley said, and 80 percent of Thrive's work now revolves around a single issue: helping clients find affordable housing.



Sarah Kelley

The majority of Thrive's clients live on tight incomes: seniors and disabled people on fixed, monthly Social Security benefits, single parents, and the working poor – people who have one or multiple jobs, often on

minimum wage, getting paycheck to paycheck.

Ten years ago, Kelley said, she could find a studio apartment that would rent for \$400 a month. Even seven years ago, she could find such an apartment.

That is no longer the case.

"We rationally plan out their homelessness," Kelley said.

That sounds cold-hearted, but Kelley is being pragmatic.

In Central Oregon – Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook Counties – the recession brought construction to a halt, and workers in the industry moved away. That stagnant housing market was followed by rapid population growth and a booming economy, pushing housing costs to far beyond wages. The vacancy rate for both rental and for-sale housing is estimated to be between zero and 1 percent. Between 2011 and 2016, Bend and Prineville had some of the fastest growing rents in the country, with average rental increases of 54 percent and 46 percent, respectively.

For decades, Central Oregon has undergone demographic and cultural changes of breathtaking magnitude. Since

Poverty – with a view

Part One: The Cities in the Desert

Once a rural timber and agricultural region, Central Oregon is now beset with a housing shortage and an increase in homelessness. How will the region respond as it continues to grow?

the 1990s, Deschutes County has been one of the nation's fastest growing counties, with more than 100,000 people moving to the area between 1990 and 2015. That's a population increase of 230 percent.

The region is no longer completely rural and dominated by a timber industry. New residents are drawn to the region's quality of life, natural beauty and recreational activities. Bend, with a population approaching 100,000, acts as a hub to the smaller, still rural towns that are all interdependent.

City governments have been aggressive, enacting multiple policies to incentivize more housing construction, but there is still a shortage: Bend alone lacks 4,700 units affordable to households earning less than \$25,000 per year. Government and public policy officials vocally fear that if that shortage persists, Central Oregon will become a place where anyone who is poor or working-class cannot afford to live.

Homelessness is on the rise, and the lack of shelters and supportive housing has

forced the vast majority of homeless people to camp in the juniper forests surrounding their hometowns.

"We have had housing crunches in the past, but this is the biggest one we've had," said Scott Aycock, the community and economic development manager of the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC), an interregional governmental body. "It's getting everyone's attention."

COIC's most recent five-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, approved in August 2017, identified housing affordability and availability as the region's top priority in order to ensure sustained economic growth.

Today, the Great Recession is a thing of the past. In 2016, according to the most recent data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the local gross domestic product

grew by 8.1 percent. Wages grew by 3 percent.

The economy has diversified, with growth in construction, manufacturing, health care, high tech, biotech, brewing and distilling, and the construction of Facebook data centers. Oregon State University continues to expand its Cascade campus, and Bend's downtown core, like Redmond and Sister's main streets, bustle with residents and tourists alike visiting breweries, restaurants, art galleries and coffee shops.

But the benefits of those changes are not available to everyone.

What does it mean to rationally plan out a person's homelessness? To Kelley, it means looking at the different options available to each person.

It can take up to two years for someone on the waiting list to receive a Section 8 voucher, which pays two-thirds of the rent for qualifying low-income people. That, Kelley said, becomes the "long-term plan."

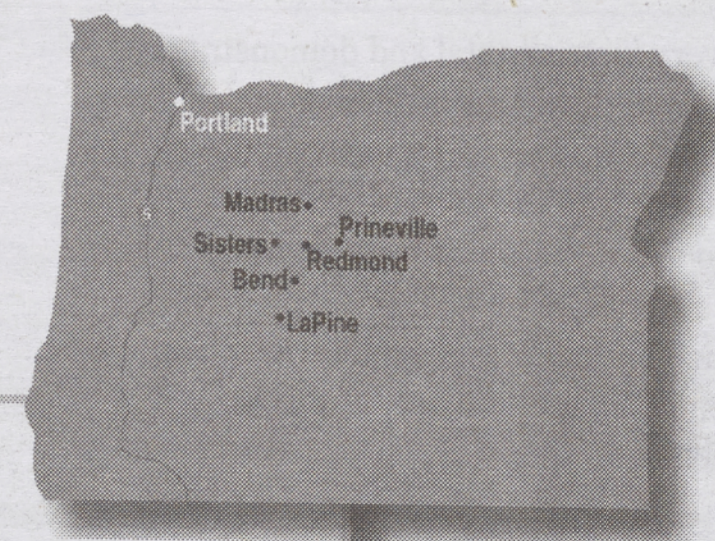
In the meantime, she sits down with clients and asks – can you get into a shelter? Is there family you can live with? Could you find a housemate on Craigslist?

According to the 2017 point in time count published by the region's Homeless Leadership Coalition, there are 1,455 people living homeless or "precariously housed" in the Central Oregon counties of Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson. One out of 3 are unsheltered, meaning they camp or live in their car.

Still, those figures are widely considered low. The count's methodology relies on people appearing in person at social services agencies, food kitchens and other

places homeless people frequent on the days of the count. So, the count's numbers do not necessarily reflect the large numbers of people thought to camp in the outskirts of town, including the estimated 400 people thought to be camping east of Antler Avenue in Redmond.

There are few shelter options available for Central Oregon's homeless. The Bethlehem Inn and the Shepherd's Door are the only year-round shelters in Central Oregon, and both offer less than 100 beds a piece. The homeless



About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series, and is the first in a package of stories looking into Central Oregon. Street Roots received funding from Meyer Memorial Trust's Affordable Housing Initiative to develop dedicated reporting on rural housing issues. Read previous articles from the series at news.streetroots.org/ruralhousing