



PHOTOS BY EMILY GREEN

Above: A local man constructs a house out of pipecleaners and popsicle sticks at the Coos County Housing Summit on April 26 in North Bend, a town of about 9,800 residents that borders Coos Bay. At right: A cargo ship docked in North Bend is headed to China, where Oregon logs will be milled and sold.

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and the parents give up, alcohol and drug abuse come in and then there's no one to set a good example for the next generation. This was a problem echoed up and down the coast by service providers. They said the idea that former loggers and seafood-industry workers could be retrained in tourism jobs is a joke.

"You're not going to take these very independent, tough talking and rough talking people and put them down as a maitre d' in a restaurant," said Lehman, laughing.

But with the decline of those industries now more than 30 years passed – many residents at the summit began to hoot, holler and cheer when North Bend City Councilor Timm Slater told the room that pride was important, "and part of that is let's drop the attitude of being a victim."

But embracing service-industry and retail jobs is not necessarily the answer. Johnson said she assists people employed in those sectors who feel like no matter how hard they work, they just can't get ahead.

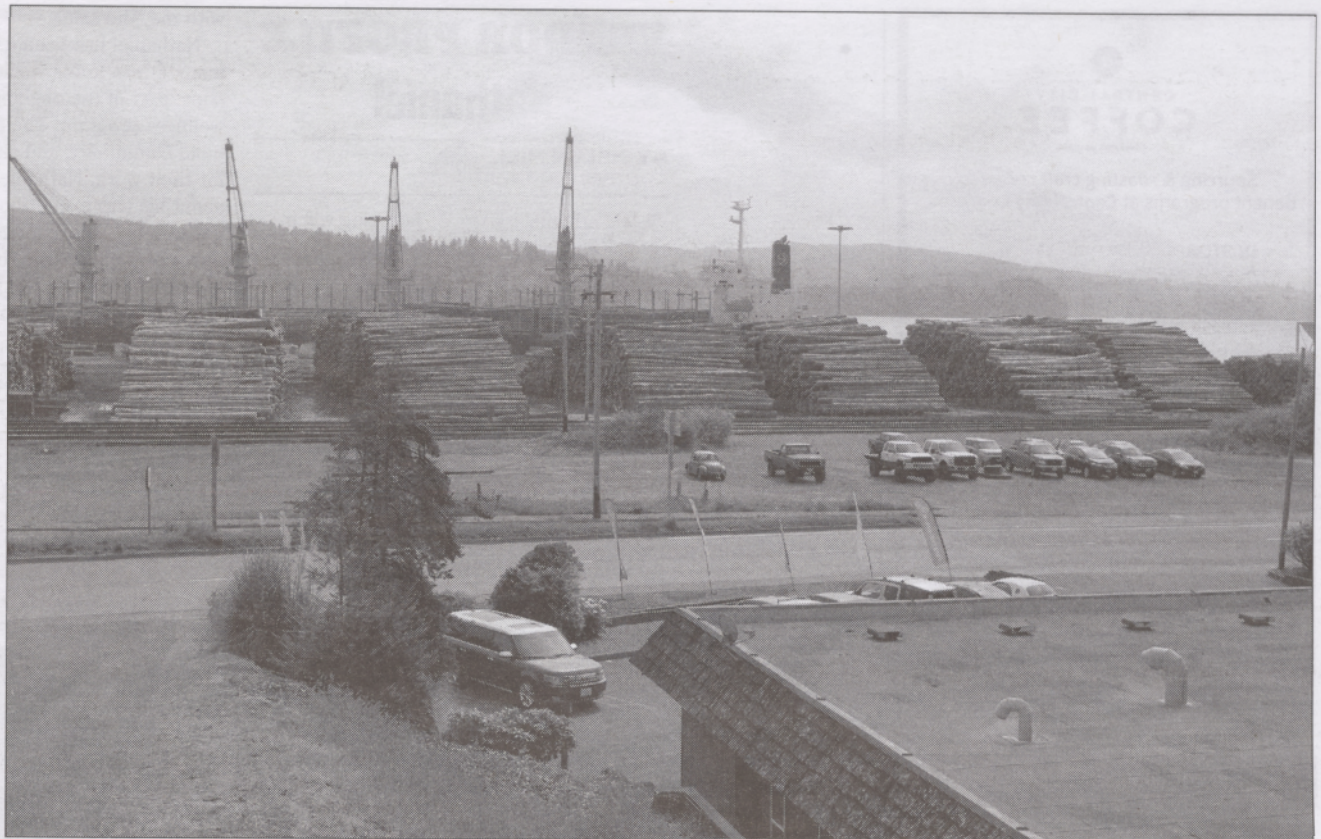
Melinda Torres, homeless liaison for the Coos Bay School District, said she watches her students fall into the same fast food and retail jobs their parents worked because, just like their parents, they don't have the skills to do anything else.

A shrinking workforce and stagnant incomes that, for the past few decades, have stemmed primarily from jobs in the hospitality industry, Coos County residents are facing their own, unique housing predicament.

Vacancy rates are higher than in many areas of Oregon, hovering around 3 percent for ownership and 7 percent for rentals, according to Buki and Eddington's analysis. Fifteen percent of all housing units are considered vacant – they just aren't all available because they're vacation homes or they're unfit for occupancy.

"I'm not sure you have an affordability problem," Buki told housing summit attendees. "What you have is a crappy stock problem – and a poverty problem that adds up and conspires to have lots of good stuff above \$300,000 and very few good options below \$200,000."

Lehman agrees: "We have a lot of crappy rentals. That's one of the common complaints you hear, 'I'm paying good money and it's sketchy.'"



Nowhere to go but home

A main driver of Coos County's housing shortfall is the aging face of the community.

While the population has remained relatively level in number, its median age has increased markedly from age 43 to age 48 since 2000.

Residents who are young enough to have children make up the smallest demographic, with Millennials comprising just 14 percent of the population in 2016. More than 2,000 of them have left Coos County to put down roots and raise their children elsewhere over the past 18 years.

Meanwhile, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation have grown to encompass 64 percent of the population. Whereas the nation's Baby Boomer population as a whole is shrinking as its members move into retirement and the great beyond, in Coos County, their numbers have actually increased in recent years.

Lehman said Coos Bay's Marshfield High School has about half the student body that it did when he graduated from it in 1971, even though the town's population has grown.

The nationwide decline in residential care facilities and nursing homes, along with longer lifespans, have resulted in a greater percentage of elderly residents aging in place across many American communities.

With no new affordably-priced houses on the market, it creates a choke point in system: The elderly don't downsize and stay in place longer, keeping their homes off the market and unavailable for people looking for their second home. And because those people are not moving out of their first homes, there is nothing available for first-time homebuyers.

In coastal areas, where many elderly flock for their golden years, this phenomenon is only exacerbated – although the increase in median age is more largely attributed to locals aging in place than beach-seeking seniors on the move.

When the elderly do move or pass away,

their homes are often so outdated and falling apart, they're undesirable or unsafe.

Buki hammered-in his point about the plethora of dated, avocado-green-furnished houses so much that when Slater, the North Bend city councilor, took the stage, he began as if it were a confessional. "Hi, my name is Timm, and I bought my house in 1978."

A collective crisis

Most agree that finding suitable housing began to be an issue about 10 years ago – following the Great Recession. It only became a hot topic in recent years, however, as homelessness grew more visible and consensus built among employers that's its tough to retain out-of-town recruits when they can't find a place to live.

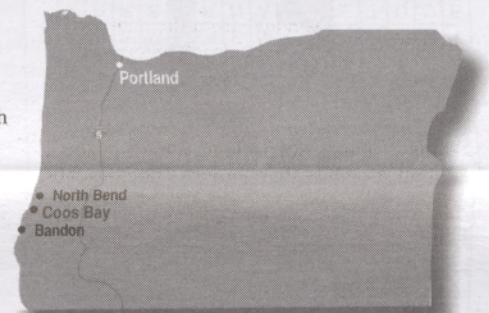
When Marka Turner moved to the region three years ago from Nevada with her husband, three kids and small dog, she said, "we could not find anything."

She had taken a job as the executive director of the North Bend City/Coos-Curry Housing Authorities and temporarily rented the agency's former director's vacant home, while he was in the process of selling it, before moving into a hotel. "We ended up buying, it was easier than trying to rent something," she said.

Turner purchased a house in Bandon, where the housing stock is in a better state of repair than in the Coos Bay-North Bend area where her office is located.

"I know \$300,000 may not sound like a lot coming out of Portland, but paying \$300,000 and then needing to put another \$50,000 or \$100,000 into it to upgrade stuff, was very discouraging," she said. "And that's the story you will hear a lot from other professionals, businesses: People won't come here – they can't find housing. In Curry County, I know people who were in an RV for six months until something became available."

On the bright side, she said, because the problem has become so bad for so many people, momentum to actually do something



About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. In this edition we are looking at Coos County. Read previous articles from the series at news.streetroots.org.

about it is building.

Barbara Green moved to Coos Bay from Portland's hot real estate market with her family in 2014, and she was surprised by how difficult it was to find a home – not just one she could afford, but a home that was available in general. Green, like Turner, had moved for a job. Her family lived with her brother-in-law for three months until they were able to secure a small 2-bedroom home in a less-than-desirable part of town. Green said everyone warned her not to move into that neighborhood, but after living east of 82nd Avenue in Portland, she said she wasn't too worried about Coos Bay's "worst part of town."

Having lived in Coos County all his life, Lehman said he's had his current home for years and never had any trouble securing housing, personally. His grown children and

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