



The Mill Casino sits where a giant Weyerhaeuser Co. sawmill once operated in North Bend. Today, the casino is among the county's largest private employers. This is emblematic of Coos County's changed economy. Once steeped in logging and fishing, it's now service-industry based.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

COOS COUNTY, from page 7

something else pops up.

With housing vouchers, which renters can use toward rent at market rate units of their choice, it's a different story. Tuner said the housing authority usually pulls 100 people off the wait list. Half respond, and of those, only half complete all the necessary paperwork. All in all, she said, there are only 12 or 15 percent who actually find a place available that will rent to them.

"We see this massive lack of follow through. Maybe some people cannot help themselves. It could be the health of the community – for so long, everything has just sort of been given," she said. "I've done housing for 12 years. It's a very interesting dynamic here."

She said 83 percent of her voucher program recipients are elderly or disabled, and even for those who do everything they can to secure housing, it can still be a challenge to find a landlord willing to rent to a voucher-holder when there are other potential tenants. It's also a challenge to find housing that is up to code and qualifies for the assistance.

For those who provide services at South Coast Community Action, it's just a cycle of sending people out with the promise of providing rental assistance, only to never see them again because they couldn't find anywhere they could spend it, said Lehman. "That's our process, and it's terrible," he said.

Building confidence and housing

Given the demographic cliff facing the community, Buki explained if nothing were done to solve the housing crisis, it would fix itself in 15 years. That's because with few young people and families, the countywide population – more than half of which is 55 or older – will eventually drop steeply from

63,000 as older residents pass away. An abundance of increasingly crappy houses will be available but, he said, "your affordability problems as they are today will go down."

Coos County residents know they will not be able to solve their housing problems without addressing the overall health and well-being of their community.

Low educational attainment and the looming threat of widespread disinvestment from all areas that aren't waterfront seriously threaten the county's future viability.

They need living-wage jobs and additional trade skills-training programs. But, if the county is successful in attracting new employers, and if the new jobs attract skilled workers from outside the community, they will have nowhere to live. The economic and housing problems go hand in hand, and must be addressed simultaneously.

Buki and Eddington were only hired to look at the housing question, but they acknowledged the connection. What they offered up was a partial solution that came with a price tag of about \$1 million a year, for 10 years.

They said if the community diversified funding – getting most of the money from the private sector, nonprofits, the medical community, schools and in donations from residents – they wouldn't be constrained in the way that government-funded housing dollars would constrain them. They could use the funding to strategically rehab 120 old units on streets where it would count, while also building about 120 new units, all over the next decade.

It's a plan that's in line with what the consultants said they'd seen similar-sized communities do in the past, and would be enough to loosen what they described as the area's "stuck market."

Ten million dollars may seem like an astronomical amount for a rural area, but Coos County has spent \$6.3 million on urban renewal projects over the past four

years, and czbLLC figured the county's contribution to the project should be just \$300,000 annually from the general fund.

In its final report, which it released a couple weeks after the summit, czbLLC also recommended alternative solutions, including a housing bond and the implementation of more employer-funded housing programs.

The Bandon Dunes Golf Resort already has its own employee-housing complex, and Buki and Eddington see opportunities for other large area employers to step up and provide housing for their predominantly low-wage workers, as well.

Along with code and zoning revisions, starting a housing trust and other ideas for funding, building and rehabbing housing, czbLLC also suggested taking advantage of the Jordan Cove LNG project to get housing built.

In a county in dire need of an economic boost, everyone Street Roots spoke with about the massive natural gas pipeline project said they thought Coos Bay's population was pretty evenly split on the idea. Either residents want the jobs it would bring, or they believe the project will harm the environment and natural beauty of the bay, along with all the tourism jobs that environment creates.

According to the Jordan Cove LNG website, during construction, Pembina will employ an average of 900 workers, with up to 2,100 workers during peak construction. Theories on what the workers will do for housing vary. There's been talk of workers staying in motels and campsites, and the company has proposed building its own temporary housing for construction

workers, should the project come to fruition. At the completion of the construction phase, the temporary housing would be torn down.

Where the 175 permanent employees will live has not been publicly addressed. Buki and Eddington think North Bend should negotiate a contractual agreement for 20 percent of the workforce housing to be permanent and donated back to the county upon the project's completion.

While discussions about the implementation of the housing report recommendations will resume in the fall, locals participating in the brainstorming sessions at the housing summit honed in on rebuilding pride.

Ideas such as investments in programs to assist elderly residents with yard work were suggested, along with finding funds for exterior maintenance and additional code enforcement officers to both enforce codes and gently remind homeowners of their responsibilities, depending on their financial means and the seriousness of their property violation.

Someone mentioned replicating Myrtle Point's block-by-block program. Myrtle Point is located in Coos County about 20 miles east of Bandon. While it fizzled out about four years ago, the city government used to challenge its citizens to beautify their neighborhoods by maintaining their homes, making landscaping improvements and encouraging their neighbors to do the same. The most improved block would win a block party.

Community partners across the county paid czbLLC \$61,500 for its services, with Jordan Cove's contribution falling into the \$1,000 to \$5,000 category. Other contributors included local government and tribal bodies, Wild Rivers Coast Alliance and United Way of Southwestern Oregon, which took a lead position in organizing

the effort.

The day after the housing summit, North Bend Police Chief Robert Kappelman posted to his department's Facebook page a before and after photo of a house that had been freshly painted and the front yard newly landscaped.

"Our little community has its misgivings, like every other city. However, one thing this community has is pride ... although you wouldn't know it as you take a city tour," Kappelman wrote. "It doesn't take a lot of money to make some significant improvements. A gallon of paint is less than \$20, a quart less than \$5. A pack of flowers is often less than \$3. ... Have neighbors that have trouble keeping up with their yards? Ask them if you can give them a little help."

In the comments section below the post, North Bend resident Matthew Hays wrote, "Someone went to the summit ... already workin' on my curb appeal, boys."

emily@streetroots.org



Photo: [Illegible text]

[Illegible text column]

[Illegible text column]

[Illegible text column]