

Decent Digs

Council puts developers ahead of renters.

The Eugene City Council put developer interests ahead of providing safe and decent housing last week.

The council voted 5-4 to delay creating a housing livability code that students and renters have asked for and instead use staff resources for projects developers and land speculators want.

The vote left supporters of a housing code shaking their heads. "Let me get this right, it's not a high priority that people in this community have decent housing with plumbing and heat and roofs that don't leak, but it's a priority to process a change for one developer," Councilor Bonny Bettman said of a council vote in support of instead prioritizing changing regulations to support a developer of a medical clinic.

At a public forum after the vote, UO student Jesse Harding reminded councilors that the council's West University Neighborhood Task Force had made housing standards its top recommendation 14 months ago, but the council had done nothing. "It's really spitting in the face of the task force and it's recommendation," said Harding, who served on the task force.

years. "These are what you have resources to do in the next 18-24 months," City Manager Dennis Taylor told the council of the top five priority list. "The rest of the items will not get done."

City Planning Director Susan Muir told councilors that items not in the top five priorities "will go on the back burner."

Bettman said Nathanson's motion could kill the housing code proposal. "It seems to me it's putting it on life support so that we can pull the plug."

Kelly said he was "very disappointed" in the council decision to put housing standards "on the slow track." It's "bizarre" that the council "couldn't give a somewhat high priority to the idea that roofs shouldn't leak, heating should be provided in the winter and you shouldn't need to go to court to fix this problem."

Kelly said that rather than forcing tenants to pursue costly and time consuming lawsuits against landlords using state housing codes, Eugene should follow the example of Corvallis and set up city housing code enforcement funded by an \$8-\$10 charge per year for renters.

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City Councilor Nancy Nathanson, now running for mayor, was the key swing vote against making a housing code a top priority. Nathanson, who is backed by property managers, land speculators and developers in her campaign, said the housing code could have a negative "potential serious impact" and "would bump another high priority" item from the top five list of city staff planning priorities.

"I can't support the motion as it was made," Nathanson said. She instead successfully argued for a motion for staff to bring back a "scoping" study on what it would take to study a new housing code in order for the council to take another look at the issue in June.

Mayor Jim Torrey cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of Nathanson's slower approach. "We're moving way too fast."

But Councilor David Kelly said the issue has been before the council for at least three years and pointed out the neighborhood task force spent weeks discussing the need. "We are hardly rushing to this."

Nathanson argued that the vote against making the housing code a top planning priority was in fact a vote to make it a high priority. "We've put it on the front burner," she said. "That's really a hurry-up."

But city staff made clear at the meeting that items not placed on the planning top five priority list would not be dealt with for

Councilor Betty Taylor said the current state housing code "does not work unless people have money to go to court."

At the public forum, Maddy Melton, UO student body president, said she was "upset" about the council move to delay discussion of the housing code until the summer when students are gone and can't lobby the council. "It's absolutely irresponsible," she said. "We're voters in this community and I think we have to be taken seriously."


Shannon Tarvin of Eugene Citizens for Housing Standards said the city's 54,000 renters need basic livability standards enforced. "We need protection now."

Kelly said "I can't think of many priorities that should be higher" than decent housing.

But the pro-developer council majority thought of many higher priorities, including rezoning property for the developer of a medical clinic, studying ways to give more tax breaks to big industry and developers, and a study to move the urban growth boundary out so land speculators can cash in. All these efforts made the city's top planning priority list instead of housing standards.

Councilor Taylor said the housing standard issue has been before the council for at least seven years without action. But she encouraged advocates to "continue to push" for decent housing. "Please don't give up."

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