

Time to Address Systemic Inequity

EUGENE NEEDS TO ADDRESS RENTERS IN ITS REDISTRICTING PROCESS

old neighborhoods served by Eugene's historic streetcar system, which was constructed in 1907, peaked in 1913 and transitioned into bus service in 1927.

Eugene's streetcar system existed decades before the city's first zoning code and long before any local neighborhood plans were implemented. Walking near these lines you'll find an eclectic mix of housing types, including duplexes, fourplexes, bungalow courts, two-story apartment buildings and single-family homes all nestled among tree-lined streets.

Planning for the streetcar system and the growth resulting from it created the Fairmount and College Hill neighborhoods. Fairmount was the first streetcar line in 1907, extensions along Blair Blvd. and toward River Road were the last in 1912. In several places, traditional middle housing types were built as natural complements to this transit system. Though the streetcar is gone, many of these homes still exist. This is a testament to how easily middle housing types can adapt to change; they represent long-term resilience at the residential scale.

Looking a century down the road, it's obvious that having diverse housing options, along with a robust, non-carbon-fueled transportation network, will be critical to Eugene's success. Today, the average local household spends nearly 60 percent of their income on housing and transportation costs alone, according to the Housing + Transportation Affordability Index.

The only way for that metric to improve is if we create more diverse and affordable housing options near where we work, shop and play. What is old is new again; creating more walkable neighborhoods with easy access to transit is a key step in helping to alleviate our housing crisis and would be a lasting contribution to our future.

Colin Dean, AIA
Eugene

Redistricting is a cornerstone of democracy and a core component of good governance. The redistricting process requires those drawing the maps to consider communities of interest to ensure fair representation in elected offices. When mapmakers identify an imbalance, they must adjust.

Renters are a community of interest that must be considered in the Eugene redistricting process. At the state level, legislators govern landlord-tenant law, rules for housing development, the eviction process and state rent assistance. At the county level, our Lane County commissioners appoint the board of the regional housing authority, Homes for Good, which manages federal rent assistance and public housing resources.

At the city level, city councilors develop the rental housing code, which governs habitability and security standards. Additionally, city officials permit rental housing construction, decide zoning regulations and have significant power over the local renter market.

Individuals who rent their primary dwelling are under-represented in our government. Additionally, Black, Indigenous and other people of color are much more likely to rent their primary dwelling than whites. Renters have very little representation in government. Not a single Lane County legislator or county commissioner rents their primary dwelling.

Among the Eugene and Springfield city councils, only Leonard Stoehr and Matt Keating rent their primary dwelling. Why are renters under-represented? Systemic inequity. Gone are the days where only white male landowners could vote. However, it is apparent that to serve in elected office in 2021, property ownership is still virtually required.

Renters are under-represented in Eugene because the current boundaries have evolved over the years to "crack" the majority population of renters throughout the various

City Council wards. Cracking is when a community is divided across several districts. Cracking dilutes the voting power of a community of interest across many districts to minimize their electoral strength.

Eugene's current and future City Council wards are cracked against renters and non-owner occupied housing.

This is not a nefarious plot by city staff or council members from years back. That said, Eugene's district boundaries have evolved over the years to disadvantage renters in city elections. In 2020, an unprecedented seven renters ran for Eugene City Council. One of them was victorious. There are many factors that go into winning a district election, but no one can deny that geography plays a significant role.

The state of Oregon just passed its redistricting plan in a special legislative session at the end of September. As we do every 10 years, the city of Eugene is currently drawing its new maps. The city has presented two maps. Both make minimal changes, and fall within the state guidelines for redistricting. Typically, the city maps pass without notice.

This is all well and good, but instead, Eugene should consider alternatives as a way to correct systemic inequity.

Eugene has an opportunity to be thoughtful about this process and make real change that addresses systemic inequity and gives a voice to under-represented communities. The current process has been lightning fast, with little opportunity for public input, and did not engage communities of interest that are unrepresented.

We are presented with two choices, neither of which will meaningfully allow for actual representation for this community which constitutes the majority of Eugene. Eugene needs to slow this process down, and engage with the renter community to draw maps that allow equal representation.

Rebecca Murphy is president of AFSCME 3267 Homes for Good, and Timothy Morris is the executive director of the Springfield Eugene Tenant Association.

CORRECTION: *The Friends of the Library Book Sale mentioned in a letter to EW (10/14) will be 10 am to 4 pm Nov. 13, not Nov. 12 as last week's letter from the Friends said.*



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