

Housing bills sponsored by Portland legislators draw complaints from east side

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

As Oregon communities struggle to fix housing problems, solutions sponsored by legislators on the west side of the state are drawing complaints from Eastern Oregon.

The city of Hermiston is voicing opposition to a bill banning single-family residential zoning in communities of more than 10,000 people.

House Bill 2001, sponsored by House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-Portland), would require cities to allow “middle housing” — duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes and cottages clustered around a courtyard — in all of its residential zones. Proponents of the bill say it will help reduce the state’s housing shortage and create more diverse neighborhoods.

Hermiston city planner Clint Spencer said the city has “pretty strong feelings” against the bill. He submitted written testimony to the House Committee On Human Services and Housing for a public hearing held Feb. 11.

Spencer called the bill a “top-down” solution that takes control away from cities. He said it also conflicts with Statewide Planning Goal 1, which seeks to include citizen input on all stages of land use planning.

“It would be changing the character of existing neighborhoods without the neighborhood having any say in it,” he told the *Hermiston Herald*.

The bill as currently written would retroactively include existing zones within cities. Spencer said for many neighborhoods in Hermiston, the water and sewer pipes, street width, on-street parking and other elements were planned with single homes in mind. If someone was able to start building fourplexes on



HH file photo

The state legislature is considering bills that would protect tenants from steep rent increases and no-cost evictions.

empty lots there instead, it would in some cases require new infrastructure to accommodate the strain.

“Who pays for that?” he asked. Allowing multi-family dwellings in all residential zones would also impact long-term planning that cities already poured time and money into creating, as it essentially “quadruples our buildable land.”

Spencer said he agrees that communities need to find solutions to their housing shortages, but there are better ways to do so. Hermiston, for example, saw an increase in housing permits issued last year after making several changes, including the creation of an infill program and easing requirements for setbacks and lot coverage.

If HB 2001 passes, Oregon would be the first state to ban single-family zoning. But cities such as Minneapolis, Minnesota have started to embrace the tactic as a way to diversify neighborhoods by removing a designation that has historically kept low-income families

and people of color out of certain neighborhoods.

Proponents also hope that the bill will encourage new housing to open up faster as developers add multi-family dwellings instead of traditional houses to lots. The Oregon Housing Alliance submitted testimony to the House Committee on Human Services and Housing stating there is a “mismatch between the types of homes available, the people who need a place to live, and the incomes that people earn.”

“Increasing the number of homes which can be built per lot, subject to reasonable restrictions allowed under HB 2001, may over time either help to decrease the cost per home or offer options which are better aligned with current needs based on household size,” wrote the coalition.

House Bill 2001 is one of several bills introduced during the legislative session in an effort to tackle Oregon’s housing shortage.

Sen. Bill Hansell (R-Athens) recently spoke out on the Senate floor about Senate

Bill 608. The bill caps rent increases at one per year, at no more than 7 percent per year plus the consumer price index. It also bans no-cause evictions for tenants on month-to-month leases after the first 12 months.

“One size does not fit all,” Hansell told his colleagues. “If Portland has a problem — and I believe they do — don’t impose the fix on the rest of the state.”

He said housing developers and landlords in his district have written him to say that the bill would unfairly tilt Oregon’s housing laws in favor of tenants. A tenant would be able to give 30 days notice without cause to exit the lease, for example, but a landlord could not.

Hansell said the bill, while meant to protect tenants, would actually hurt them as landlords became much more strict in their screening process and housing developers pulled out of Oregon altogether. He said landlords needed to be able to raise rents fast enough to keep up with increases in property taxes and other costs.

Former Umatilla County commissioner says county needs a manager

By HERMISTON HERALD

Former Umatilla County Commissioner Larry Givens said it’s time for the county to have a manager and part-time commissioners.

Givens, who lost re-election last year, told the county’s Charter Review Committee at its Jan. 15 meeting the county needs a manager who is educated and experienced in municipal government, according to the meeting minutes, and a political science education would be helpful.

Givens explained the board of commissioners is to create and oversee policy and conduct outside work, such as promoting the county and obtaining grants. Five part-time commissioners receiving a stipend of \$28,000 a year, for example, would be better suited to the work than the three full-time commissioners the county employs, he said.

Commissioners now make almost \$91,000 a year. A county manager would cost a chunk of money, Givens said, but the decrease in salaries for the commissioners would offset that cost.

County-wide representation on the board also matters, he said, so two commissioners could be at-large and the others from districts. The county could limit commissioners to working 20 hours a month and mandate they can only miss a certain number of meetings. That might make it tough to some who have jobs, he told the committee, but retirees would be interested.

Givens also complained about the liaison arrange-

ment the commissioners have with department heads. He said three commissioners mean three styles of administration, and the system creates “inconsistency and discord among departments and is not good for morale,” according to the minutes, and that is a reason to have a manager.

County Commissioner Bill Elfering in November also suggested the county move to a manager to oversee operations and the budget.

Commissioner George Murdock spoke with the committee in December. He has been adamant he would not make suggestions to the committee, but he did answer their questions. He said elections do not guarantee continuity, but a county administrator could help with continuity and institutionalizing the county’s vision. He told the committee 27 of Oregon’s 36 counties have some form of county manager.

Linn County administrator Ralph Wyatt also spoke at the December meeting. He said he has a range of responsibilities, from human resources director to overseeing payroll and the motor poll. Linn County employs more than 670 people and has a budget of \$148 million. Commissioners there make \$96,000 a year, he said, and have authority over the county budget. He said new commissioners can take as long as two years “to get up to speed” on county government.

The committee has the task of reviewing the county charter, the founding document for the local government, and suggesting charges.



Givens

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