

UCAN News Articles – February 2019



Sunday, February 3, 2019

Affordable housing crisis only getting worse

Despite being a nagging problem for years, construction of affordable housing remains nonexistent in Grants Pass — and local officials seem powerless to do anything about it.

For the ninth time in 10 years, no new apartments were built in Grants Pass in 2018. Over the same period of time, nearly 800 single-family homes were built.

In fact, since 2006, a period of time that encompasses a housing bubble, a recession and the subsequent recovery, there have been more than 1,300 homes built in the area. The number of new apartment units? Fewer than 100.

Meanwhile, despite recognition among local officials that affordable housing is both a humanitarian crisis as well as a drag on the economy, to date, the only concrete measure that city officials have taken has been to ease rules so as to allow small accessory dwellings on a property.

In September, after the city's Housing Advisory Committee said the city is far behind other communities in tackling the crunch, a recommendation the city hire a housing specialist tasked with finding ways such as zoning tradeoffs to incentivize development has gone nowhere.

Another proposal that would allow contractors to pay city fees after construction is complete, rather than before, has yet to be enacted.

Perhaps most telling: The housing crunch ranked No. 2 on the City Council's goals for 2018. This year, it's No. 10.

The City Council said it plans on tackling other projects that have carried over from last year while it deliberates over the right course of action.

"Major action may take as long as two years," said Mayor Roy Lindsay. "We have a lot of things to work out."

Construction of new homes, many sold to retirees and investors from out of the area, continues at a strong pace. In 2018, the city issued 120 building permits for single-family homes, with a further 10 duplexes.

But no new apartments. Of the 93 units that have been built in the city since 2006, 48 are at Parkview Terrace, a low-income project on Fruitdale Drive which city officials tried to block. They were eventually overruled two years later by the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals.

In 2018, a 52-unit development headed by Medford-based OnTrack called Lincoln Meadows was approved by the City Council over the objection of neighbors, but it has been put on hold until funding can be secured for the project.

The low supply resulting from the dearth of construction of affordable housing has resulted in escalating rent prices, which have skyrocketed from a median of \$900 a month in 2012 to \$1,385 in 2018.

Housing prices have also been affected, with the typical single family home rising from \$175,000 in 2012, just before Grants Pass finally began to recover from the Great Recession, to \$280,000 in 2018.

Thanks in part to population growth of roughly 25 percent in Grants Pass since 2000, the lack of new high-density housing has caused rents to skyrocket and families scrambling to find a place to live.

Alison McIntosh of the Oregon Housing Alliance in Salem said the vacancy rate, or the amount of rentals available, in Southern Oregon is 1 or 2 percent.

"Other communities are struggling with affordable housing," she said, "but the crunch is particularly acute there."

Inflation, combined with stagnated income, has led to nearly 50 percent of households in the area falling into the category of rent-burdened — meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing and related expenses.

Additionally, the poverty rate of Grants Pass sits at around 20 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. However, only a small percentage of those people receive rent assistance.

Currently, about 826 families are enrolled in the federal Section 8 housing program, which pays part of a family's rent based on need. A further 350 are on the waiting list.

"The number of people on the waiting list is increasing," said Teresa Santucci, executive director of the Josephine Housing Council.

"Right now, the wait time is about six months, but that can be longer or shorter depending on funding and how many current participants drop from the program."

With all numbers considered, just what's keeping affordable housing from being built in Grants Pass?

Local developer Dwight Faszler believes he has the answer.

"In recent years, I've been working on single-family because we went through that horrible economic time when the housing bubble burst and builders like me either went bankrupt or lost their capital," Faszler.

"Since then, we've been wary of the investing in multi-family housing because we're trying to regain what we lost."

According to Faszler, multi-family housing is risky business because funding such projects involves taking out commercial loans, which are much larger and have higher interest rates.

Commercial loans, Faszler added, also do not have fixed interest rates — which make them a difficult bet.

Developers additionally see barriers to development because of the lack of buildable land. A lack of utility infrastructure on buildable lands and traffic congestion can lead to higher development costs, as construction has to account for all these factors, per state and local regulations.

"The two things the city needs to do, and do as fast as they can, are, No. 1, finish the urban growth boundary project so that land is available, and the second is waiving percentages of system charges based on the rent price-point of the housing," Faszler said.

To a lesser extent, a dearth of qualified construction workers is clogging things up, as well. Very few young people entered the trade for almost a decade following the collapse of the housing bubble in 2008.

Although the labor market will have to correct itself, the city said it has a plan to open up more room for development by zoning the area which was incorporated into the city during 2014's urban growth boundary expansion.

City Planning Director Lora Glover expects the process to take at least 18 months because the Oregon Department of Transportation requires a comprehensive transportation plan to proceed.

Another project in the works, which potentially will be a quicker fix, will open up some 90 acres of space between West Harbeck Road and Denton Trail.

"Since the area between Denton Trail and Harbeck has a stand-alone traffic impact analysis, we can move forward on zoning that area," Glover said. "We have our task force committees reviewing the different sections of the plan right now."

"We'll start having public meetings about it probably by next summer, not this summer but the next."

The area will be zoned moderate to high density residential, and developers are reportedly excited at the prospect.

"We have some looking into it already," Glover said. "It's going to be very interesting to see what happens when the land becomes available."

Although the city hasn't made anything happen yet, voters in November approved Measure 102, which allows municipalities to take out bonds in partnership with private entities and nonprofit groups for the construction of affordable housing.

Any plan to take out a bond must be approved by popular vote and would be paid back with rent dollars from the resulting residential units, from taxation or a combination of both.

"I hope it's a tool we use and move forward with," said Doug Walker, a local contractor and member of the city's Housing Advisory Committee. "The housing crisis affects everyone. Doctors, nurses, teachers and entrepreneurs aren't coming because there's no place to go.

"It just has a giant ripple effect. We can't easily attract businesses here because we can't keep entrepreneurs here."

Although City Council members have not been yet been briefed on Measure 102, the Housing Advisory Committee plans to do so at some point in the near future.

"We think it's a really effective solution because local communities can set the income level for the housing that they want the bonds to serve," said McIntosh.

In Portland, voters recently approved a bond of \$653 million to build as many as 3,900 units of affordable housing.

Other measures include Gov. Kate Brown's budget proposal which, if approved, would earmark \$406.1 million dollars for the housing crisis, including \$170 million to build or preserve more than 2,500 units of affordable housing around the state.

House Bill 2004, currently being reviewed by the Oregon Senate, would prohibit landlords from increasing rent more than 7 percent or immediately terminating month-to-month tenancy without cause after 12 months of occupancy.

"We have a lot of cases where landlords rose rent prices 50 to 100 percent overnight, sometimes more," McIntosh said. "It's becoming quite the problem because families suddenly become homeless with nowhere to go."

Senate Bill 608, also currently in the hands of the Senate, would allow local governments to expedite the expansion of urban growth boundaries of land to be used for housing.

Finally, lawmakers in Salem, have introduced a proposal that would require cities larger than 10,000 people to allow up to four homes to be built on land currently zoned exclusively for single-family housing.

Another facet of the housing crisis is partly driven by the federal government, which is investing three times less in communities than it did in the 1970s, according to McIntosh.

She said the Housing Alliance's main goal currently is to persuade state lawmakers to take out \$200 million in general obligation loans in order to establish affordable housing around the state.

"We're all going to have to act to solve these problems," McIntosh said. "We're going to need local communities to act, the state to act, and we're also going to need the federal government to step up and act as well.

"There's no silver bullet. It's going to take a lot of different solutions, but I really do believe we can solve the housing crisis."

Wednesday, February 6, 2019

UCAN Executive Director Mike Fieldman announces retirement



Mike Fieldman, the man who led the United Community Action Network for the past 20 years, plans to retire.

UCAN announced Fieldman's retirement Wednesday.

During his tenure as executive director, Fieldman helped expand the nonprofit into one of Douglas County's largest. UCAN provides housing, food and other services for the poor — programs that expanded under Fieldman's leadership. It operates buses and a Head Start facility. And while Fieldman was in charge, UCAN built a new facility on Northeast Kenneth Ford Drive and expanded into Josephine County.

In a press release, UCAN said it will select a replacement for Fieldman who will build on his legacy. Board Chairwoman Susan Fischer-Maki said the board is working on a plan to ensure the organization continues to thrive under a new director.

Fieldman expressed his appreciation to the community for its support of UCAN during his tenure. He also thanked the board and staff for their dedication toward UCAN's mission of creating solutions to poverty and improving the lives of people in the community.

"Because of this strong team of people UCAN has been able to make a positive difference in the lives of tens of thousands of people and families," the news release said.

The UCAN board has hired a consulting firm to assist with the new director's recruitment and the transition.

A transition team consisting of board members and "key" community members has also been assembled. Fieldman will continue with the organization until a new director is hired in approximately 9 months.



Sunday, February 10, 2019

Editorial: Mike Fieldman can retire, but his impact won't

It's almost impossible to imagine the United Community Action Network being steered by anyone other than Mike Fieldman.

His indelible contributions to this community — that have rippled far beyond our county's borders — are too numerous to list and far more deserving than words alone can award.

Fieldman announced his retirement Wednesday after 20 years at UCAN. During his tenure, Fieldman grew the nonprofit into one of the county's largest and began operating in Josephine County. UCAN has always had a mission of providing housing, food and other services to the poor, and under Fieldman's watch, each of those areas were expanded.

“We have a responsibility when we see something wrong to try to correct it,” Fieldman told *The News-Review* in 2013. “I strongly believe we are all equal and should all have the same opportunities.”

Fieldman grew up in Chicago, surrounded by the very rich and the very poor. He went to school with kids who had indoor pools and others who lived in ghetto-like conditions. And from an early age, that bothered him, because he didn't think it was fair for a kid who had access to a larger bank account to have a better chance of succeeding.

That empathetic and compassionate view drives Fieldman to this day, which you can sense whenever to greet the man. His humble demeanor, mixed with his love for this community, which is nothing short of contagious, is exactly what this world needs more of.

We're sad to hear of his retirement, but certain that the work and goodwill Fieldman spread throughout his career will drive this community for years to come.



Wednesday, February 13, 2019

UCAN Food Bank to pilot food hero program

United Community Action Network Food Bank and Oregon State University Extension will kick off a winter "Food Hero at the Farmers' Market" program from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the Umpqua Valley Farmers' Market at the First Methodist Church, 1771 W. Harvard Ave., Roseburg.

Volunteers will give out samples of food made using produce found at the farmers' market. Children will have the opportunity to receive a \$2 voucher that can be used to purchase a fruit or vegetable at many of the farm stands.

The program aims to give children a chance to interact with local farmers. It also will be the first of six opportunities for children to obtain stamps for a passport book. For each farmers' market the child attends over the next six weeks, they will receive a stamp in their passport book. Prizes will be awarded after the third and sixth stamps. The program runs every Saturday through March 23.

There will also be a summer food hero program in June.



Friday, February 15, 2019

Housing project for homeless hits some snags

A proposed housing project for the homeless in Grants Pass has fetched up against rocks — or train tracks, at least.

A spokesman for the development team that announced the Cozy Homes project last month said the project has run into some snags and is in the process of being scaled down.

The team, led by local homebuilder Dwight Faszer, had hopes of providing as many as 108 units of so-called "transitory housing" on a quarter-acre plot of vacant land in the 800 block of Southwest Foundry Street.

Despite an eager start, things aren't quite falling into place, says Doug Walker, a spokesman for the development team. The site is next to railroad tracks, and the Central Oregon & Pacific Railroad, which owns a sizable buffer strip of land around the tracks, has been slow to respond to a request to lease some of it, he said.

The developers were planning to use some of the land for parking and additional units in anticipation of city parking standards.

Without the extra space, a more realistic goal at this stage may be about 20 units, Walker said.

"We're regrouping at the moment," said Walker, adding, "The next step is for us to scale down the project. Then we have to evaluate the cost and ask if it's worth it."

Central Oregon & Pacific Railroad did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Walker says that even with a lease of the railroad's land, the developers always knew that the final proposal would never have achieved the full 108 units; the number was simply pitched to City Hall in order to provoke a comprehensive review, for planning purposes.

The project team was going to start with a batch of 16 units, then see where fundraising took them.

However, the long-term plan banked on gaining access to railroad land.

Lora Glover, the city's head planner, said one possible way to achieve more density is to build covered space for bicycles.

"It's a very small property without that land," Glover said, referring to the railroad property. "But what they can do to cut down on parking is build additional bike spaces."

"It might afford them a few more units. Many of the people living there might not have a car."

Walker says a second site may be necessary in order to build enough units to accommodate the homeless in Grants Pass. Besides Walker and Faszer, the other two members of the development team are John Jones, founder of JC Jones Real Estate, and retired attorney Michael Bird.

"In my opinion, two sites of 20-25 units would be most doable with the kinds of lots that are available in Grants Pass," Walker said. "Once people see how well it works, the second location will be much easier to get moving forward."

Known in land-use parlance as transitory housing, the goal of the Cozy Homes project is to bridge the gap from homelessness and unemployment to permanent housing.

If Cozy Homes gets off the ground, it is to be modeled after Hope Village in Medford, which opened in 2017.

As such it will be a fenced and gated community with 24-hour security and professionals who work with residents to overcome barriers in the way of an individual's transition back into society.

The project team hopes to get the same nonprofit that runs Hope Village to take ownership of Cozy Homes and run daily operations, because the developers do not personally have that kind of expertise.

The Annual Point-in-Time count recorded some 650 homeless persons in Josephine County in 2017. Data for 2018's homeless count will be available in March.

Many of that number are not homeless by choice. The vacancy rate, or the amount of housing units for rent in Grants Pass, hangs around 2 percent.

The low supply resulting from the dearth of affordable housing has resulted in escalating rent prices, which have skyrocketed from a median of \$900 a month in 2012 to \$1,385 in 2018.