

Recommendations Of the Housing Solutions Conference

October, November, 1999

The cost of housing in King County has been rising rapidly in the past few years, as a strong economy drives demand in a tight market. For the first half of 1999, the median household income was enough to purchase less than 20 percent of what was sold, putting homeownership out of the reach of thousands of working families. In the rental market, very low vacancy rates have led to rapidly rising rents.

Many groups have been promoting changes to state and local laws and policies in order to encourage more housing construction to meet demand. Representatives of a number of these groups met in September and October, 1999, to compare their housing agendas and to find common ground. This report reflects that common ground.

Following are a series of recommended actions that, if enacted by local governments, would have a positive impact on housing construction and a moderating effect on prices. This list is by no means exhaustive, but is intended to be a manageable policy agenda that would receive support from a wide range of civic, business, trade and housing advocacy organizations.

I. Regional Policy and Planning

Although housing affordability is a regional problem, most solutions must be implemented locally. Nevertheless, there are meaningful actions that can be taken at the regional level. We encourage city and county leaders to:

- A. Tie regional investments to housing production. Additions to infrastructure, amenities and services should be made in areas where there is both development capacity and a demonstrated desire on the part of local governments to aggressively pursue new housing.
- B. Make unused or underused publicly-owned land available for new housing and the related infrastructure and amenities needed for new housing. Such land may be owned by local, state or federal agencies.
- C. Balance jobs, housing and infrastructure on a sub-regional basis. Initiate planning among cities and the private sector within sub-regions of the county so that cities can respond to anticipated employment growth in adjacent cities.
- D. Ensure that more dense neighborhoods are attractive to developers and residents by taking maximum advantage of existing parks, open space and other regional and sub-regional amenities, and by planning and pursuing funding for new parks, open space and amenities.

II. Local Policy and Planning

Local plans and policies that affect housing production fall mostly within the context of the state Growth Management Act and the local comprehensive plans developed under it.

Now that the region has several years' experience with the GMA and with these plans, some weaknesses can be identified and remedied. We urge local governments to:

- A. Ensure that the housing elements of comprehensive plans clearly describe housing targets, density targets, jobs-housing balance goals, and the actions being taken to meet those targets and goals. Targets, goals and actions, in turn, should always inform city deliberations on policies that may affect housing production.
- B. Actively monitor housing production and the degree to which housing targets are being met. Policies and plans within cities should be adjusted to encourage housing production if targets are not being met.
- C. Monitor the balance between job creation and housing construction within sub-areas of the county, and take cooperative action with adjacent cities to promote housing production if a healthy balance is not being achieved.
- D. Tie public investments to housing production, targeting new infrastructure, services and amenities to areas within the cities that can and will accept new housing.

III. Public Perceptions and Politics

Few issues cause more local controversy than the addition of new housing. Since the GMA requires significant amounts of infill housing in already-developed communities, ways must be found to address public concerns and make public involvement in housing a positive rather than a negative force. We urge local governments to:

- A. Provide clear and straightforward explanations of development policies and processes so that citizens understand timely, appropriate and useful ways to influence their local processes.
- B. Provide opportunities for public involvement early in the development process, so there is less perception that all development plans are cast in stone.
- C. Take advantage of opportunities to see and learn about innovative housing development strategies, in cooperation with housing industry representatives, housing advocates and local civic and community leaders.
- D. Work with developers on design demonstration projects that achieve targeted density in innovative ways.
- E. Institute an ombudsman system as a place for citizens to have questions answered.

IV. Permit Process Changes

Although substantial improvements have been made in many jurisdictions, permit processes are a continuing source of frustration for many developers and builders, adding time and cost of housing construction. We urge local governments to:

- A. Provide opportunities for early cooperative interaction between developers, local governments and interested citizens, so specific code issues can be addressed before projects are initiated.
- B. Expand private sector outsourcing of code review processing when back-ups occur, so as to minimize delays.
- C. Employ team processing, and/or other management techniques in order to enhance coordination, predictability and certainty.
- D. Adjust permit fees and fee collection processes to enhance the affordability of housing aimed at low and moderate income markets, and to recognize the public benefit of new housing

V. Land use Code Changes

Land use and development codes have a large influence on housing production and cost, and some specific changes could lower costs while maintaining essential protections for communities. We urge local governments to:

- A. Increase flexibility in parking requirements in multi-family buildings by allowing the use of shared parking in nearby commercial buildings.
- B. Lower parking and/or transportation concurrency requirements in multi-family buildings with good transit service nearby or which will have a resident mix (e.g. low income, seniors) known to have low trip generation and car ownership.
- C. Apply more flexible development codes to commercial areas of mixed use buildings that will have light-duty commercial uses or will have low impact uses such as live-work space or artist studios.
- D. Monitor the impact of setback and building envelope requirements on the achieved densities in various zones, and make adjustments to improve the zoning yield.
- E. Institute minimum density requirements in growth centers.