

GUEST OPINION

Local cities have tools to address affordable housing crisis

By Michelle Glass and Greg Holmes

Thousands of households in Jackson County are facing an affordable housing crisis. In the next few months, the cities of Medford, Phoenix, Eagle Point, Central Point and Talent have an opportunity to take action. Residents will be able to help shape changes that will affect these cities for decades to come.

Every city in Oregon is required by state law to have local plans that "encourage the availability of adequate numbers of needed housing units at price ranges and rent levels which are commensurate with the financial capabilities of Oregon households." The Jackson County cities listed above have been conducting reviews of their plans, and all have found

significant shortages of housing types that are affordable for many residents.

That comes as no surprise to anyone who has read the paper or tried to rent a home recently. Currently one in every three renters in Jackson County — and three-quarters of low-income renters — are paying more than 50 percent of their income in rent, leaving little for other necessities like food, transportation and health care. Housing vouchers are going unused for years at a time because affordable units aren't available. Jackson County has more homeless youth than any other county in the state except Multnomah. Rents have increased 68 percent in the past three years alone.

These problems affect working people across the region. They are tearing our communities apart and will

drag our economy down if we don't find solutions.

Starting with Medford later this month, the cities are about to start a series of public hearings to revise the housing policies in their land-use plans. They will need to show local residents that they are doing everything possible to address the affordable housing crisis within their borders.

In the past, public policy decisions like these have typically been dominated by those with a vested financial interest in the outcome — developers, Realtors and large-scale landlords. Although working families, seniors, veterans, people with disabilities and other residents greatly outnumber the few who speak for the industry, the voices of those whose everyday lives are affected the most are rarely heard.

Fortunately, there are positive, constructive steps that local cities can take, drawing on proven experience in other communities. Here are just a few examples:

- Encourage the addition of more cottage-type housing in residential zones.
- Allow developers to build additional homes — such as going from a duplex to a triplex, or allowing more cottages in a cottage cluster — if some of them are affordable.
- Reduce or waive fees for affordable housing projects.
- Make it easier for non-profit affordable housing organizations to help fill the need.
- Enact a small construction excise tax to raise funds to support creation of more housing options.
- Require that in any development above a certain number of homes or

apartments, a certain percentage be affordable.

The problem is not a lack of solutions. What is needed is for city councils to act in the broader public interest.

The rental market must be stabilized to prevent a further increase in homelessness and ensure that households have enough money left over for basics. The Legislature will likely consider new tools for short- and mid-term stabilization. For the long term, increasing the supply of affordable rental housing is critical. If we don't do that, we'll still be having this discussion 20 years from now.

The hearings that are coming up in local cities are our best chance to get started down that path — but it is critical that the voices of those most affected by these decisions are heard. We strongly encourage residents

to look out for and participate in their own cities — starting with Medford on Thursday, Feb. 15, at the regularly scheduled City Council meeting.

A recent Mail Tribune guest opinion representing the local Realtors association said that a "progressive approach would not only work, but would be supported by many." The next few months will tell whether Realtors, developers and landlords are ready to work with local communities to, as that column said, "be part of the solution and not the problem."

The first step is for decision-makers to hear from everyone who is affected.

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