



Community Forum on Workforce Housing May 4, 2006

Sponsored By:
Save Our Schools
and Playgrounds
&
Ashland Housing
Commission

Summary of Results

Introduction

On May 4, 2006, thirty-four members of the Ashland community gathered at the Ashland High School Library to discuss the issue of workforce housing. The intent of this forum, which was co-sponsored by the Ashland Housing Commission and the non-profit group, Save Our Schools & Playgrounds, was to engage the community in a dialog regarding this issue, to generate ideas, and to make use of each participant's extensive networks in order to make further progress in the area of workforce housing in Ashland.

Participants were asked to respond to the following questions: "How big is the problem?"; "What can the City of Ashland do?"; "Where do we find the land?"; "How can Ashland employers help their workers live in Ashland?"; "Where do we find the money?"; "How can we build the political will?"

For the sake of brevity, many of the ideas generated at the forum were not able to be included in this summary. For complete forum results please refer to the attached list of comments.

Focus Group Question #1: "How Big is the Problem?"

There was much concern voiced regarding the problem of escalating real estate prices and an increasing shortage of workforce housing in Ashland. There was concern regarding a growing lack of diversity in age and incomes, as well as concern regarding Ashland's ability to attract qualified people to jobs. Participants were concerned that teachers, police officers and firefighters be able to live where they work so that they don't run the risk of becoming detached from their constituency.

Declining enrollment in our schools was another area of great concern. Our community experienced two elementary school closures in two years (Briscoe Elementary closed in June 2003, and Lincoln Elementary closed in June 2005) in large part due to declining enrollment. Participants worried about the ability of families with school-age children to live in Ashland.

Focus Group Question #2: "What Can the City Do?"

Forum participants thought that there are a number of ways in which the City of Ashland can help. Participants thought that the City could do the following:

- Start a housing trust fund
- Allow for higher density in all zones
- Limit lot and house size to promote smaller units
- Mandate that certain employees live in the City of Ashland
- Create a city-owned workforce housing development

The issue of more creative zoning and the City's role in that deserves further mention. Participants favored the concept of co-housing, in particular, and suggested that co-housing be allowed wherever possible on existing properties using existing homes with large backyards. Participants suggested that zoning could be changed if needed to add cottages in older neighborhoods in order to create more housing without changing the character of the neighborhoods.

Focus Group Question #3: "Where Do We Find the Land?"

The importance of air rights was brought up frequently, making it one of the central themes of the forum. Building up above city-owned properties (such as downtown parking lots) was suggested.

Parks Department properties such as the golf course, among others, were mentioned as possible locations for workforce housing.

Portions of the Ashland School District's property were suggested: The Lincoln "triangle" (near Beach Street); Willow Wind; a portion of Helman; Ashland High School practice fields; and fringes around playgrounds near residential areas at other locations.

Southern Oregon University (SOU) land was brought up as well, in particular, the land located in front of ScienceWorks (Walker Avenue & E. Main Street) and at the corner of Ashland Street & Walker Avenue.

It was also suggested that the City investigate possible land exchanges with Jackson County and the Forest Service.

Annexation and the possibility of expanding the urban growth boundary were also mentioned.

Focus Group Question #4: "How Can Ashland Employers Help Their Workers Live in Ashland?"

A few of the ideas that were brought up in regard to how employers can help their employees live in Ashland were:

- Subsidized, low-interest loans
- High-density rental units downtown that employers could help provide
- Consortiums of businesses to jointly build workforce housing
- Tax benefits for employers that provide housing for their employees

In terms of workforce housing for school district personnel, participants were interested in seeing the Ashland School District provide some housing for school district employees (using school district land in partnership with the Ashland Community Land Trust).

Focus Group Question #5: “Where Do We Find the Money?”

Many ideas were brought up on this topic such as:

- Grants
- Taxes and fees
- Donations
- Private investment

Participants suggested a real estate transfer fee, city sales tax, business fee, automobile sales tax, and a voluntary capital gains donation when selling a home, to name a few of the many ideas that were brought up (please see the complete list of forum comments).

It was suggested that if a program existed to encourage donations then home owners might elect to donate a percentage of the sale of their homes to a housing trust fund. A city-wide education / awareness campaign could direct people to the housing trust fund where they can donate money and homes.

Focus Group Question #6: “How Can We Build the Political Will?”

Some of the themes that emerged on this topic were:

- Community vision
- Education / Awareness
- Partnerships

Participants thought that it was important to first listen to the community to try to determine what the community needs and wants, and then try to identify common points and a community vision.

The need for an education and awareness campaign came up frequently throughout the forum. Participants felt strongly that members of the community need to be made aware of the issue and what is at stake. An education / awareness campaign similar to those done in other communities was suggested (ads on buses sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce).

Conclusion

Often times we have heard people comment that the housing problem is too big for anyone to make a difference. People generally feel intimidated by the scope and the complexity of the problem.

It was for this reason that at the end of the forum people were asked to fill out postcards with 2-3 things that they could commit to doing in the next month to help move the issue of workforce housing in Ashland forward. Ideas were pulled from the postcards to create the attached list, "50 Things You Can Do to Help with Workforce Housing in Ashland."

In compiling the list it was our intent to demonstrate that you don't have to be a housing expert to make a difference -- in fact, there are many things that each of us can do to help.

There are also many things that the Ashland City Council can do:

- Promote revision of codes to encourage higher density: smaller lots, smaller houses
- Support the creation of a local housing trust fund
- Education / awareness campaign
- Partnerships with Ashland School District, Ashland Parks Commission and other agencies
- Make the issue of workforce housing an immediate priority