



CITY OF SOUTH PORTLAND

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James H. Gailey
City Manager

MINUTES

Affordable Housing Committee

Wednesday, March 30, 2016

5:00 PM

City Hall - Lower Level Conference Room

Attendees:

Chris Kessler
Kim Coit
Tiffanie Bentley
Mike Hulsey

Richard Berman
Mike Duvernay
Kathy Bouchard
Isaac Misiuk

Adrian Dowling
Tex Haeuser, Planning Director
Joshua Reny, Asst. City Manager
Mary Jo Elliot, Research Analyst

Absent: None

1. The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m.
2. Josh provided a brief overview of the Committee's mission statement and the scope of work to be undertaken.
3. Committee members introduced themselves and discussed why they wanted to serve on the committee, and what they were hoping to accomplish.

Chris described what he sees happening in the rental market with rent increasing faster than inflation. He would like to see certain protections for renters and the committee to explore a rent control ordinance. He is interested to learn more about how we implement the Mill Creek Master Plan, which calls for more mixed use development and housing in that area. He would like to explore opportunities to increase density and add new affordable housing options where appropriate. He is also interested in learning about how AirBnB is impacting the rental market, and whether it should be regulated by the city. Finally, he wants to discuss how the city might engage and work with first-time homebuyers.

Richard stated he would like the committee to focus on helping low-income people, not those who can afford housing already. He believes the committee needs to focus on strategies that will result in increased housing supply, both subsidized and market rate. Finally, what can we do to protect tenants?

Kim would like the committee to define what is affordable and the people these strategies are intended to help. What is the demographic; the income range? How do we measure the problem? Perhaps we should reach out to partners and agencies that can help us frame the issue. Should we invite some guest speakers? There should be a comparative analysis of strategies and best practices.

Tex urged the group to target a small number of higher impact strategies rather than trying to solve it all. We need to stay focused. Solutions should emphasize economics above NIMBY-ism. Some of the recommendations in the City's Comprehensive Plan could be seen as radical changes, i.e. minimum lot sizes, etc. Housing is a regional issue, and we should consider that public transit is a related issue when crafting a vision for development. There is a lot in the Comprehensive Plan that addresses some of these issues, but we not yet implemented much of it because it takes a lot of time and labor.

Mike D. suggested the group focus on free market solutions. Prices are going up because of limited supply. Rent control is a knee jerk reaction that creates long term problems, unintended consequences. Mike provided a few examples of how rent control might have a negative impact on renters.

Tiffanie expressed interest in discussing amendments to zoning and parking requirements that could spur new development. She agrees we must define what is affordable housing and set clear goals/metrics for new construction or redevelopment in the city. Perhaps the easiest way to create more units is to promote their construction in the least expensive areas of the city, but this could raise other issues related to poverty and equity. She is interested in viewing the issue from the vantage point of students and young people. Many SMCC students are also city residents, and many are struggling with housing and food security. The committee should not be afraid of NIMBY-ism and should consider strategies to increase the number of housing units older and more affluent neighborhoods.

Kathy urged the committee not to reinvent the wheel. Housing affordability is an issue being address in many other areas. We should define the issue, set clear goals, and focus on a limited number of significant strategies. We should also focus on the qualitative as much as the quantitative measurements. We must understand the stories of our residents, and what they are experiencing.

Mike H. explained that housing supply is truly the issue. He would like the group to bring in a speaker to explain the state's affordable housing tax credit program. These credits are very competitive and perhaps we should consider methods to better compete, and increase the number of points when local projects are scored. NIMBY-ism

will be a challenge, but South Portland needs to pull its proportional weight to create workforce housing and close the gap between supply and demand. We should also consider the pattern of development and design standards that will enable more seniors to age in place. We have an aging population that will have unique needs and place an increased demand on rental housing close to services and amenities.

Isaac explained that utilities are also component of housing costs and should not be ignored. What strategies might we consider to help renters pay for utilities? He expressed reservations about rent control, and asked how there is limited supply for student housing when dormitories are being closed at USM. This effort should be a two-pronged focus, both on renters and homeowners. Three months is not a long time to address all these issues; perhaps this committee's work should be extended. We should do a comparative analysis and learn best practices as exhibited by other like communities that are also facing housing shortage.

Adrian suggested the group get information on the size of the Section 8 waiting list. What could the city do to create more units and decrease the waiting list? Implementing the Comprehensive Plan and promoting more housing and mixed use development, including subsidized and market housing, would substantially help the housing situation.

4. The group then discussed what research and homework should be done to prepare for the next meeting. The committee agreed that it should define the demographic that is struggling most with housing affordability. The group needs relevant and up-to-date data so that it can understand the magnitude of the problem. What portion of the population is eligible for housing subsidy? There's an unmet need, so how can the city help fill that gap? It was suggested that to a certain extent rent control already happens voluntarily, when developers are provided incentives and financing assistance to maintain units at regulated rent prices. The committee members agreed to do some independent research and create a list of ideas and strategies that could be discussed at the next meeting. Josh, Tex, and Mike H. will dig into the definition of affordable housing and collect some data to present to the committee. Chris agreed to circulate a draft ordinance for rent control that he prepared.
5. The Committee nominated and elected Isaac Misiuk as the Committee Chair. Mary Jo Elliot will staff the committee along with City staff members Josh and Tex.
6. The Committee scheduled its next meeting for Wednesday, April 13th at 7:00 p.m. and tentatively scheduled the following two meetings for April 28 and May 11.
7. The meeting adjourned at 6: 42 p.m.