

Public Policy Memo

I. Introduction

It is undeniable that housing affordability is one of the most pressing issues facing Americans today. The average American spends well over 30% of their monthly income on rent, and a significant percentage of Americans, particularly younger demographics, are unable to buy homes and expect to rent indefinitely. In fact, according to The Housing Affordability Index, “77% of households in America cannot afford the median priced home” and they predict that number to increase in the next few years. This issue is exacerbated by a national affordable housing deficit of an estimated 7.3 million homes (NLIHC). Additionally, urban areas facing rapid population shifts and economic growth are struggling to accommodate both current residents and new migrants with their current zoning practices and existing infrastructure. This proposal outlines a comprehensive approach to address housing affordability through land use and zoning changes, and the integration of environmental resilience into urban development.

II. Objectives

This proposal's main goal is to increase housing availability by developing and implementing policies that increase the supply of affordable housing in the state of Washington. Additionally, this proposal aims to further support low-income communities by providing housing vouchers to cut barriers to securing stable housing. Finally, the proposal seeks to promote sustainable practices by ensuring that new housing developments are environmentally resilient and sustainable.

III. Proposed Actions

To achieve these goals, several actions are proposed. Land use and zoning changes will be essential. Zoning regulations should be revised to allow for higher-density housing developments, mixed-use properties, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). This will help maximize urban land use, create density, and increase accessibility. Additionally, the approval processes for affordable housing projects should be streamlined to reduce delays and costs for developers.

Incentives for affordable housing development will also play a crucial role. Financial incentives such as tax credits and write-offs should be offered to private developers who build affordable housing that meets specific criteria, like meeting energy efficiency standards and proximity to public transportation. Public-private partnerships should be facilitated to fund and build affordable housing projects that meet these criteria.

Environmental resilience and mitigation are also critical to sustainable urban development. Development buffers and compensatory mitigation for habitat loss should be required to protect air quality and vulnerable ecosystems like wetlands and waterways. Compensatory mitigation programs, which offer incentives to developers that encourage them to mitigate the unavoidable ecological impacts of a building project, should be implemented. For instance, developers affecting critical wildlife habitats would have to contribute to off-site restoration and protection projects. Coordination between private developers, state, and federal agencies would be necessary to ensure these projects are guided in the most appropriate areas. We need these efforts to be collaborative to deliver both verifiable and durable conservation gains.

IV. Implementation Strategy

Implementation of this proposal will require bipartisan legislative action. State and local governments should be engaged to pass necessary legislation and update zoning laws. Public engagement will also be crucial. Public outreach programs should be conducted to encourage participation and gather community input, but Pew Research suggests that there is already widespread support amongst Americans for many of the policies outlined in this proposal. For example, 50% of people polled support denser development and 86% support expedited approval processes for affordable housing projects (Horowitz Kansal 2023). Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to track the effectiveness of these policies and make data-driven adjustments as needed.

V. Conclusion

Addressing housing affordability requires a multifaceted approach that includes land use and zoning changes, financial incentives for developers, providing targeted support for low-income communities, and the integration of sustainable development practices. This holistic approach addresses the interconnected challenges of housing affordability, social inequality, and

environmental sustainability, paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable future for all Americans. Implementing these policies in Washington State can serve as a model for other regions facing similar challenges. With concerted effort and collaboration, we can create a more inclusive and resilient housing landscape for current and future generations.

Sources

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