

THE FLAGSTAFF COMMUNITY POLICY TRUST
Flagstaff, Arizona

Discussion Topic:
Housing in Flagstaff



December 4th, 2017
Meeting #4

INTRODUCTION

The Flagstaff Community Policy Trust (the Trust) is a group of former or current elected officials and community leaders who come together to analyze a community issue or topic. Individuals are selected to participate in Trust meetings based on their knowledge and expertise of the subject matter (topic of interest).

Organized by Mayor Coral Evans, the Trust is designed to build a foundation of expertise and experience for the benefit of present and future leaders in Flagstaff, as well as other similar communities.

The Trust also serves as an opportunity to provide continuity and consistency regarding the history and purpose of long-term policy goals from formerly elected officials who are no longer in office and, with each meeting pertaining to a specific topic, it provides valuable insight regarding effective policy solutions for ongoing community issues.

BACKGROUND

The Trust held its December 4th, 2017 meeting at the Flagstaff Housing Solutions Center of Northern Arizona. The Housing Solutions of Northern Arizona is a non-profit housing organization, that was founded as the Affordable Housing Coalition in 1990, through the grassroots efforts of local citizens who were concerned about the lack of affordable housing in the Flagstaff community. Flagstaff Housing Solutions Center expanded from an advocacy organization to an organization whose mission is to help residents build opportunities for sustainable, affordable housing in Northern Arizona. The Flagstaff Housing Solutions Center's core values are safe, decent and affordable housing with an opportunity for upward mobility. Housing Solutions is assisting program recipients in an inclusive, respectful manner that maintains the dignity of active participation in achieving personal goals. Finally, the recognition that the entire community shares in achieving housing affordability is a key value of the Housing Solutions organization.



COMMUNITY POLICY TRUST PARTICIPANTS

December 4th, 2017

Devonna Mclaughlin serves as the Executive director for Housing Solutions of Northern Arizona.

Margay Witzdam represents Flagstaff Shelter Services and serves as their Program Director.

Mayor Coral Evans currently serves as Mayor of Flagstaff, was formerly Vice Mayor, and a former City Council Member. Throughout her time in office, she has advocated for greater opportunities in civic engagement, civil discourse, community revitalization, and sustainability. She is the City's first African-American Mayor and Arizona's first female, African-American Mayor. She is also the founder of the Policy Trust.

Sarah Darr leads housing programs for the City of Flagstaff as the Flagstaff Housing Director.

Erin Ulloa currently serves as Executive Assistant to the City of Flagstaff Mayor and City Council. In addition, she provides support services to the Flagstaff City Manager.

Allie Stender works for Coconino County Public Works Department and has spent eighteen years working in Public Health. She has been a housing advocate in Flagstaff and a Flagstaff resident for many years.

James Jayne works in the Coconino County Manager's Office as the Interim County Manager.

COMMUNITY POLICY TRUST STAFF:

Kerry Blume is the Community Policy Trust Facilitator. Ms. Blume has served as a non-profit leader throughout her work career. From 1998 to 2013, as CEO of United Way of Northern Arizona, she worked to improve the quality of education, income and health for those in need. She currently consults with community and public organizations.

Kyle Davis is a senior attending Northern Arizona University and Student State Affairs Director for the Associated Students of NAU. He serves as intern for the Flagstaff Community Policy Trust.

Housing in Flagstaff

For many Trust participants, the general response to the topic of housing in Flagstaff was bittersweet. There is large frustration regarding current conditions in the community and many of the levels at which housing decisions in Flagstaff are made.

The overwhelming conscience of the Trust was that more effort is needed to change public perception of affordable housing and more funding sources are needed to ensure that Flagstaff is serving all its citizens in an appropriate manor.

For the Trust participants, home for them was a stable safe place to live, where they could enjoy time with their families. It was noted that family, safety, community and longevity were all ideals each Trust participant valued. Participants also mentioned that these same values are shared by most Flagstaff citizens.

When asked what the Trust participants thought about housing in Flagstaff, the group conscience was that housing in Flagstaff is expensive. It was also mentioned that housing in the city is a limited resource and it appears only privileged citizens can obtain.

Housing Challenges

1. Community:

When focusing on the Flagstaff community, some Trust participants felt that the City and its community, do not have clear shared values. These diverse values appear to be derived from who is perceived to be part of the community, and what it means to provide certain opportunities. Participants mentioned there are conflicting ideas about wanting to create homeowner opportunities. Certain City restrictions do not appear to be consistent with the concept of expanding housing opportunities.

Participants also mentioned that the affordable housing issue does not appear to be a public or legislative priority. Members mentioned that homeowner concerns and requests often revolve around parks and open spaces rather than new housing developments.

One participant mentioned that housing is viewed, by some, as the root of other issues the City is facing. More specifically, new businesses coming to Flagstaff are finding stable workforce housing to be a significant challenge.

Residents frequently struggle to find a place to live. It was further stated that a prevailing feeling is that the community does not appear to value its citizens.

2. PUBLIC PERCEPTION:

Trust participants noted that there appears to be a discouraging public perception of affordable housing in Flagstaff. This may be due to stigma associated with individuals who live in affordable housing. Many Trust participants view affordable housing occupants and those living in historically poorer neighborhoods as residents seen regularly around the community.

Another concern expressed by Trust participants was public outcry against affordable housing or other new housing development plans in or adjacent to their neighborhoods, i.e., “in their backyard”. Many Trust members recognized residents’ attempts to preserve beauty within the community and neighborhoods; however, they also acknowledged there are not many more places for new housing developments.

Additionally, many citizens fear that new housing developments and affordable housing units may obstruct beautiful views and nature in surrounding areas as well as drive down property values. Trust members recognized that finding a healthy balance between building new housing developments and maintaining existing property values is challenging.

Trust members described having trouble with changing public perception about who really lives in affordable housing. For example, many citizens believe crime will increase with the introduction of new affordable housing units. During the previous Trust meeting, participants noted that crime in Flagstaff has dropped, despite new affordable housing units being built in the city.

Despite many public forums on the Flagstaff housing topic, Trust participants continue to feel that many citizens perceive of housing as a privilege and not a basic right. Discussion revolved around the perception that homeowners and renters may feel entitled to deciding about the types of housing that should be built in the community.

Trust participants unanimously agreed that housing is a basic human right. Trust members also recognized that, though many citizens may feel entitled to make community decisions, the inclusive voices of all residents may be lost or overshadowed.

3. POLITICIZATION:

Trust members also mentioned that the affordable housing issue is becoming more politicized than in the past. Concerns were voiced regarding increasing numbers of political officials influencing how local citizens perceive the affordable housing topic.

Trust members mentioned differing agendas being addressed by the City Council that interfere with affordable housing development discussions and legislation. The Trust conversation also focused on how elected officials and many citizens support new affordable housing developments until it comes time to implement them.

Next, the Trust discussion focused on how momentum for new housing development plans gets lost because public support or views change as plans are being developed. One Trust member expressed that housing development plans take time and, as public perception changes, a plan that was once fully agreed upon by citizens and council may be stopped.

Trust members agreed that it is time to develop shared City values regarding housing. These values should be as depoliticized as possible to ensure that all citizens are served in an inclusive manner.

4. NEEDS:

Many members of the Trust voiced the critical need for new general and affordable housing units within the city.

As the City cost of living continues to rise, more citizens are moving away or commuting from further distances, to be able to maintain a job and provide for themselves and their families. The Trust mentioned how this is a “wake-up call” for many employees and citizens as “you’re willing to pay to live here or you’re not”.

The Trust felt that this creates a skewed message to many people who live or work in the City. Some Trust members mentioned how this message may discourage many of Flagstaff’s workforce to leave and never come back. This is a problem as the City is already losing much of its lower socio-economic labor force.

Some Trust participants see the City turning more and more into a resort community where many of its work force members will live further away. The general feeling was that this shift will hurt the community over time.

According to a few Trust members, there are homeless individuals in Flagstaff that stay in shelters who are employed in the City. Despite employment, they do not earn enough to afford stable housing. Some do not have transportation to live outside of the city and are not able to commute back and forth to work.

Many Trust members mentioned limited resources in Flagstaff and identified this as another hurdle for new housing developments. One of those limited resources is financial security for new housing projects. One member of the Trust mentioned that Flagstaff qualifies as a metropolitan area for one federal funding source but it is too small to access other grants. Rural Arizona funding poses the same problem, the City of Flagstaff is too large to access some of those funding sources, as well.

With that said, a few Trust members have looked at factors that drive housing costs up in Flagstaff. One of those sources is Airbnb. The Trust felt that certain checks or restrictions should be placed on Airbnb to stabilize housing and renters' markets. The concern was that home owners charge rent with almost no restrictions, giving the appearance of protecting other housing complexes.

A few Trust members also mentioned that Northern Arizona University plays a role in the Flagstaff housing topic. Off-campus student housing reduces space for much needed general housing within the City.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

Many Trust members expressed frustration and others expressed concern about housing in Flagstaff. All Trust members shared suggestions about ways to address the issue and all were very helpful with recommendations and recognizing areas for improvement.

1. FINANCING:

One suggestion was for improved planning during preliminary stages of housing development processes. Many members of the Trust recommended that it is better to invest "more for one time" than a "little bit over time". A few Trust members reported not seeing this suggestion in plans for new housing developments and new housing units.

Investing more for "one-time" housing plans requires more money than investing "over-time" (usually the downfall for not being able to invest "one-time"). Some members mentioned that if more money could be invested for "one-time" large development plans, the community would see improvement for all citizens.

A few Trust members mentioned creating some source of local funding, A Local Housing Trust Fund was one example. Another example, currently utilized in Pima County, is a fund that developers can apply for to help provide housing units at a lower cost. It was suggested that local money in Flagstaff could do something similar. A CDFI (Community Development Financial Institution) can also be used to assist for local funding. CDFI's can make different financial tools available for consumers.

Some members suggested buying land from non-profits or other owners within the community to create better opportunities for the City to site housing units. This is taking into consideration that the City does not own most of the land that many community members would like to see become affordable housing.

When any development occurs within the City, affordable housing units should be included in the plans to ensure all members of the community are served.

It was suggested that Northern Arizona University could be required to identify existing City spaces, where housing units are no longer needed, that are either vacant or are reasonable to remodel. Some members pointed to this as another solution for lack of available space within the community.

2. OUTREACH:

Trust members recommended utilizing improved feedback methods to properly gauge community interest on the affordable housing topic.

Many Trust participants agreed that most citizen feedback methods are geared towards citizens who have the means to respond promptly. Trust members also noted that any citizen's participation can be limited depending on the required method of feedback. Trust members agreed that a healthy balance of different methods is needed so more citizens can provide meaningful feedback.

Many Trust members noted that working with the City Council and other community partners can help create a wide-reaching tool for gauging citizen feedback. Trust members also suggested that another way for citizens to participate in housing project decisions is to make voting by ballot easier than it may have previously been.

3. EDUCATION:

Increased public outreach is needed to ensure information about housing development projects is available for public access.

Trust members who represented affordable housing concerns also mentioned that the issue needs to be framed differently. Members recommended showing the community what affordable housing looks like and educating the public about application requirements. The thought was that if accurate public understanding of affordable housing increases, public support could increase.

The same thought process was applied to educating the public about tools that are available to the City and why housing decisions are made. Members cited a lack of understanding about what the City can and cannot do regarding housing.

Trust members encouraged re-phrasing the housing topic conversation. They suggested changing the focus from “everyone needs a place to live” to gearing the discussion towards “a variety of housing units are needed to grow Flagstaff’s workforce and our local economy”.

4. PUBLIC PERCEPTION:

In addition to re-phrasing the topic and improving affordable housing public education, members also recommend better public education about the affordable housing application process. For a Section Eight voucher, individuals are required to disclose extensive personal information. Trust members noted that many individuals face difficulties being accepted into affordable housing for a variety of reasons, with availability being at the top of the list.

Trust members pointed out that many public housing residents do not want others to know they live in public housing. The belief is there is a stigma that can affect interactions with other community members who do not live in public housing.

Trust members felt that if community members could better understand the vulnerabilities of having to ask for housing assistance, the community would be more sympathetic. Stigma is also a factor in preventing individuals from requesting assistance. There are known instances of citizens feeling fearful about seeking help, even when the family is in need.

Many Trust members agreed that housing and affordable housing is not only the City’s responsibility but is also the concern and responsibility of the community. The Trust felt that with increased community and organizational engagement, funding could become more

available and stigma could be minimized. Trust members suggested that support could come from the Flagstaff real estate industry, as additional housing could result in better profits.

Trust members felt that including the topic of housing as a part of the City's building community infrastructure would assist in improving public perception. Additionally, Trust members believe that a collective effort to de-politicize the Flagstaff housing issue and focus on affordable housing public education will encourage the community to fully accept additional housing units that will help grow the economy and the future of Flagstaff.

MEETING ADJOURNED