OP-ED Piece for COVID-19 and Housing

May 20, 2020

The pandemic and the economic shut-down are causing widespread hardship. The nation has spent a lot of money in response. It is about to spend a lot more. Some of that money proposes to address emergent needs, such as HB 6314 sponsored by Representatives Denny Heck, Derek Kilmer, Adam Smith and others. This bill would provide $100 billion to fund shelter and short-term rental assistance. Doing that is essential. Yet, local and national leaders also need to invest so we come out of this crisis stronger, and better.

Before the pandemic, important parts of our markets and civic systems were weak, and unjust. The local housing picture showed this clearly. If we were speaking about food instead of housing, we would recognize widespread malnutrition with pockets of starvation. In speaking of housing, we recognize that nearly half of Tacoma and Pierce County’s renters could not afford their housing. The local mismatch between wages and rents reached high into the working population. The home purchase market was unaffordable for many first-time home buyers. A notable number of people and families had no housing at all. This housing shortage showed our deep racial disparities. Although persons of color constitute about 25% of Pierce County’s population, they constitute 45% of persons experiencing homelessness. Housing patterns were segregated by income, race, and health outcomes.

This housing failure weakened almost every other civic system or interest: education, child welfare, health, behavioral health, wage progression, economic development, transportation, growth management and environmental protection, justice, and racial justice.

The pandemic made all this worse. It reminded us that housing is necessary not only for personal health, but also for public health. It taught us that a housing crisis makes a contagion or the next emergency harder to manage. It created a large wave of newly impoverished people and families that now need to find places to live in a market that was not serving them well even before the crisis.

In our pandemic spending, we should not seek to rebound merely to the prior level of failures. We should imagine a better future, and invest in it. There are precedents. Our nation has made some of its wisest investments in its own future, and some of its boldest re-imaginings, during crisis.  During the Civil War, when that war was not going well, Congress invented the land grant program that financed the establishment of public universities, including Washington State University.  Congress planned the transcontinental railroad.  It created the homestead program that helped to settle the Midwest (albeit on land taken from native people).  In the Great Depression and World War II, Congress invented Social Security, public housing, the National Labor Relations Act, the Bonneville Power Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Security and Exchange Commission, the G.I. Bill, and the basis for what became the subsidized home mortgage market, which opened up homeownership to the white middle class that it helped to create.  Much of this work was designed not merely to survive the crisis.  Indeed, the payoff for these investments was years ahead.  Congress made these investments in a re-imagined future.  The COVID-19 pandemic should also be an occasion for a similar re-imagining, a similar investment, and a similar bold leadership.

A better housing future is not hard to imagine. The City of Tacoma and Pierce County have both commissioned thoughtful studies, each recommending strategies based on our local markets and needs. The recommendations come in three types: **First**, we need to make it easier to build housing of all sorts for all incomes. This requires more inclusive zoning that allows appropriate densities in more places. It requires easier and more predictable permitting. **Second**, we need to give adequate and smart incentives to market rate housing developers to allow and, in some cases, require them to include affordable units in their market rate developments. These strategies would benefit households at the lower to mid income ranges. Yet, they would not serve the lowest income households, where the greatest need is. To do that, the reports recommend a **third** type of strategy. The key recommendation of this sort would establish a city and county dedicated housing trust fund to help finance the purchase or construction of housing removed from the speculative rental market through public or nonprofit ownership.  Much of this housing would be coupled with other civic systems: schools, colleges, child welfare, judiciary, mental health, and transportation.  Such a fund would make local developers more competitive for financing from elsewhere.

The result of all these strategies for all incomes would be a community resilience that will serve us all very well, through the next crisis and beyond.  It would provide a measure of racial and economic justice we would recognize. We could spend our enormous COVID-19 investments to provide more emergency shelter. That is necessary and helpful. But more shelter alone would not be the future we need.

Co-signers so far:

Tacoma-Pierce County Affordable Housing Consortium

League of Women Voters of Tacoma-Pierce County