

Summit: Build cheaper housing

HOUSING CRISIS

Here are some of the possible steps toward solving the affordable housing crisis in the valley proposed by those attending the Coachella Valley Workforce Housing Summit:

- A centralized effort, possibly in the form of a multi-jurisdictional agency comprised of numerous local stakeholders, to work as a clearinghouse and aggressively tackle the issue. The agency could be spun off of or coordinated by the Coachella Valley Association of Governments. The group would assess and collect tools that enable the valley to work together to solve the problem.
- Developers need to "get over" the notion of the 3-bedroom, 2-bath home with a 10,000-square-foot lot on the golf course and offer more high-density, diversified housing options.
- Become lobbyists to ensure California's tax credit program has a more equitable distribution of funds, said Dan Horn, president of Palm Desert Development Co. "We need a cohesive group to lobby the state and get a system that is fair." A larger percentage of the money often goes to more heavily populated urban areas.
- Consider affordable housing bonds or increase transfer fees or taxes that are paid when houses are sold and purchased.
- Employers are urged to get more involved and pool resources and talent to contribute to solutions.
- Senate Bill 303, the Housing Affordability Act, is seen by some as a viable land-planning instrument that would help identify sites, zone and plan for affordable housing.
- Reduce local barriers to affordable housing, make sure land is made available, provide more state resources and ensure local accountability.
- If you're a public official working with a developer, "don't disengage," recommends Christine Iger with Iger & Associates Government Interface Consultants. Rather, see the project through because the availability of tax credit financing is highly competitive. Local governments need to be an active partner.
- Planning commissions and cities should keep in mind that density is a key to making projects affordable for developers. They may need to change perceptions.
- Because federal and state funding for affordable housing projects goes quickly and is so competitive, cities need to be ready with zoning, permits and environmental clearances when projects are submitted. "When the project comes to us, everything pretty much has to be in place," said Jaonie Jones Kelly, executive director of the California Debt Limit Allocation Committee.
- Pool redevelopment agency funding, create more teamwork among redevelopment agencies and planning departments.
- Change perceptions that affordable housing must be "cheap." La Quinta sees it as it as an opportunity to put its signature on a project it funded for the long term, said Frank Spevacek, a principal with Rosenow-Spevacek Group who has worked for 30 years with cities on affordable housing projects. "Lead by example. We need to walk the talk. We need to make it happen."
- Consider attached housing options that offer offices within the development to avoid commutes. Some cities have embraced "village-like nodes" with mixed uses that offer energy and water efficient, more sustainable designs, said Loren Boch, president of Community Dynamics.
- Enhance economic development initiatives that attract higher-paying jobs and push for a prevailing wage.

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Afraid that more desert residents and potential employees will be unable to find affordable homes, Coachella Valley leaders gathered Thursday to address a looming crisis.

Only 10 percent of valley residents are able to afford the \$400,000 median-priced home and the nation's eighth-worst house-price-to-household-income ratio.

The 300 leaders from local gaming tribes, hospitals, businesses, school districts and cities acknowledged they face a huge challenge: find ways to add to the valley's supply of

affordable homes or risk an economic slowdown because of companies' inability to find workers who can afford to live here.

Economist John Husing told the attendees at the Coachella Valley Workforce Housing Summit that he expects 6 million more people to call Southern California home by 2030 - enough new people to populate Chicago.

"And the fact of the matter is, they're coming your way," Husing told nearly 300 representatives from government, businesses, nonprofits and other organizations.

They came from across Coachella Valley and Riverside County to discuss new ways to create affordable housing.

"You face an enormous challenge with (affordable) housing, and it is one that must be thought through. If not, these things will occur by happenstance."

Elected leaders know what's at stake.

"We all need to start getting involved and share ideas to keep this from becoming a real crisis," said Roy Wilson, fourth district Riverside County supervisor.

Orange County's "whole future depends on the 91 freeway," Husing said.

Similarly, unless affordable housing is planned and built across the valley, workers will experience similar commutes from Twentynine Palms, the Salton Sea and beyond.

A simple trip to Redlands will become a mess, Husing told the crowd at the Westin Mission Hills.

"You need to have affordable housing here or you're condemning people to an abominable lifestyle," Husing said.

The workers who need affordable housing options comprise the "backbone" of the county workforce, from police, firefighters and teachers to casino and hotel workers, said Marion Ashley, Riverside County fifth district supervisor.

Ashley urged participants to "open their minds and hearts," embrace a collaborative approach and think of smart growth and sustainable, energy-efficient communities that are affordable without the long commutes.

Among solutions proposed is the formation of a multi-jurisdictional, joint powers authority, or JPA, that would work through a public and private partnership to tackle an increasingly complex problem, said Tom Davis, chief planning and development officer for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Rick Daniels, CEO of the Salton Sea Authority, led one of several panel discussions with experts from government agencies, municipalities, developers, tribes and other groups.

With only about 10 percent of valley residents now able to afford a median-priced home, Daniels said, the issue is critical in order to attract businesses and a top-notch workforce to the valley.

Hospitals' recruiting hurt

As valley home prices have soared in recent years, it has made recruiting and keeping nurses tougher for human resources directors such as Hank Hudson, with Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs.

Hudson said he used the valley's once-affordable housing as a "hook" to attract qualified nurses. He can't do that anymore, he said.

He said he often loses nurses whose spouses can't find decent jobs that allow the couples to buy the homes they want.

Tribe a major backer

Although affordable housing has been a hot topic for years, the Agua Caliente tribe, one of the valley's largest employers with some 2,400 workers and another 300 to be hired before long, pushed for the regional meeting.

The problem affects the entire Riverside-San Bernardino county area, which, according to the International Housing Survey, has the eighth-worst "house price-to-household income" ratio in the nation at 7.9, Wilson said.

A recent survey showed 86 percent of Californians want to live in single-family, detached homes. But the reality is that the dwindling amount of developable real estate means developers will have to create new options, Husing said.

Higher density one option

"We're going to have to reinvent how we plan neighborhoods," said Loren Bloch, president of Community Dynamics, whose firm showcased some affordable housing projects at the summit.

"We're going to have to look at that word "density" because we're running out of that four-letter word, 'dirt.'"

Creating denser developments with innovative designs that blend residential and commercial uses often can be more easily funded, said Frank Spevacek, principal of Rosenow-Spevacek Group, another affordable housing developer.