June 1, 2018

To our friends on the Olympia Planning Commission,

Changes to land use policies – including the Missing Middle – are a vital part of our community’s strategy for preventing homelessness and, as such, are a key element of the local 5 Year Homeless Housing Plan.

As rental prices grow and rental availability grows ever scarcer, increasing numbers of people are falling onto the streets. Our own data, as a coordinated entry provider for homeless services, show that the number of people newly falling into homelessness has grown each year for the last five years in a row. The rate at which we are moving people into homes (no small thing – SideWalk helped over 1,000 people to escape homelessness in 5 years) is now radically outstripped by the rate at which new people are falling onto the streets. Too many people are being squeezed out of an extraordinarily tight housing market.

In order for SideWalk’s participants to find homes, and to prevent them from falling onto the streets in the first place, rental prices need to stabilize (or decrease) and the availability of rental homes needs to grow. We particularly need a diverse array of types of rentals available: studios, micro-apartments, tiny homes, accessory dwelling units, room rentals, and smaller, lower cost homes. Missing Middle does not address all of these needs, and our community will still have a lot of work to do if it passes, but it does represent a very important first step in the process of stabilizing and diversifying the local housing market.

There is another critical issue that is addressed by Missing Middle. It is an issue that cuts to the heart of our values as a community, and it also impacts homelessness. It has to do with the legacy of redlining and racial segregation in Olympia.

Olympia’s neighborhoods were designed to be white. This was done intentionally and explicitly over many decades. Redlining policies, applied in our own community, prevented people of color from receiving home loans. Racial
covenants in homeowners’ associations explicitly excluded people of color from the neighborhoods. Deed restrictions on property titles prevented sale of property to people of color (many of these restrictions, though they are now illegal and unenforceable, still exist on many property titles in our city today). And as these practices were shot down by the courts, restrictive zoning policies were created that prevented the creation of homes at prices within reach for many people of color.

Redlining, racial covenants, and racist deed restrictions are now illegal. But restrictive zoning policies continue to artificially inflate property prices, pushing homeownership out of reach for communities of color who have historically been prevented from developing the equity necessary to purchase a home in this era. The same restrictive zoning laws, combined with a regressive system of impact fees, are also suppressing the creation of rental homes at prices within reach for people with disabilities, senior citizens, and working class and low income people.

People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately people of color, and a whopping two thirds of the population of homeless adults are people who are on fixed incomes due to disability. These are the very same communities that have historically suffered the many of the worst impacts of discrimination.

The current single-family zoning laws are incompatible with our values as a city. Olympia is a community that offers a welcoming smile to our neighbors, whomever they may be. We are the community that rallied to the aid of Camp Quixote when they launched their protest in a city parking lot 11 years ago. As Nazi’s and white supremacists marched openly in the streets and as federal agents detained Muslims in the airports, our city council voted to make our community a Sanctuary City. In voting for the Home Fund, Olympians showed that we are a city that will not abandon the most vulnerable people among us. We are the city whose government signed the Charter of Compassion, and whose city council invoked that charter in a historic display of solidarity with the homeless in a recent and unanimous resolution. We are the city that created and nurtured Bread & Roses, Pizza Klatch, Unity in the Community, GRuB, Interfaith Works, the Bridge
Music Project, SafePlace, SideWalk, and many other extraordinary organizations. Because we are a community that believes in inclusion.

We are better than our history. Policies like Missing Middle, by contributing to a diverse array of rental options and new niche opportunities for first-time homebuyers, can help to reverse the legacy of racist housing policies, contribute to our city’s inclusive values, and help to stabilize the skyrocketing prices of rentals in our city.

Our city is at the start of a rapid growth in population. If we band together now to plan for thoughtful development of new homes, we can ensure that Olympia grows to be the diverse, inclusive, vibrant city that we all dream of. And if we work together to stabilize rental prices through smart land use policies, then together our community can still end homelessness.

Yours in Service,

Phil Owen
Executive Director