

WITH MISSOULA HOUSING PRICES STILL ESCALATING, LAWMAKERS AND CANDIDATES GATHER FOR FORUM

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A group of elected officials and candidates from across the ideological spectrum gathered with local real estate agents and others on Tuesday in Missoula for a three-hour discussion on how to solve the affordable housing crisis.

Hosted by the Missoula Organization of Realtors, the education forum was designed to examine Missoula's current housing market with a focus on how to increase the creation of housing, overcome impediments to creating housing and prioritize efforts.

The Missoula market has been in an undersupply of available homes for sale since 2012, according to Brint Wahlberg, a local real estate agent and the chair of the MOR's housing report committee. The median home sales price in August in the Missoula urban area was nearly \$523,000, which is a 16.2% increase over the median home sales price of \$450,000 for all of 2021.

Housing prices have been skyrocketing in Missoula for the last decade, far beyond wage increases.

Wahlberg noted that with a 5% down payment, a median family income of \$153,000 per year would be needed to purchase and afford

a median-priced home without paying over 30% of income to housing costs. However, the median family income in Missoula in 2022 stands at just \$70,900. That means homes are out of reach for the vast majority of people who earn paychecks locally.

The discussion on Tuesday was productive and touched on a range of subjects, explained Mandy Snook, the MOR's board president.

“We talked about different issues such as what can we do about taxes,” she said. “What can we do about NIMBYism (which stands for Not In My Backyard), and creating more of a labor force to get going so that we can get more houses online when they do get through permitting.”

The goal of the forum, Snook said, was to help people learn about the challenges facing the community in terms of housing and “leave prior concepts that were maybe inaccurate at the door and learn something new.”

“And I feel like we did that, personally, at my table,” she said. “I learned a lot of great information. And, you know, I think we walked away with some great action plans to move forward.”

Among the action plans discussed were a local option sales tax or a local option gas tax for communities to offset property taxes. Many people agreed that high schools should focus on giving kids an education in the trades to help reduce the labor shortage in the construction industry.

Snook said that she believes NIMBYism, the term for when people are supportive of the creation of new housing except when it's near where they live, is a problem in Missoula.

“A few years ago, I went to a great presentation, and in it, they gave pictures of areas around Missoula,” she said. “And they showed that every neighborhood in Missoula has multifamily housing, and a lot of them are really older multifamily housing that had been there for a long time. And so one of the ways that I think we, I hope, can get past NIMBYism is just for people to realize that Missoula has always been diverse.”

She said the community is better when it’s diverse.

“And let’s not put up roadblocks that then create situations where everything is just one type of family,” she said. “I think that if people were more open to how we operate best, that we could move on.”

As for what steps state lawmakers can take to help alleviate the shortage of housing, Snook said that’s not her area of expertise.

“My hope for the Legislature is that they create opportunities this year rather than hurdles,” she said.

Kim Chambers, a local building contractor who is running as a Republican in the Nov. 8 general election for county commissioner against Democrat incumbent Dave Strohmaier, attended the meeting.

“I came today because housing is such a big political point,” she said. “I’m also a contractor and developer and I have been watching Missoula kind of get funneled down where we were going to be out of (buildable) lots, we’re going to be out of (workers skilled in) trades and it’s something that’s very passionate to me.”

She said people on both sides of the political aisle know that there’s a crisis.

“We all have the same passion,” she said. “We want housing. We know that there’s a problem. I’ve actually been going to a lot of different forums, like the renters/tenants union. And they have the same concerns as we have here. I’m coming here basically as a builder, working with my real estate agent, and (the renters and tenants) are looking for rentals. And well, it’s still the same problem and so there needs to be a solution.”

She said that although Missoula needs to build more homes of all types, it has to be done in a smart way.

“We need to keep our livelihood that we came here for or what we grew up here loving,” she said. “And I think that sprawl would be the wrong thing to do. I think that we have accessible land that we need to develop first and bring our infrastructure out to and be able to be smart. It’s also going to be much more financially effective that way.”

She said she’d like to be able to give people the ability to subdivide their property.

“And maybe help give your retiree that maybe has a child that wants to come home, to be able to subdivide their acre to be able to provide another home for a family member,” she said. “Because right now we’re being forced to really have to have family members move in, either with an existing home or build on existing property.”

Chambers believes the Legislature needs to take a look at exempt wells in Montana, meaning small individual wells that are exempt from permits and regulatory oversight. Organizations like Trout Unlimited need to be a part of the discussion, she noted.

“We need to come up with a solution that is fair to everybody and takes care of a little bit of everybody’s needs,” she said. “With realizing that we are growing in population and we need to tap our water.”

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