
My two cents

Affordable housing: what can we do?

In the last of a series of essays on New Haven's housing crisis, Jeremy Brecher discusses the possible direction for a housing rights movement.

By Jeremy Brecher

Across the country, broad public support has developed for affordable housing. In the past three years, according to a recent New York Times poll, the proportion who feel local government has not shown enough concern for the homeless has increased from 46 percent to 75 percent. 60 percent favor more Federal spending for the homeless — and say they are willing to pay higher taxes for it. 65 percent favor building more Federally-subsidized housing — including a majority of those who describe themselves as Republicans and conservatives!

Yet the housing crisis often appears so large, so diffuse, with so many different aspects and players, that it seems difficult to translate such general sentiments into results.

Affordable housing for all will require changes at every level of our society that will not happen overnight. But the good news is that every little bit really does help. Every home made available at an affordable price means someone will not be living in inadequate shelter or homeless on the street. And every expansion of the stock of affordable housing will reduce the gap between supply and demand and thereby make housing more affordable for all.

Previous articles in this series have explored how housing should be owned, where it should go, and who should pay for it. *Making it happen* will require action by citizens here and all over the country.

Nearly everyone believes there should be affordable housing, but in practice there is tremendous resistance: from those who don't want to pay for it, from those who want available land and resources for other purposes, from those who don't want affordable housing near them, and from for-profit developers who benefit from the housing shortage and will be hurt by effective government and non-profit housing programs. Overcoming all of this resistance will require both a broad coalition of support for housing and a movement which directly challenges those who are blocking its provision.

The housing movement must demand, as indeed basic morality requires, that housing be provided first for those most in need. But it also must seek broad support by addressing the needs of the majority of Americans who are suffering from the shortage of affordable housing.

The New Haven housing movement will need to concentrate on priority objectives, such as:

• Conserve existing affordable housing. The housing movement

should ask the city government, all elected officials and candidates, and all members of the community to immediately begin actively opposing all conversions of affordable housing to condos, offices, or other uses. It should ask the Board of Aldermen to pass a Housing Conservation Ordinance, along the lines of one in effect in Hartford, that requires developers who eliminate affordable housing to create or pay for new affordable housing to replace it. It should demand that available money, such as the city's unspent Federal community development funds, be used to make our existing public housing livable.

A system-wide movement is needed to address our housing crisis.

• Convert empty condominiums to affordable housing. As of September, 1988, there were 844 unsold condominium units in New Haven — enough to house all the city's homeless! These are ideally located to provide scatter-site affordable housing.

The state Department of Housing currently has a task force investigating the conversion of condos to affordable housing. A report was due in May but has not been issued. The state and the city should convert the unsold condos into land trusts, coops, and mutual housing to provide affordable housing on a limited equity basis to those most in need.

• Build affordable housing. New Haven Development Administrator John DeStefano, Jr., now a mayoral candidate, stated late in 1988 that he wanted to see New Haven build 2,300 affordable housing units over the next two years. Construction of those units should begin now. They should be permanent affordable housing, leased on a limited equity basis, distributed through every neighborhood in the city on a "fair share" basis. Churches, neighborhood organizations, and other community groups should actively support and participate in the planning for that housing and for the positive reception of their residents.

The struggle for housing rights may well become as crucial to our society in the 1990s as the struggle for civil rights was in the 1960s. Now's the time for all of us to become part of the solution. ♦

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