

One of the best methods to affect workforce stability problems, according to Kaarin Knudson, founding director of Better Housing Together, is to address the reality that a majority of our workforce cannot afford the cost of housing in our community. “We cannot improve stability in our workforce until we can create stability in our housing,” she said, in a program presented to Springfield City Club on September 16. “The people building housing in our community,” she added, “cannot live in the housing they are building.”



Ms. Knudson attributes a large part of this problem to the fact that while we continue to build, we are building larger single-family residences that are, for the most part, unaffordable. She called for a shift to building the housing that is identified as the “missing middle” – smaller housing in duplexes, triplexes, cottage clusters, all with a much smaller footprint than the

typical single family home of today.

This type of housing is not new, she added. Historically urban housing had been cramped and crowded in earlier centuries, an example being Victorian England. The progressive American response to this overcrowding, which was replicated in the tenements of large American cities, was to plan for spacious communities. Although at the end of the nineteenth century, duplexes were still the most popular housing type, in the 1920s architects and planners develop idealized ideas of neighborhoods which pushed traffic to the exterior and segregated out non-residential uses from residential, creating the elements of what we now know as a suburban pattern which ultimately translated into development patterns that look like Levittowns.

As this trend grew and matured, the focus shifted away from the compact duplex and triplex to the expansive single-family home with its large yard. That trend accelerated with the development of the interstate highway system which put greater priority on throughput than connectivity and also split and segregated communities.

The result today is that in many places, like Springfield and Eugene, there is a dearth of this type of housing, and, in fact, our planning laws have in many cases effectively prohibited its construction with large minimum lot sizes and zoning that requires exclusively single-family homes. Ms. Knudson called for the need to “relegalize” the smaller footprint multi-unit housing, a task she says is fostered by the recent enactment of SB 2001, which, among other



things, eliminates the restriction on building this missing middle housing in areas now zoned for single family residences.

This is not a radical change, she argued. We can see remnants of this type of housing in older sections of the community where two-story duplexes still exist. In a recent visit to City Club, Springfield Senior Planner Mark Rust told the audience that SB 2001 would not result in wholesale change in neighborhoods, pointing out that change in the developments would be driven by the market. If it becomes profitable to replace existing single-family units with multiplexes, then a property owner might consider doing it. An assertive approach to implementing proposals for increased housing density in the range of multiplexes or cottage cluster development would result in neighborhoods that look a lot like older neighborhoods that already exist in the community, Ms. Knudson said. She showed an example of a small development on two lots in Portland where two single family residences had been replaced with two market rate residential units on a second floor, two small retail units on the ground floor and, at the rear of the building, an 11-unit SRO (single room occupancy) unit.

While the major benefit of this smaller, denser, and more compact housing is that it can increase the supply of housing, it also can become more affordable for individuals and families. Higher density means that the cost of public infrastructure is shared among more properties, the units themselves are less expensive to construct, and are easier and less expensive to maintain.



Ms. Knudson said that recent data suggested that there is significant support for this approach in Springfield. In community feedback presented to the Springfield Planning Commission last week, she reported Mr. Rust's findings that only 25 percent of respondents preferred that the City do the minimum amount required to comply with the new requirements. The balance, well over 70 percent, want the City to either encourage the expansion of missing middle housing or maximize the opportunities for missing middle housing.

Ms. Knudson concluded by saying that it is not useful to separate the solution to the housing shortage and the challenge of stabilizing and supporting the local workforce. The two tasks are inextricably connected and solutions must be developed which support both goals. The increase in the supply of missing middle housing meets that test, she said.