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Council Corner: Affordable housing boosts everyone's quality of life

By Bellevue City Councilmember Phil Noble

How hard is it for some people who work in Bellevue to find affordable housing here? Consider these numbers: Median income in King County for a family of four is about \$78,000. However, the average kindergarten teacher in the Seattle-Bellevue area earns an average annual salary of \$48,420, according to data compiled by the federal government. Medical assistants make \$34,130, waiters and waitresses earn \$27,860, and retail salespersons average \$29,190.

Using the general rule of thumb that one-third of a family's income goes to housing, a family of four with a median income could afford a \$263,000 house, or a monthly payment of \$1,871. Lower income families, of course, can afford much less.

Now consider this: The median sales price of a single-family home in Bellevue is \$635,500, while the median price of a condo is \$324,995. The average monthly apartment rent is \$1,162.

What these numbers tell us is that those who teach our children, repair our vehicles, police our streets, sell us clothing or serve us in restaurants either cannot afford to live here, or find it exceedingly difficult. Add senior citizens, people with disabilities and others on fixed incomes to the mix, and the number of such people grows.

Why should we care?

There are many reasons. If employees who provide the services we need cannot live here, it may become impossible or very expensive for businesses, schools, hospitals and other establishments to recruit and retain qualified workers. Moreover, traffic congestion and air pollution worsen when people are forced to commute long distances; families lose stability if they must move frequently and people paying too much for housing risk homelessness.

In a recent survey conducted by the city's Human Services Division, residents overwhelmingly identified affordable housing as one of Bellevue's most pressing issues. Over the years, the City Council, using a variety of strategies, has worked to expand the supply of such housing for both low and moderate-income households. Perhaps most notably, since 1993 we have collaborated with other East King County cities through A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH) to fund more than 2,300 affordable housing units for families, seniors, persons with special needs and the homeless. An estimated \$23 million has been provided to ARCH, with Bellevue providing just over \$10 million of those funds.

In coming years, the majority of new affordable housing built on the Eastside will be in existing downtowns and areas zoned for mixed uses. In Bellevue, city planners estimate that 80 percent of all types of new residential housing will be built in these areas.

With that in mind, the Council last year, as part of the larger Bel-Red planning process now underway, endorsed an affordable housing work program to evaluate potential tools to encourage more affordable housing construction. More than 5,000 new housing units are expected to be built in coming years in the Bel-Red area as major zoning and other changes occur.

Some of the issues the Council is expected to consider in coming months include:

- Should the city specifically decide how many affordable housing units must be built in Bel-Red, and if so, for what income levels should the units be targeted?
- Should the city require housing contractors to include affordable housing in their projects, perhaps offset by higher density or height incentives? Or should the construction of affordable housing be accomplished solely through voluntary incentives?
- Should commercial developments be included as part of a comprehensive affordable housing strategy?

These are some of the questions the City Council will likely address as it moves toward adopting a comprehensive land use plan for Bel-Red later this year. Ultimately, strategies adopted for Bel-Red will be considered or used in other areas of the city.

The bottom line is that providing affordable housing is not just about improving housing conditions for those who live in the housing, but improving the quality of life for all of us. I urge you to get involved and let your views be known on this very important topic.

Councilman Noble serves on the Eastside Human Services Forum Executive Board, the Governing Board Committee to End Homelessness (a regional coalition hosted by King County) and the King County Mental Illness and Drug Dependency Oversight Board. He is also the Council liaison to the city's Human Services Commission.