

**HOUSING ROUNDTABLE**  
LA PLATA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN  
Summary of July 22<sup>nd</sup> Roundtable Discussion  
Three Springs Conference Room

**Overview**

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, representatives of nonprofit and for-profit housing organizations participated in an “Affordable Housing Roundtable” that was organized as part of the process to prepare a Comprehensive Plan for La Plata County. Consultant team member Kate Hildebrand facilitated the two-hour meeting.

The meeting started with a discussion about the challenges facing affordable housing clients. Then the group developed a “vision” of success ten years from now. After identifying obstacles to that success and opportunities that could be leveraged, the participants suggested policies for the revised Comprehensive Plan. Finally, they discussed representation of housing interests in the comprehensive planning process.

**Challenges Facing Affordable Housing Clients**

The major challenge for clients of affordable housing programs is that their incomes are too small to cover housing, energy, childcare, and healthcare costs. The wages of most are so low that it is difficult to support a family, and many people are unemployed or under-employed. During the past three months, one nonprofit organization serving renters has found it increasingly difficult to collect rents due to unemployment. The representative from that organization pointed out that market rents are not adjusted when a family experiences a job loss, and emergency rental assistance is becoming more and more limited.

Energy costs are a growing household expense in today’s economy. Energy codes need to be strengthened to lower these costs and curtail environment impacts. Further, childcare and healthcare are issues affecting the families served through affordable housing programs. One participant noted that their organization’s clients have credit issues, usually due to healthcare costs; it is estimated that 99% of clients have outstanding collections related to healthcare.

With regard to housing supply, there is a scarcity of rental housing that is affordable to people with incomes of 80% of area median income or less. There is an especially acute need for accessible, affordable housing designed for seniors and persons with disabilities that is integrated into the community. Moreover, the housing needs of undocumented, non-English speaking people have yet to be addressed, although this population is growing significantly.

The costs of production and resource constraints are constricting new development of affordable housing. Private developers cannot build housing that is affordable because of high lot costs. (One developer’s cost basis for lots is \$50,000-\$70,000.) Roundtable participants suggested that the County address reuse of land and infrastructure and

ascertain the amount and location of developable land available for future affordable housing development.

### **Success 10 Years from Now**

During the next part of the discussion, roundtable participants developed an image of what “success” would look like 10 years from now. The resulting “vision” had four components: 1) housing, community amenities, and transportation, 2) jobs, education, and regional economic development, 3) healthcare and social services, and 4) resources to support needed changes.

#### VISION – 2019

##### Housing, Community Amenities, and Transportation

Ten years from now—in 2019—all La Plata County residents live in decent and affordable homes in safe, peaceful communities. Back in 2009, the County implemented a strategy to integrate housing efforts across jurisdictions and the unincorporated area. One result of this strategy is the diversity of housing types throughout the county including many accessible and “green” units. Neighborhoods are LEED-ND certified (neighborhoods rated as “green neighborhoods” through the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program), and many of the commercial buildings in the community have LEED certification as well.

The County’s transportation system includes alternative forms of transportation. Because homes are located near jobs and services, many people walk or bike to work or to do errands. In addition, many commuters use the regular bus service to commute between Bayfield and Durango. A secondary result of the transportation system is improved air quality.

##### Jobs, Education, and Regional Economic Development

As a result of a thriving educational system, there is a critical mass of skilled labor in the county by 2019. Consequently, businesses hire local labor, which increases local prosperity. Residents have jobs that pay decent wages and provide experience and training for career advancement. Employees at the low end of the wage scale have ample opportunities to work their way up, which keeps talent in the community.

La Plata County works strategically to attract industries that pay good wages and offer career development opportunities. In particular, the County is a leader in recruitment of industries that specialize in technologies and innovations. Many of the new jobs—such as construction in renewable energy production and green jobs—lessen human impact on the environment.

In addition, the incorporated towns are self-sufficient. Residents can work, shop, go to school, do business, and take advantage of recreational facilities without leaving the communities in which they live.

Healthcare and Social Services

By 2019, every family has affordable healthcare. Further, there is a clearinghouse for services and management of a support system that provides rebate programs.

Resources to Support Needed Changes

To realize this vision, the County has phased in a property tax increase that cushions the loss of severance tax revenues. In addition, there are many cooperative efforts involving the public and private sectors, and a robust network of nonprofit organizations collaborates on delivering services to low-income residents. Community leaders and residents alike view these collaborations as a positive community attribute.

**Obstacles and Opportunities**

The group identified key obstacles and opportunities that could hinder or aid efforts to implement the vision.

Obstacles	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Access to state and federal resources is more constrained than in the past</li><li>• The County also has fewer resources to invest in housing-related programs</li><li>• Political will is often fragile</li><li>• Our clients have major challenges. (We need better methods of reducing their reliance on public assistance, increasing their contact with the community, and keeping them out of institutions.)</li><li>• It is difficult to communicate that affordable housing in a range of prices will help to solve other problems (e.g., transportation and healthcare)</li><li>• There is a need for zoning and other land regulations for the planning areas (regardless of where the land is located); zoning and regulations should be consistent whether promulgated by the County or another jurisdiction</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Housing already has been established as a priority for the County</li><li>• The Regional Housing Alliance has an action plan that can be updated, which would establish who does what by when</li><li>• The County should work on growth issues with Bayfield and Ignacio as well as Durango</li><li>• The Comprehensive Plan should establish a strategic policy to guide recruitment of industries that are good for the community.</li><li>• New leadership is emerging through the comprehensive planning process and other initiatives.</li><li>• Affordable housing agencies could co-fund a central grant seeker &amp; writer</li></ul>

## **Policies for the Comprehensive Plan**

Next, the group brainstormed a list of potential policies for the Comprehensive Plan. Their suggestions were as follows:

### Density Increases

- Create policies, incentives and regulations to encourage density based on well-defined criteria.
- Create policies to encourage infill and housing rehabilitation.

### Energy

- Institute County energy codes that require new homes (and perhaps home additions) to meet 2009 international energy codes.
- Require LEED certification for all commercial development and whole neighborhoods.

### Fees and Taxation

- Implement fee waivers for attainable and affordable housing. This policy would identify specific fees.
- Establish property tax waivers for attainable and affordable housing during a specified time. (This policy should be considered an investment in affordable housing by the County.)
- Make appropriations from the general fund for affordable housing.
- Pay for the costs of affordable housing development through fees and/or taxes. (San Miguel County is a model of such a fair share program, which accumulates revenue from a variety of sources.)
- Set up financing mechanisms such as local improvement districts (LIDs) or special improvement districts (SIDs) to amortize the cost of infrastructure for undeveloped land.
- Establish a real estate transfer assessment or voluntary fee that is collected each time there is a property transfer. (Eagle County is a model.)
- Eliminate leakage of sales tax by promoting a “buy local” campaign and attracting competitive commercial development in Grandview to keep purchases in La Plata County.

### Resource Support for Housing Nonprofits

- Create a clearinghouse or resource center to provide support and technical assistance for organizations seeking financing and other resources. (This policy responds to changes in the priorities of traditional funding sources including CDBG and USDA.)
- Establish a County land-banking program to set aside parcels for future development. This policy would be one of a mix of policies and would require the County identify a revenue source for the program such as impact fees or other assessment or land dedication mechanisms.

### Regulation and Other Suggestions

- Work with the City of Durango to revamp development standards. The standards should:

- Avoid costly urban requirements and city requirements for affordable housing built in exurban and rural areas,
- Reflect the context and location of the development when requiring infrastructure improvements. (For example, curbs and sidewalks would not be required in undeveloped areas.)
- Be connected to housing needs including the needs of persons with disabilities, and
- Encourage narrower streets, soft path surfaces, and infrastructure that have minimal impact.
- Create a zoning code for the County
- Create a five-year housing plan that is approved by the County Commission, managed by the RHA, and updated on a regular basis. The plan would include a one-year action plan that sets development goals for affordable housing to which both the client and the County would agree. For example, the goals would call for development of a certain number of transitional housing and tax credit units as well as allocate specific County resources to support that development.
- County should include provisions for deed restrictions when referencing affordable housing in the new Land Use Code

### **Representation in the Comprehensive Plan Process**

A Working Group has been formed as part of the comprehensive planning process, which has been charged with determining policies for the plan, and Jenn Lopez is a member of the Working Group. At the end of the meeting, the roundtable participants discussed how they will work with Jenn to communicate their ideas and concerns to the Working Group.

The participants agreed to meet several times during development of the Comprehensive Plan, and Jenn committed to organizing the meetings. A participant pointed out the roundtable hadn't included representatives from Bayfield and Ignacio, stated their presence is critical to gaining the support for the housing element, and suggested they be invited to join the Working Group. The County's project manager of the Comprehensive Plan process said the jurisdictions would have an opportunity to join the Working Group and noted that an inter-jurisdictional group of technical staff would also be formed.

### **Next Steps**

As the meeting closed, roundtable participants indicated they would like to see an ongoing public involvement process on the Comprehensive Plan. Then they noted the following steps should be taken in the near future:

- RHA will update its plan, making sure it reflects the needs of people with disabilities and it includes an updated needs assessment.
- The Comprehensive Plan should "benchmark" current housing needs so it will be possible to measure future progress.
- The Plan should set realistic affordable housing production goals that reflect organizational capacities and resources.
- The Plan should tie housing goals to a budget.

Roundtable Participants:

Nathan Ballenger, NRG by design

Katie Bonamaaso, Mercy Housing

Herb Brodsky, Colorado Development Corporation

Nadine Cheney, Habitat for Humanity

Andrea Cohen, Housing Solutions for the Southwest

Brad Elder, private developer

Jenn Lopez, Regional Housing Alliance

Jason Meininger, LPC Planning Department

Julie Simmons, Colorado Housing Inc.

Pat Vaughn, private developer

Comprehensive Plan Consultant Team:

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