

Regional plan for affordable housing needed

Our view: Call to action has gone out; effort will require strong leadership

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

What's happening in Arizona and the rest of the country has been called many things: the housing crisis, the foreclosure crisis, the burst housing bubble, the subprime meltdown.

Whatever the description, the result is that too many people owe mortgage payments on homes they can't afford. The damage isn't contained to the family that loses its home. The effects creep throughout the neighborhood by affecting home values and prices.

The issue of housing reaches much deeper than the latest real-estate fiasco and the solution must involve the entire community, which is why a new effort to come up with a regional approach to affordable housing is welcome news.

Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas, Marilyn Robinson of the Roy P. Drachman Institute at the University of Arizona and Peg Harmon of Catholic Community Services told the Star this week about an effort they hope will evolve into a regional plan similar to the Regional Transportation Authority, if not in structure, then in process and scope.

Tucson and Pima County elected officials are also involved in the effort, and representatives from surrounding towns like Oro Valley and Sahuarita, along with religious leaders and nonprofit agencies, were invited to participate in an initial meeting this week and another in April. The effort must cast a wide net to be successful.

Participants in the Arizona Town Hall identified housing as a priority and came up with a set of steps to improve access to and the quality of housing available to Arizonans. The local group is going to use this document as a guidepost.

The need for affordable housing is obvious: People should be able to find a decent place to live without busting their budgets. For too long the mantra of "drive until you qualify" for a home loan has pushed lower-cost housing to the outer limits of our community.

As a result, people seeking housing they can afford to buy or rent often end up living on the outskirts of communities. The house payments may be lower than in other locations, but higher transportation costs can eat up the difference.

The definition of "affordable housing" depends on who is being asked. There are official benchmarks for some government programs, but affordable housing also must encompass options for senior citizens, young families, students, empty-nesters, people who are homeless, those who rent, and those who strive to put down roots and buy a home.

Access to transportation is part of affordable housing, as are utility costs, proximity to shopping centers, workplaces and schools. It also involves land-use codes, zoning requirements and planning.

The Tucson area isn't lacking for people, governments and agencies that understand this shared need. The shortcoming is that efforts are splintered by jurisdictions or organizations. Many people are working — separately — on many parts of a complicated problem.

While much good work is under way, affordable housing is a regional issue and should be dealt with as such.

We applaud the formation of a group to pursue creating a more comprehensive plan for affordable housing in the greater Tucson area.

One concern we have, however, is the likelihood that those involved with the many separate programs and agencies will be able to defer their own priorities and work together on a larger scope.

Kicanas told the Star that unless the group is able to stay away from "intra-agency jealousies and competitions" the effort would be doomed, and we agree.

No matter how noble the intentions, the effort won't succeed unless a leader emerges to guide the participants and convince all of the individuals to set aside their particular wants and projects to consider the greater picture.

This regional housing effort must succeed because without it affordable housing will become farther out of reach for many

Tucsonans.

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