

No solutions come out of housing forum

By Terra Breeden

Whether you own a home in Lake Tahoe or rent one, count yourself lucky to have a roof over your head. The housing crisis in Lake Tahoe is reaching a crescendo.

On Aug. 17 a throng of concerned residents met at the Tahoe Beach Retreat for a community meeting regarding the South Lake Tahoe housing crisis.

The meeting, hosted by Tahoe Regional Young Professionals, addressed the issues that have led to the affordable housing shortage in the community and discussed solutions to the problem.

Jenna Palacio, Executive Director of TRYP said, "This isn't your mom's affordable housing event. It's a serious problem and we are saying goodbye to a lot of people who can't afford a house here."

A panel of experts from Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Urban Housing Communities project, Tahoe Prosperity Center and Tahoe Truckee Foundation presented the reasons Lake Tahoe is experiencing a housing crisis.



Dozens of people on Aug. 17 attend a housing workshop in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Terra Breeden

According to a study conducted by the Tahoe Prosperity Center, the housing shortage is because of the very nature of the area. Quite simply, Lake Tahoe is a resort community that relies on tourism dollars to support the economy.

Employment in the Lake Tahoe community is primarily focused on tourism and visitor services. The majority of residents work in these industries where pay is low and jobs are often seasonal. Sixty-three percent of Tahoe residents fall into a low-income bracket.

Because Lake Tahoe is a world-renowned destination, many people from outside the community buy houses in Tahoe as vacation homes. With limited land to build and expand towns, property is becoming scarce. These factors combined have made Lake Tahoe houses expensive, and home rentals are becoming harder and harder to find.

“We are in a housing crisis simply because there aren’t enough houses for residents and there is limited room to build more,”

speaker Sara Schrichte from the Tahoe Truckee Foundation said.

According to the study by the Tahoe Prosperity Center, nearly two-thirds of Tahoe's houses are second homes, not primary residences, and the median home price in the Tahoe basin was 1,007 percent of the median income. This ratio was significantly higher than ratios observed in other areas such as Reno (530 percent) and the Bay Area (838 percent).

After laying out why the community is experiencing a housing shortage, the panel and audience began a discussion about what can actually be done to solve this problem. There is so much red tape from the state government and local planning agencies such as TRPA, that solutions to the housing crisis seemed daunting.

"We are always going to have a very limited supply and a very high demand for people who want to buy homes in Lake Tahoe," South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry said.

Yet, many of the ideas focused on solving the housing problem and boosting the local economy so that Tahoe residents can actually afford a home in the area where they live and work.

Heidi Hill Drum from the Tahoe Prosperity Center proposed said that building the economy in Lake Tahoe is a key factor in solving the housing crisis. If residents can generate higher incomes, they will be able to afford homes in Lake Tahoe.

"The way our organization is approaching housing is with a work force project that allows businesses to expand and offer higher wages," Drum said.

Another solution to combatting the housing crisis is to develop more affordable housing projects. All of the low-income housing that has been built in the Tahoe basin has been immensely successful. The Aspens, an affordable housing project in South Lake Tahoe geared toward low-income residents, has more than 40 units and all are occupied. In

fact, there is a six-year waiting list to rent a home in the Aspens.

But to build more affordable housing in Tahoe requires government funding for building permits, land parcels, and housing development. Local taxpayers won't fund these projects, so the state government – still taxpayers – has to step in and make it happen.

“We need affordable housing in our towns, but we are competing for government funds with cities like Fresno where people really need affordable housing,” Kerry said.

Once the panel laid out the issues and possible solutions to the housing crisis, the audience asked questions and ones submitted online were asked.

One of the questions focused on the tiny house trend that is taking the country by storm. “Are tiny houses available in Tahoe? Could tiny houses help revive the housing crisis?” were questions posted by a resident in the online discussion.

According to the panel, tiny houses require the same amount of government fees as a \$450,000 private residence.

“The fees don't pencil out. But I have a developer interested in building smaller units to make it economically feasible,” Susan Simon from Simon Consulting said. “However, it's a great question and worth looking into.”

Lyn Barnett, a local resident and founder of the nonprofit organization Saint Joseph Community Land Trust, said, “I advocate that TRPA set aside a large percentage of homes to be owner-occupied only and not be a second home for someone in Los Angeles.” Barnett used to work for the bi-state regulatory agency before starting his own consulting firm.

Barnett's sentiment echoed that of many community members because his statement was met with a resounding applause.

After Barnett suggested putting a cap on vacation homes in the Tahoe basin, many other audience members voiced similar opinions. Everyone seemed to agree that, yes, Tahoe is a place where people from all over the world want to live, but if we keep letting non-residents buy all of the homes in the Tahoe basin, pretty soon there will be nowhere for local residents to reside.

“It’s going to take all of us to solve the housing problem – the community, the city, everyone. But we have to do what we can to provide affordable housing for everyone,” Mark Irving from the Urban Housing Communities project said.