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From the Columbus Business First:

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From the editor: Stop being scared of people who need affordable housing

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Columbus Business First convened an outstanding group of advocates and others steeped in housing policy for our Big Table discussion this year.

If you're not familiar with it, The Big Table is an initiative by the Columbus Foundation to encourage groups to get together one day each year to discuss ways we can strengthen the community.

There are obviously many pressing issues facing the Columbus region but we decided to focus on affordable housing for a couple of reasons.

One, this is a core economic development issue. Companies looking at expansions are taking into account factors other than available land and tax incentives. They need workers, and workers need housing. If your region can supply both cost-effectively, you'll have a leg up.

Second, this is already a problem. Everyone may not be feeling it yet, but the proverbial lobster in the pot is getting warmer. To prevent the region from boiling over, we need to start taking action now.

That's why I wanted to hear from those who are deeply involved in planning, financing and advocating for affordable housing projects. The participants were:

Leah Evans, director of home ownership and neighborhood revitalization, Homeport

Bill Faith, executive director, Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio

Roberta Garber, interim executive director, Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio

Steven Gladman, president, Affordable Housing Trust for Columbus and Franklin County

Joseph McCabe, vice president of development, Woda Cooper Cos.

Marcus Roth, communications/development director, Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio

Steve Schoeny, director, Columbus Department of Development



JOHN LAUER

I want to thank them all for sharing their thoughts. Their input will inform our coverage in the coming months.

It was at times a disheartening discussion. No affordable housing project is straightforward or easy, with financing typically coming from an ever-changing suite of loans, grants, subsidies, tax credits and other sources. Rising land costs from the frothy housing market are making the projects more difficult to assemble, and more neighborhoods are being overrun by speculators and landlords unconcerned with the broader picture and blithely happy to let gentrification take its course.

Everyone seemed to agree that public subsidies can help renters afford their homes and developers add more affordable units, but federal tax cuts and state cuts to funding for local governments have left less to help.

Still, where there's a will there's often a way. The problem is there's not yet enough will. Simply put, not enough people think this is a problem. This lack of empathy, or foresight if you want to put it in economic development terms, stems from a basic misconception of who needs more-affordable housing.

A report this year found eight of the 10 most common jobs in Ohio don't pay enough for workers to comfortably afford a two-bedroom apartment, much less anything more for their families.

Schoeny pointed out that you can be a call center supervisor or delivery truck driver and still be below the area's median income, putting you at risk of not being able to afford typical housing costs.

McCabe said his company, which specializes in affordable housing projects, frequently meets resistance from officials and residents who associate such developments with housing projects from the '70s.

While suburbs are typically held out as the roadblock to new approaches to housing, the panelists said there's a good deal of "urban NIMBYism" at work now, too.

Some suburbs are becoming more active in encouraging such projects, though. Evans noted Whitehall's role in helping her organization find sites.

The need for more housing overall is certainly growing, but we need to ensure the affordable end of the market isn't left behind or shunted to neighborhoods without access to amenities or transportation. We'll all be better off for it.

Doug Buchanan
Editor in chief
Columbus Business First

