

Letter from the Co-Chairs

In the mere 150 or so years since the earliest non-Native settlers set foot on Alki Point in 1851, Seattle has evolved from a scruffy frontier community to a world-class center of commerce and culture driven by powerful economic engines and populated by a highly diverse, global citizenship.

Over multiple generations and through cycles of boom and bust, the city has continuously reinvented where and how it houses its residents and the ways it promotes the livability of distinctive, vital neighborhoods. Today's Seattle faces a set of challenges which demand that – once again – we rethink urban living and how we shape the environments that we call our home.

Seattle attracts residents for many reasons, and livability has been chief among them. A truly livable city offers not only affordable housing, but communities that promote quality of life, walkability, access to better transit, parks and amenities that enrich urban life. As Seattle grows, we need to ensure we keep planning for quality design, quality of life and the highest quality city overall.

An adequate, affordable supply of housing is the lifeblood of vibrant, urban centers. Without this, many who work here will be forced to move out of the city, with dire impacts not only on their individual lives, but also regionally: more traffic congestion, increased environmental degradation and decreases in the rich diversity that defines a vibrant community.

Today, as Seattle expands rapidly and experiences massive economic and population growth, we are held back by policies and historical precedents that are no longer viable for the long-term survival of our city. Some of the challenges we face are intrinsic to Seattle, for example tight constraints on housing supply epitomized by the fact that almost two-thirds of our urban land is restricted to single-family zoning. We are currently confronted by the reality of more dollars chasing a limited supply of housing than ever before in our history. This, combined with a booming regional housing market, widening income inequalities locally, nationally and globally, have created – and will likely sustain – a housing affordability crisis in Seattle of unprecedented proportions.

In this overall environment, some existing renters and homeowners don't necessarily want significant change, and are seeking to preserve traditional neighborhood configurations. There are developers who are benefitting from providing badly-needed housing stock, and some housing advocates who view housing as a right, rather than a commodity, and a right that is significantly constrained by structural issues related to race and social justice.

There are those who believe that private market forces can and should shape the future of housing in Seattle, and those that see the principal challenge as the need to extract new funding or subsidized housing (or both) from governments and from all who benefit from a glowing economy. Some seek to dramatically loosen the existing zoning and code restrictions on the construction of new housing, while others want to regulate rents and provide more enforcement of existing tenant protection laws.

All of these passionate and well-informed interests and perspectives came together in a 28-member task force empaneled by the Mayor and City Council to address Seattle’s Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (the “HALA”), and to develop a clear road map to a Seattle that sustains its powerful economic engines while simultaneously meeting the compelling needs of those threatened or excluded by accelerating rents and housing prices.

In our deliberations, we attempted to balance the needs of a fast-growing city with almost unimaginable new wealth and the acute needs of communities that experience systemic inequities driven by issues of income, ethnicity, and race on a daily basis. We also acknowledged the reality of the cyclical nature of economic growth, and that the recommendations we crafted needed to anticipate periods of economic uncertainty and contraction – as hard as that is to imagine today.

As we dove into our work, the HALA encountered one of the fundamental reasons the problem of housing affordability and livability is so daunting, and why previous similar efforts have failed: the politics of the issues appear to be almost intractable. The multiple interests gathered around the HALA table seem at times fundamentally opposed to each other – or at least in significant tension with each other – and each interest group is politically powerful enough to block any single-sided proposal. In short, the crisis of housing affordability in Seattle is a true Gordian Knot.

In this challenging context, the HALA spent the last 10 months seeking common ground. Our report includes dozens of recommendations that received high levels of support from the very diverse group of stakeholders gathered around the HALA table. These recommendations are included in the body of the report that follows. There is a shorter list of ideas – some of them brought to the HALA with great energy and passion – that did not win significant levels of consensus across all of the constituencies of the HALA. (These ideas are also part of our report, and are included in Appendix F).

A viable development-related strategy to boost the resources dedicated to affordable housing – **TO BE INSERTED HERE PURUSANT TO RESULTS OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

We have sought to untie the Gordian knot by presenting a comprehensive package of strategies that address multiple contexts, problems, and solutions. Alone and individually, many of these would not survive, but in a suite of recommendations, we found consensus.

In the end, we have agreed to organize our work around four key areas of inquiry, all four of which must be considered as part of the city’s unflagging commitment to a race and social justice agenda that promotes equity for all of its residents. These four areas can be summarized as:

- More housing (maximizing opportunities across the market)
- More resources for affordable housing (more subsidy, through a range of revenue generating mechanisms)
- More supports (for preservation of housing for vulnerable tenants and homeowners)
- More innovation (the streamlining of systems and related reforms).

MORE HOUSING: The inescapable reality is that everyone in the City of Seattle needs to make room both for newcomers, as well as those that have historically been excluded altogether from the housing market altogether, including individuals and families who are homeless. We've all got to slide over and make room at the tables of our many communities. That means more cottages and in-law apartments and flats and duplexes and triplexes and roommates and rooming houses in the two-thirds of Seattle currently zoned exclusively (and, historically, for purposes of exclusion) for single-family neighborhoods. In fact, we don't even think they should be called single-family neighborhoods anymore. It means prioritizing housing over free, on-street parking spaces. It means phased upzoning of areas in and around Urban Villages -- more 6 story building where there were 4 stories before; more 7 story buildings where they were 6 stories before; and more multifamily housing of all types in areas currently zoned for less density inside Urban Villages or very close to desirable urban amenities. An increasingly dense city also must have access to a robust transportation system, one that gets people out of their cars and using public options to move to and from work, school, and community activities.

In short, it means that our city will not look like what we're used to. But that's been the story of Seattle from its birth. Our city's physical form will change so that our character and values can stay the same: We can only hold onto our commitment to inclusion, opportunity for all, and affordability if we let our city fill in with more housing. We can still be a city for everyone, but only if we give up our outdated ideal of every family living in their own home on a 5,000 square foot lot.

MORE RESOURCES FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING: More housing alone is only part of the challenge. We also need significant, new resources to create more affordable housing. Everyone who has and is benefiting from the enormous real-estate boom of recent years -- the surging equity of individual homeowners, the run-up in land values for the land owners and developers, and everyone who is enriched by the upzoning (and added zoning flexibility) required for more housing must do their part to share some of that wealth with members of our community who have found themselves excluded from these opportunities. This means a much higher housing levy. **ADD RESULTS OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS/HALA AGREEMENTS HERE.** An urban growth fund. A healthy Real Estate Excise Tax for affordable housing. Finally, we must also redouble our efforts to engage our state and federal partners, particularly in areas (such as federal Housing Choice Vouchers) in which affordable housing options have been losing significant ground over the several decades.

Getting to these results will ensure that schoolteachers and firefighters, baristas and dishwashers, art students, the members of the cleaning crews in glass-and-steel office towers -- and even those who have struggled with homelessness -- can live in the dense, walkable, transit-oriented urban centers on which Seattle has pinned its post-carbon future.

MORE SUPPORTS: The current Seattle housing market is particularly cruel to renters with low incomes. It's cruel to lower-income families that seek to own their own homes. As rents and prices rise, individuals and families are too frequently displaced from their communities or pushed out of Seattle altogether. The HALA agreed that the most viable solution to this challenge **INSERT SOLUTION TEXT HERE WHEN WE ACHIEVE AGREEMENT ON DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES.**]. Additionally, we must ensure more supports are provided to existing vulnerable tenants, through targeted preservation efforts, as

well as longer timelines for eviction and more adequate funds for relocation expenses. We must ensure the necessary legal protection of access to housing for tenants with past criminal records. [We are also asking the city to consider supplementing the anemic federal housing subsidies with a Seattle rental housing voucher, which would allow more low-income families in Seattle to stay in the city.]

Commented [DW1]: This item is still under consideration and has not yet been approved by the full HALA.

MORE INNOVATION: Seattle has, from its inception, relied on the ingenuity, acumen and strong business sense and civic pride of its citizens. It's essential that we now turn these skills towards the challenges of innovation that can support the affordability and livability of our city. This means creating more streamlined approaches to the rules and processes that could allow housing development to occur more efficiently; fostering new partnerships for subsidized housing development; innovation in housing types allowed in lower density zones; the creation of Medicaid based housing supports; ensuring access to Sharia-compliant loan products that promote increased home ownership. The ideas we generate will only be limited by our potential to imagine them.

We now invite you – the citizens of Seattle – to dive into the body of this report and consider the many recommendations we have offered. The pages that follow represent the extraordinary hard work of our fellow HALA members, and many, many hours of conversation that pushed into the night and stretched our capacities to listen, understand, and plan together. It is far from a perfect product, and for its flaws we accept full responsibility. But it represents the aspirations of a diverse group of caring Seattle stakeholders, and our belief that we can, working collectively, ensure a future for Seattle that is vibrant, flourishing, equitable and accessible to everyone who seeks to call this beautiful place their home.

Faith Pettis and David Wertheimer

HALA Co-Chairs