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Encouraging Affordable Housing

Proactive — that's the philosophy of the Spokane Association of REALTORS® (SAR) which in the last three years has stepped up its efforts to promote innovative housing in the area to ensure that homeownership remains an affordable option for individuals and working families.

Although homes in Puget Sound and Western Washington are not always affordable for working families, homes in Spokane, which is located in the eastern section of the state, remain within reach, said SAR Executive Vice President Rob Higgins.

The goal is to keep it that way by planning how the area should provide for its future growth, which is expected to increase by a moderate 125,000 new residents in the next 20 years.

"We want to address this issue before it gets beyond our reach," Higgins said of affordable infill housing options. "Let's do it now to best ensure that we can promote affordable housing in our community."

In 2005, the increase in the median price of homes was 16.3 percent. The following year, the median price jumped 16.7 percent, Higgins said. The price surge led the SAR to join with the area homebuilder's association to develop an affordable homeownership taskforce in late 2006.

With the help of a \$3,000 Smart Growth Action Grant from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, the SAR hired consultant Michael Luis & Associates to produce a briefing on the challenges the area was facing in keeping home ownership affordable.

Among other things, Luis found that Spokane would sustain steady but unremarkable growth and that the overall wage growth for the area — which has been flat for some time — likely won't change in the near future. He also opined that pressures on prices in the Seattle-Redmond axis are reverberating throughout neighboring and nearby counties, especially as high-earning telecommuters move into the area.

The findings were distributed to about 200 REALTORS®, developers and government officials. The REALTORS®, Higgins said, held several meetings with city planners and one with the mayor to discuss their concerns. Later, the city developed an Infill Development Task Force that is made up of Spokane area REALTORS®, builders, nonprofit housing providers and neighborhood representatives. The task force is examining the city's current cottage housing ordinance.

Although Spokane has had a cottage housing ordinance since 2006, there have been just two applications for projects, said Nikole Coleman, a planner with the city's planning department. One development was never built and the other, she said, is in the approval process.

Cottage housing — also known as "innovative single-family housing" — provides compact, new homes within existing single-family neighborhoods. Cottage housing offers access to detached, smaller and less expensive houses. Cottages are often built in clusters and have shared common spaces. In a state like Washington, where growth management laws require compact urban development, cottages are seen as an attractive alternative to the traditional choices of larger single-family homes or condominiums.



The Infill Development Task Force has been meeting through the spring months and discussing the ordinance and what changes could be made to make cottage housing more flexible and attractive for developers in hopes of encouraging them to build the smaller homes. REALTORS® have been front and center in these discussions, Higgins said.

The proposed changes are aimed at providing more flexibility for developers to build cottage communities. They would increase the allowable square footage for the cottages from 1,000 square feet to 1,300 square feet and would decrease the maximum and minimum number of cottage homes required to be built in a cluster.

Another proposed change would delete the requirement that no more than 50 percent of the homes in a cluster have a main floor that is 650 feet or less.

After being reviewed by the Spokane planning department staff, the proposed changes will go to the City of Spokane Plan Commission for review, said Coleman. If approved by the Plan Commission, the proposed changes still will need the approval of the Spokane City Council, which is expected to review the changes this summer.

After tackling the cottage housing ordinances, the Infill Development Task Force will focus its efforts on townhouse development, said Coleman.

The Spokane Association of REALTORS® — which represents about 1,800 REALTORS® — expects to be part of that debate, too. Higgins attributes the association's increased involvement in growth management dialogue in Spokane to the research it helped produce with the NAR Smart Growth Action Grant.

"It really moved us forward. Without it, we would have been talking among ourselves," Higgins said. "We became a major player in the whole effort as a result of the grant." ●

