

Missoula Housing Summit
June 3, 2010
Final Panel: Community Strategies

Panelists:

Dr. William Hettinger, moderator
Mayor John Engen
Beki Hartmann, Director, ASUM Off-Campus Renter Center
Brint Wahlberg, President, Missoula Organization of Realtors
Gene Mostad, Mostad Construction
Kelly Katz, Lender, First Montana Bank
Collin Bangs, Missoula Realtor and developer

Developing housing for Missoula's workforce will require smart economic development, creative funding, public support and political will, panelists at the final session of the Missoula Housing Summit said.

Economic development is key, several panelists said, and Missoula will have to overcome an anti-growth attitude that often surfaces in discussions of housing development.

"In Missoula, growth is a dirty word," said Realtor and developer Collin Bangs. "We have to market the social benefit of affordable housing for everyone."

We must move ahead and talk about the basics, said Mayor John Engen: "Where do we put it, and how do we pay for it?"

Most people understand and support reasonable, positive growth that is not just growth for growth's sake. We can grow well, and we can grow sustainably, he said.

"If you're not growing, you're dying," Mayor Engen said. "We need good jobs, and we need good places to live... Let's make good choices about how we grow so that we remain a good place."

Among the areas for local government to discuss are:

- Building the businesses we have so that they may pay higher wages.

- Employer -assisted housing, with the City of Missoula as leader. The City subsidizes health insurance for its employees, a model that could apply to housing. Could we think about benefits in a different way?
- Meaningful subsidy for moderate-income households.

So how do we move forward? Suggestions from the panel included:

- Work on ways to make lots affordable for developers.
- Work on compromise in politically sensitive parts of town, such as Third Street west of Reserve Street.
- Educate the community about the need for affordable housing for average Missoulians.
- Involve the younger business community.
- Concentrate on urban renewal districts, where money is available
- Attract other partners. For instance, help the administration of the University of Montana think about developing housing for students.
- Explore the promising market for townhomes.
- Involve UM students in neighborhood councils to ease tensions.
- Consider lower fees for nonprofit projects.
- Develop rentals as well as homes for ownership.
- Build a close partnership among government and nonprofit programs and the free market.
- Support the Missoula Organization of Realtors' Front Porch initiative.

Missoula is not without problems, Bangs said, but the number of people who spent the day at the Housing Summit working on housing is promising. And Missoula and Montana are well off compared to the rest of the nation. Our home foreclosure rate is 1 percent; we're one of only five states with a rate of less than 5 percent.

"I don't know what the next steps are going to be," Bangs said. "But the doors are opening up."

#