

27 Aug 2019 Martha Bryson

I want to talk to you today about our need for housing here in Lane County. Some are giving me flak for urging you to consider putting together an initiative for a housing bond, saying they won't support this until they see the details, what the housing per unit will be to construct – not trusting the developers who inflate costs, how “affordable” the rent will be on such housing, etc. My response has been that we need to convince you commissioners we desperately need more housing, specifically income-based affordable housing. I'm being told I'm wasting my time because surely, you already know how badly more housing is needed.

I'm here today to make sure you do know why we need more housing. We all see the homeless on the street, and know they need housing. By the way, the Coordinated Entry system the county uses, by definition only serves the “most vulnerable.” But, I do not meet the screening criteria to access rent subsidies or any other program currently in place in Lane County. There are thousands of us who are the invisible homeless, who need affordable housing, not because we don't have income, but because the regular rental market is priced out of our budgets, and we are not poor enough to qualify for programs through the housing authority or St. Vincent de Paul.

Let's talk affordability. Tax credit rental properties are generally priced below the over-inflated regular rental market and are still not affordable for those of us on a fixed income without also having a Section 8 voucher or some other rental subsidy program that currently we do not have in place here. Let's talk Section 8.

The housing authority has decided to sell 112 single family dwellings, publicly owned and scattered throughout this area. They are selling these properties to use the money to build more housing. The first 12 sold and because those families were displaced by the housing authority, these families were income eligible for and received Section 8 vouchers. After months of trying to find affordable housing in the regular rental market, they couldn't find replacement housing they could afford even with the vouchers. Every rental was priced too high for their budgets, and the vouchers were returned unused to the housing authority.

Now let's talk about the need for housing for those of us who are disabled and/or elderly, who live on a fixed budget. There is NO housing in the regular rental market I can afford and the rents keep rising. And, now there are new barriers in place such as one needs a credit score of 600 or better to even apply, in addition to having three times the rent amount in income. I lost my housing 2 years ago and applied for every vacancy I could find that were ground floor units. Some complexes said they hadn't had a ground floor vacancy in 4 or 5 years. Some property mgmt. companies wouldn't tell me if a vacant unit was on the ground floor even after I told them I'm in a wheelchair. In May 2018 I was calling every day the prop mgmt. companies with whom I'd applied. Finally, one exasperated worker asked me to stop calling because they had over 40 applicants for every vacancy, and most had far more income than I. I began crying in desperation saying I would become homeless if I couldn't find some place to rent. He coldly said, “Lady, I have 140 people in that same boat, hounding me to rent to them!”

That next month I began living in a used RV with no heat or running water, dependent on someone bringing me jugs of water daily so I could wash my dishes and flush my toilet down to the sewer! I lived in that RV, where my w/c couldn't fit, draggin myself around on crutches to move about. I was depressed and angry that I couldn't access decent housing. Then, I began to run into other woman over 60 who'd lost their housing in the past 3 years, all of them either sleeping on the street, or on someone's couch, desperate for adequate housing they could afford.

I'll be coming back again and again until I've told you all the stories about people who need housing, to make sure you know how bad our housing crisis really is.