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Nov 11, 12:00 PM | last updated Nov 12, 12:14 PM

Charles Royer: Do something about middle class housing prices

By David Brewster

Former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer pens an interesting think-piece in Sunday's *Seattle Times*, urging us to pay more attention to the squeeze on middle class housing in high-cost Seattle. The essay is very diplomatic, as befits a former mayor, but it scores some valuable direct hits on local politics.

Gingerly, Royer calls for a "conversation" about this topic, using a word that normally suggests that the proposer of some strong medicine doesn't really want to be candid. What he's saying is that the city has done a fair job in building low-income housing, going from 8,000 subsidized units to 21,000 today. But what about the middle class?

Royer, who is a national expert on urban problems from his 12 years as Seattle's mayor and then as director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, worries about the teachers, firefighters, and invaluable Seattle workers who make decent salaries but simply can't buy into Seattle's superheated real estate market -- and don't qualify for low income housing. They have to live far away, spend hours in long commutes, and contribute to sprawl and carbon emissions. Families are moving out (a problem Royer as mayor tried to address in numerous "Seattle is a Kidsplace" initiatives), making it harder to support public schools and parks.

Some figures Royer cites put the situation in a nutshell:

In 1980, the median value of a house in Seattle was about \$65,000. The entry-level firefighter qualified for a house valued at about \$75,000, some 15 percent more than needed to buy the "average" house. In 2006, the median home value in Seattle was about \$449,000. That year, the entry-level firefighter could qualify for a house valued at about \$228,000, some 95 percent less than needed to buy the "average" Seattle house.

The problem is, city leaders have done little more than hand out crying towels about this situation. Better politics has been to sock it to developers of fancy new condos, making them pay for greater height by building low-income housing. (In turn, that raises the prices on the units in the condos.) Meanwhile, affluent and politically organized neighborhoods put the squeeze on new apartments, demanding amenities like storefronts and limiting the number of apartments allowed, driving costs up further.

Royer lists some of the ideas that "should be on the table," such as multifamily property-tax exemptions, transportation investments in dense, walkable neighborhoods, and programs to help employers give their employees more living choices closer to work.

Significantly missing from his list is "inclusionary zoning," a popular idea (though not with local developers) that requires all new housing developments beyond a certain number of units to include a small percentage of units that must be sold at significantly discounted prices, putting a few in reach of renters of modest means. (Of course that means the remaining units get slightly more expensive.) Denver and Montgomery County (a D.C. suburb) are leaders in this idea.

As Royer rightly notes, Seattle is becoming a city both richer and poorer. Talk to law firms, and they will tell you how the attorneys can live locally but the support staff has to commute from Tacoma or Kent. It's a recipe for bad class feelings. The problem is, the politics of helping the middle class always runs into complaints about the plight of the poor. That's the point where most local politicians retreat from "middle class welfare."

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Little wonder that Royer raises these essential questions with such a delicate tone. He's poking a great big nest of bees.

David Brewster is Crosscut's publisher. You can e-mail him at david.brewster@crosscut.com.

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WHATIF

Posted by: [kieth](#) on Nov 11, 2007 3:12 PM

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What if we had an ideal city, good transit, healthy economy, dense housing along with notsodense housing? and what if the land value increased toward the center of this urban paragon so that, viewed as a 3D model, the valuation model would shape itself like a pyramidal tent with the highest valuation at the center?

That "tent" was, at one time, a common metaphor for urban land economics and planning. It was regarded (and probably still is regarded) as a "normal" condition. Seattle has become normal. The demand for close-in housing has become insistent. I think market distorting (and probably largely ineffective palliatives) such as:

"... multifamily property-tax exemptions, transportation investments in dense, walkable neighborhoods, and programs to help employers give their employees more living choices closer to work"

are merely stage set devices to scam the public in general, or as Mr. B. notes, the full price buyers. What is so bad about policemen living in Kirkland, or Shoreline? how many New York policemen live in Manhattan? they work there don't they? is it OK for them to live in Staten Island? how about New Jersey?

When Mr. Royer was mayor (late 80s I think) he was focused on bringing jobs to Seattle. He was a developer-friendly mayor and, I have to say, he was a good mayor. But it should be understood that if you succeed in bring jobs to Seattle you also bring demand for housing and that demand forces prices up. It might be nice to theorize how we can have lots of jobs and cheap housing at the same time but those two conditions don't go together.

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Posted by: [Andrew_Taylor](#) on Nov 11, 2007 7:49 PM

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The link to Royer's Seattle Times article sends you to:

"Battlefield Report From the Evolution War" in the NY Times!

What you really want is:

<http://tinyurl.com/2jnfjb>

Love
Andrew

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» [Thanks, Andrew](#) Posted by: [Lucy Mohl](#) on Nov 12, 2007 12:13 PM



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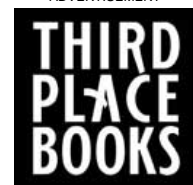
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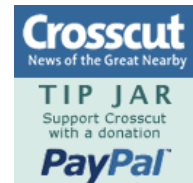
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