

Rental Housing Research Stakeholder Group Meeting Minutes

West Central Community Center, Newton Room

1603 N. Belt Street, Spokane, WA

March 22, 2016, 3:45pm-5:15pm

Stakeholder Introductions

Charter and Stakeholder Group Outcome Review

Julie Banks, Chair

- Reviewed the purpose of stakeholder group, emphasizing it is a citizen-driven process and not a city-driven process.

Heather Trautman, Facilitator

- Explained change in location due to expected increase in gallery attendance. Asked whether there were any objections that the meeting be recorded by a member of the gallery (no objections).
- Reviewed ground rules and meeting agenda.

Discussion of Survey Requests by Stakeholder Groups

- Noted that some stakeholders have previously expressed interest in a survey or study regarding rental housing issues in the city. Asked for stakeholders' feedback on whether they were interested in a survey and if so, what form it might take.
- Questions were raised as to whether a survey would be an informal survey or a scientific study. The issue of whether there should be separate surveys or studies for each representative stakeholder group or a single survey was also discussed.
- Several stakeholders expressed the opinion that the only way to collect reliable and unbiased data on the condition of rental housing in Spokane would be a single scientific study performed by a professional firm.
- Asked whether the group has concluded whether a survey would be productive.
 - **Yes – 9 votes**
 - **No – 3 votes**
 - Responses emphasized most of the issues raised during the discussion.
- Noted there was a majority consensus for a survey but addressed the neighborhood group's concern about statistical significance as well as other stakeholders' concerns about the length of time a survey would take.
- Asked the stakeholders whether they would prefer each stakeholder group conduct an individual survey or whether there be one survey for the entire group.
 - **Individual Group Surveys – 3 votes**
 - **Entire Group Survey – 3 votes**
 - **Abstained based on lack of information about what a survey would include or address – 6 stakeholders**

Conclusion of Discussion

- The city will look into existing national/city/local research as well as identifying any tools available to collect additional data and will report at the April meeting.

Discussion of Timeline and Next Steps

- Went over timeline. Proposed that presentations for the neighborhood and tenant groups take place in April and a discussion of gaps and solutions to the issues take place in May.
- Asked the stakeholders whether they would like any other speakers to present to the group.
 - No responses from stakeholders.
- Asked whether anyone would like to change the proposed timeline.
- Asked the stakeholder group whether they are interested in a longer meeting of 3-4 hours on a weekday evening or Saturday in June in order to formulate conclusions and quickly wrap up the stakeholder group process.
- There was interest among several stakeholders to hold a longer meeting on a Saturday. Others said they were unavailable on Saturdays. Some stakeholders expressed an interest in wrapping up the process soon, while others expressed concerns about rushing to complete the process.

Conclusion of Discussion

- The stakeholder group will continue the discussion regarding an extended June meeting, including date, time, and location, at the April meeting.

Landlord Stakeholders Presentation by Alexander Scott

(A copy of the Landlord's presentation is available under Project Materials at:

<https://my.spokanecity.org/neighborhoods/community-assembly/subcommittees/>)

- Importance of Rental Housing
- Profit Myth
- Major Concerns
- Specific Concerns:
 - Low Income
 - Ageing Properties
 - Less Rental Properties Available
 - Less Affordable Housing
 - Neighborhoods
 - Landlords
 - Tenants
 - Existing Systems
 - Mandatory inspections
- Conclusions for Spokane

Presentation Questions to Alexander Scott

Question

- What are the existing systems that are ineffective that would make a rental inspection program unnecessary?

Answer

- Cited code enforcement, building inspectors, Fire, and Police inspection processes. Why can't rental homes be taken to code enforcement? Better utilize the existing framework and agencies.
- The existing department systems may need to expand scope and reporting systems.

Question

- Who would bear the costs of a rental inspection program?

Answer

- The cost would be passed onto the renters or the city. City would raise taxes to pay or take from other services and pass costs onto residents.
- Clarified that a rental inspection program is not a defined outcome of the stakeholder group.

Question

- Code Enforcement, Fire, Police, and Building Inspectors, are only brought in after serious issues arise. What programs or policies exist to prevent it from getting to that point?

Answer

- Referred to his presentation regarding costs. Properties require an initial investment and maintenance.

Meeting Wrap Up

- Proposed next meeting be on April 12, 2016.
- Group agreed to meet April 12.
 - A poll will be sent to the group about whether to meet later in the evening.
 - May continue use of West Central Community Center for larger meeting space.
- City will provide results of additional research on rental housing.
- The research/survey conversation will continue at the next meeting.
- The tenants and neighborhood groups will determine a date to finalize presentations.

Audience Member Questions

Q. If a landlord can't afford to repair their property because of such a low profit margin, what happens to the property and tenants when conditions need repair?

A. It depends on a variety of factors such as the type and size of the property and the level of repair required. There are a wide range of possible outcomes. The owner may make the repairs or sell the property. If a landlord does not make repairs within the required amount of time, the tenants are able to utilize the landlord-tenant law, and in serious cases, may required to vacate the property and possibly obtain relocation assistance from the landlord.

Q. Please use some type of microphone system at future meetings so members of the audience can hear. Have time for gallery comments at the end of the meetings.

A. Because a larger turnout was expected for the March 22 meeting, it was determined to move the meeting to the West Central Community Center. A microphone will be provided for future meetings held at this site.

Regarding gallery comment: Please refer to the Project Scope document under the Public Safety Committee, Rental Housing Research Stakeholder Group at:

<https://my.spokanecity.org/neighborhoods/community-assembly/subcommittees/>

According to the Project Scope, General Meeting Attendees are allowed to observe meetings of citizen stakeholder discussions but may only participate in discussions or provide comments if they are recognized by a stakeholder.

Q. What systems exist that make rental inspections unnecessary? How will landlords make tenants pay for inspections?

A. Since the Rental Housing Research Stakeholder Group convened, the group has heard from experts on issues related to the habitability of rental housing in the city. The stakeholders are currently identifying relevant issues. The group will then identify gaps in the ability of existing programs, policies, and ordinances to address the issues identified by the stakeholder group. Some individual stakeholders have voiced support or opposition to a rental inspection program during the process, however, the purpose of the stakeholder group is not to discuss whether or not to implement a rental inspection program, but to define the problems, if any, related to rental housing.

Q. Is there a process or place to report landlords? Is there any way to educate tenants re: problem resolution? Example: I am working with a family in a rental (ie. Leaky pipes, leaky roof) with an unresponsive landlord. The family did not know they could write the landlord and after 10 days, have repairs made and deduct the cost from the rent, or have the option of breaking their lease. Do tenant groups provide this kind of information or help?

A. The Washington State Attorney General's Office provides a list of resources to assist both landlords and tenants. These resources are available at:

<http://www.atg.wa.gov/residential-landlord-tenant-resources>

In addition, tenants may contact the Center for Justice or Northwest Fair Housing for assistance.

Q. Opinion. There are representatives of tenants, landlords, and neighborhoods here. Shouldn't these representatives be able to speak for their groups? Each representative should come to the meetings with the concerns that their group has. If they need to survey their group, they can do so. What purpose would an overall survey serve? If you're going to the expense of a survey, why have representatives?

A. Each stakeholder has brought diverse opinions and perspectives to the process. Some stakeholders have expressed interest in a survey in order to give them a more accurate picture of rental housing issues in Spokane. At this time, the group has not come to a consensus on whether to conduct a survey or study, or what the form of a survey or study might have.

Q. Is rental housing considered a business?

A. Under city law, property owners are not required to obtain a business license to rent a property. However, property owners may choose to form a corporation under state law for tax and liability purposes.

Q. I live in the county. One of property is in the county and one property is in the city. Although I pay taxes for the property in the city, I have no vote. I think this is considered taxation without representation. Ideas?

A. The Rental Housing Research Stakeholder Group is a task assigned by the Community Assembly to the Public Safety Committee (which is a subcommittee of the Community Assembly) to identify issues, resources, and gaps associated with rental housing in Spokane. Any findings by the stakeholder group will be reported to the Community Assembly for informational purposes only.

The Community Assembly is comprised of representatives from individual neighborhood councils within the City of Spokane. Members of the Community Assembly and neighborhood councils are not elected officials, and do not have the authority to pass laws and ordinances, or levy taxes. As a property owner, you are free to participate in the neighborhood council in which your property is located.

*For more information on the Community Assembly, please see:
<https://my.spokanecity.org/neighborhoods/community-assembly/>*

The issue of nonresident property owners' lack of representation in City Council is beyond the scope of the Rental Housing Research Stakeholder Group.

Q. Regarding a survey: Science dictates what is statistically significant. What is the data on utilities paid by landlords or tenants? What percent of those in poverty were homeless and not living in rentals? Proposed a renter's guide website that is intuitive to allow them to identify their problem and find steps to fix the problem and lists additional options.

A. Utility data does not list whether utilities at a property are paid for by a landlord or tenant. Since anyone associated with the property can set up utilities at the property (ie. Landlord, tenant, family member, manager, etc.), it is impossible to gather accurate data.

For data on homeless numbers in Spokane, please see the Spokane Regional Point-in-Time Count:

<https://static.spokanecity.org/documents/chhs/plans-reports/reports/2015-spokane-regional-point-in-time-count-executive-summary-2015-06-05.pdf>

<https://static.spokanecity.org/documents/chhs/plans-reports/reports/2015-spokane-regional-point-in-time-count-fact-sheet.pdf>