

Strategy to address the rising rents and homelessness in the seattle area



Seattle is in the mist of a crisis — A housing crisis which has manifested itself into a homelessness crisis. Like many regions along the West Coast Seattle is experiencing rapid increase in population. According to the 2018 U. S. Census Bureau, Seattle has become the nations fastest growing city this decade. Furthermore, the census ranked Seattle rents among the top five most expensive in the U. S. As home prices and apartment rents keep climbing many long time residents are getting priced out of basic housing or are increasingly stuck in insecure rental tenure.

Moreover, access to housing has become deeply unequal — “ The number of Seattle families making at least \$200, 000 is greater than the number of families making less than \$50, 000. As of 2016, the top 20 percent of earners were making more than half of the city’s total income. And in 2017, the percentage of local families making \$200, 000 or more was among the highest in the nation (Balk 2018).” Similarly, the 2019 Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies report that 45, 000 households in Seattle pay more than 50% of their income on rent (Pg). This illustrates they are one check away from potentially being homeless.

In an attempt to help the homeless population, the city has allowed individuals to live in sidewalk tents, doorways, and encampments. Some critics argue that people come to “ Freeatle” because it’s a free for all. Free food, free medical treatment, free mental health treatment, free clothes, a free tent and so on. Others argue that the more money council members throw at the problem the worst it gets. The Puget Sounds Business Journal estimates that Seattle and its outlining areas spend one billion dollars addressing and responding to the homeless situation every year (Stiles and <https://assignbuster.com/strategy-to-address-the-rising-rents-and-homelessness-in-the-seattle-area/>

Garnick). And they say that the number is almost certainly underestimated. Non profits, city and county budgets, hospital services, building tiny houses, and so on. However the cost is not a billion dollars a year — the cost is quality of life.

With all the wealth and growth in Seattle one could ask how did this happen?

Technology and Poverty

In the past five years the average cost of living index has gone up nationwide by 19%. In Seattle it has gone up 55% (CREC, Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness).

The rapid economic growth of the tech industry in Seattle has created hundreds of thousands of new jobs. The influx of high wage tech workers combined with the high demand for housing, mixed with the lack of supply (a gap between what is available and what is needed) has caused dramatic increases in rents and extremely high housing prices, adding to the already developing crisis.

In the latest conflict between Amazon and the city of Seattle, in April Amazon moved thousands of its employees from its main headquarters to nearby offices in Bellevue (a large suburb of Seattle) following a difference over a new tax on big business. The company stated that it will eventually hire 25, 000 employees in Virginia; While adding workers in Boston, Denver, Austin, TX and perhaps more than 10, 000 in Bellevue, WA. All of this follows the Seattle City Council passing and then quickly repealing an ordinance that would have taxed Amazon and other large companies a fee for every

employee in the city. The head tax would have cost more than 12 million dollars a year. The rationale was that Amazon was driving up wages and housing prices so much it was largely responsible for Seattle's growing homelessness problem. Which begs the question how does a city grow inclusively when it has such a dynamic company at the core of its economy?

Making Connections

The impact of big tech giants and the progress of Seattle run parallel to Muller's "Transportation and Urban Form." On the surface these two topics—transportation and technology—might seem to be distinct, but in fact, they are linked. Transportation and the policies that encourage their use have shaped urbanization. Without transportation the U. S. would not be the force it is today. Likewise, technology plays an important enabling role in shaping cities and metropolitan areas. Seattle tech giants impact the spatial distribution of population, job markets and skills in the area. By influencing the workforce they change not only the job market but the types of expertise needed by residents.

The problem as it stands — big tech is reinforcing inequality. Big tech giants are more likely to locate and grow in cities with higher housing costs, higher wages, and stronger tax bases. This leads to a widening gap between wealthy and poor suburbs or central cities. In turn influencing where people live. For example, the evolution of Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Apple makes Seattle attractive to millions of people. Seattle transplants are excited to move to tech city which results in economic changes such as:

displacement of poor people, impact of rising houses, less single family housing, more apartment buildings, and so on.

Unquestionably, Cronon's "Natures Metropolis" relates to the Seattle dilemma. Natures Metropolis tells the story of the rise of Chicago. The river was the first defining natural feature of Chicago. S. H. Goodin of Cincinnati argued Chicago became a metropolis because of what he called the "law of gravitation"—whereby access to obtain goods and services impacts spatial distribution of populations. "The lake city that gave access to the most extensive group of river cities would grow most quickly," wrote Goodin (41). Indeed physical factors influenced people's choices of where to settle. Transport and trade were much easier for people who lived by water. As resources such as meat and fur became more profitable Chicago shifted away from its natural landscape to a more competitive landscape of business. In like manner, as the Seattle job market has become more technology fueled the city's appeal has created excitement of the prosperity in the region. Tech talent is fleeing to Seattle — "America's fastest growing tech hub" according to a 2018 report from real estate company CBRE. These changes are not only reshaping Seattle but also our society. While change is inevitable gentrification however is displacing communities of color.

The city's historically black Central District (CD) was once a flourishing community for African Americans. Now, many of the families who have lived in the Central District for generations can no longer afford to stay. African Americans who were fleeing the segregated south and looking for better economic opportunities and quality of life migrated to the Pacific Northwest.

Once black Seattleites arrived they were confined to the CD because of <https://assignbuster.com/strategy-to-address-the-rising-rents-and-homelessness-in-the-seattle-area/>

restrictive covenants to keep black families out of white neighborhoods and other acts of discrimination (Balk). The Central District saw significant change from 1990, when black people outnumbered whites three to one, to the year 2000, when the number of whites surpassed blacks. In 2010 the Central District was only 23% black. By 2016, that number dropped to an estimated 14.8%. Today, less than a fifth of the CD's population is black. White people are the majority in the Central District for the first time in six decades resulting in a very different type of landscape (Beason).

Recommendation

Ultimately, preserving affordable housing can be more important than building it. These efforts create opportunities to work *with* communities to meet their housing needs. By building upon the character and history of a neighborhood in a way that values rather than erases the past.

We need to think about housing not as investing in real estate, but, in investing in community. By redesigning our housing system to better meet the needs of Seattleites who are currently missing out. There are ways to remodel an unequal housing system:

- Revive and extend social housing as part of purpose built mixed income rental communities; Providing secure leases to people across the income spectrum. Social housing not only ensures affordable and accessible housing for all households it avoids many of the effects and stigmas associated with public housing.

- Inclusion Replanning – Requiring affordable homes to be included as part of future development. We need to prioritize housing resources for people who face the greatest barriers. The homes are dedicated or sold at discount prices to lower income first time home buyers or social housing associations.
- Preserving housing, rather than building it new, may prove to be the most financially sustainable method. There is not enough affordable housing under development to meet the rising demand, and what already exists is becoming less available. Saving fair, affordable homes means saving critical community resources — in short, improving the spirit of the community.

However, fixing the housing problem is not just about building lower cost rental housing or helping first home buyers into ownership. We need to fundamentally think where and how we accommodate Seattle’s growing population. Seattle is one of the top urbanized cities; Ranked as the 18th most populous city in the U. S (2017 census data). Public officials cannot keep squeezing tower cranes in the sky and pushing the disadvantaged into the ever spreading urban fringe. Re-expanding the geography of housing opportunity in Seattle must be the long term plan.

Seattle is dividing into a nation of those with housing wealth and those without. Ending homelessness is a matter of resources, political will, and public support. The solutions already exist: Rebuild social housing as part of mixed income rental communities, affordable home ownership, and preserving housing.

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