The How-To of Affordable Housing Advocacy in Colorado Springs

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The Colorado Springs Pro-Housing Partnership is a grassroots coalition of diverse stakeholders - including teachers, faith-based communities, southeast residents, veterans, and more - advocating for local policies that promote affordable housing.
Introduction to Affordable Housing Research

The Problem

In Colorado Springs, an affordable housing crisis is emerging. According to a recent report by the city’s Community Development division, 32% of households – or more than 80,000 people -- in El Paso County pay more than 30% percent of their income on housing, making them housing-insecure. Amongst many other factors, part of the problem is our city’s zoning policy. Much of our city is zoned for single-family homes, making it next-to-impossible to add the type of affordable housing units necessary. Thus, the lack of affordable housing is a failure of public policy, and therefore necessitates political solutions.

The Solution

Political solutions do not magically appear. Rather, they are driven by strong, organized advocacy. For this reason, a few peers and I recently founded the Colorado Springs Pro-Housing Partnership (COSPHP), a coalition of stakeholder groups that include faith communities, veterans, teachers, senior citizens, students, and many more. Our goal is to make sure that the city hears the voices of those most directly affected as they consider policies to address housing unaffordability. In particular, we advocate to change zoning policies to allow for more affordable types of housing to be built in more neighborhoods throughout the city.

The Question

In doing this advocacy, it became clear that advocates in cities across the country have plenty of experience that we can learn from. As such, I decided to conduct a research project in which I analyzed the elements necessary for policy change in Seattle and Minneapolis. Both cities had recently implemented transformative zoning policy changes to address their lack of affordable housing, which is why I chose to examine them in particular. Minneapolis eliminated single-family zoning city-wide, while Seattle loosened ADU restrictions, mandated affordable units, and required developers to pay into an affordable housing trust fund. By examining these successful outcomes, I could discern some key takeaways from the advocates there to help guide our organizing work here in the Springs. Rooted in theories of social movements, I looked at the political windows, campaign tactics, framings, and coalitions that were present in each locale. A few key questions emerged:

- How did campaign actors effectively frame issues of zoning and affordable housing to mobilize support?
- What types of tactics did activists use, and how did they impact decision-makers?
- Which stakeholder groups became actively involved in the advocacy coalition, and how did they influence the framings utilized?
- How did existing political opportunities shape policy potential and campaign tactics?

The Report

This report outlines some of the key findings from Seattle and Minneapolis. I will then compare the political context of those cities to that of Colorado Springs. Finally, based on both my research and advocacy experience, I will provide some recommendations for effective affordable housing advocacy in Colorado Springs. While my research and our advocacy are focused on zoning policies, the takeaways in this report are equally applicable to all forms of housing advocacy. Ultimately, however, this research is only as impactful as it is widely disseminated. Therefore, I aim to share this research with organizations and advocates who can act on these important case study findings, amplifying the work that is already taking place on the ground. And please share with your fellow advocates, activists, and concerned citizens!
In both cities, existing political opportunity shaped the subsequent advocacy tactics.

**Political Opportunities**

In both Seattle and Minneapolis, city council and city agencies signaled an opening for advocacy because:

- A younger, more progressive council – many of whom ran on affordable housing platforms – was elected just a couple of years before the zoning changes occurred. They put zoning changes on the agenda even before the advocacy groups ultimately rallied behind them.

- Each city’s planning department engaged in a more extensive, equitable form of public outreach, accessing directly-impacted voices who are often left out of political processes. This provided the empirical ammunition to make the policy changes happen.

**Advocacy Tactics**

A strong presence at public hearings provided political cover for supportive councilmembers and shaped sympathetic news coverage. In order to mobilize people to come to those public hearings, advocates:

- Leveraged social media to build a base and communicate their message.

- Lowered barriers to engagement by making it as easy as possible for people to make their voices heard to decision-makers. They created form emails, charted easy ways to make public comments, and provided all of the necessary information.

- Created lawn signs to generate a mobilizing sense of conflict with NIMBY homeowners. Such signs were particularly effective in Minneapolis, where they made the pro-housing message visible in single-family neighborhoods.
We envision a future where we all find secure, affordable homes in neighborhoods we choose.

In each city, framings were crafted to both appeal to potential campaign actors and powerful decision-makers. The following were some of the most common:

- Promoting a positive, people-oriented vision of abundant homes and complete neighborhoods. Neighbors for More Neighbors, a Minneapolis-based advocacy group, included the following as one of their core values: “We envision a future where we all find secure, affordable homes in neighborhoods we choose. Those neighborhoods may include great transit, a community where family and friends are neighbors, or complete neighborhoods with walkable errands and jobs.”

- Emphasizing the need to legalize new types of housing. As one article in Seattle put it, “If we want more homes in more neighborhoods for more people, it’s time we legalized housing.”

- Providing an opportunity for seniors to age in place. For older adults looking to downsize, cities must allow more housing that is catered to their specific needs.

- “This isn’t enough” – making the proposed changes sound like an inadequate-but-obvious compromise. Countering the notion that the proposed policy changes were radical, advocates instead emphasized they were just a conservative first step.

- In Seattle, advocates heavily invoked the need to reduce carbon emissions. If zoning allowed for more types of housing, it would be easier to develop denser, more walkable neighborhoods.

- In Minneapolis, advocates primarily focused on racial justice. As exclusionary – single-family – zoning was initially implemented to both racially and socio-economically segregate cities, by diversifying the types of housing across all neighborhoods, the loosening of restrictive zoning would right historic wrongs.

We envision a future where we all find secure, affordable homes in neighborhoods we choose.
Coalitions and Summary

Coalitions & Organizational Structures

- Advocacy campaigns were driven by informal, volunteer-led grassroots advocacy groups. Their grassroots nature allowed them to maintain autonomy in their framings and tactics, and prompted the formation of informal coalitions.

- The coalitions in support of zoning policy changes were broad and diverse, including housing advocacy groups, labor unions, transit advocates, and environmentalist groups.

- Communities of color-led organizations stayed on the sidelines, neither mobilizing in support of or opposition to zoning policy changes.

- Seattle in particular had a case of strange bedfellows – there were more conservative players, most notably the Master Builder’s Association, in the pro-housing coalition.

Summarized Takeaways

In sum, research revealed that existing political windows – due to the presence of progressive councilmembers and city staff – became the impetus for advocacy engagement. Grassroots activists then crafted framings tailored to their contexts to gain the support of environmental groups, city officials, and racial justice groups. A sense of conflict with Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) opponents in turn mobilized coalition stakeholders to provide the political cover necessary for councilmembers to defend proposed changes. These takeaways are summarized in the following diagram.
The Context of Colorado Springs

In Seattle and Minneapolis, not a single Republican is a member of city council. Each are ranked towards the top of the most liberal cities in the country. It is no wonder, then, that advocates and activists in each of those cities enjoyed a much wider political window. On the other hand, we know that Colorado Springs is a completely different ballgame. Long defined by the military institutions within its boundaries and its Focus on the Family ethos, it is by some metrics the most conservative large city in the entire country. Some of the more predominant discourses in the city center economics and small government. Given this prevailing logic, environmentalists, for instance, have long resorted to economic, rather than climate change, arguments to advocate for the closure of the Martin Drake power plant. In doing so, they aim to appeal to the largely conservative policymakers on city council, even if such a framing counters the values of many of the organizers themselves. Thus, in order to make the findings from Seattle and Minneapolis applicable, it is important to first paint a clearer picture of the Colorado Springs housing policy context.

“\textbf{We can create the political opportunity necessary for change to happen}”

With regards to zoning, the Planning Commission has in the last couple of years placed Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) on the council agenda in an effort to address housing unaffordability. To put it in perspective, Seattle and Minneapolis both engaged in similar debates about ADUs 5-7 years ago. In each of those cities, ADUs then became a gateway policy for more transformative changes in the last couple of years. Our Planning Commission and Community Development teams understand that we too need to alter our restrictive zoning policies to ease our affordable housing crisis; city officials therefore provide some opportunity here. Council, however, has remained largely opposed to any wholesale changes to our zoning code, almost entirely shutting the window that the Planning Commission tried to open. Thus, as long as our city council is dominated by the more conservative sentiments in our city, there will be little political opportunity for change. However, we can create the political opportunity necessary for change to happen. With the right framings, coalitions, and tactics, zoning and housing policy change is possible. Based on both my research findings and our advocacy experience here, the following section highlights political strategies & opportunities, coalition members, tactics, and framings that we need in Colorado Springs to transform housing and zoning policy in our city. It will require an all-of-the-above approach to make it happen. And like Seattle and Minneapolis, it is possible!
Housing Advocacy Recommendations

This section outlines, based on research findings and COSPHP experience, key recommendations for housing advocacy in Colorado Springs. This will serve as a "how-to" manual, identifying the who, what, and how of organizing to change zoning and affordable housing policies in our city.

Political Strategy

There are many policy-related avenues that can be leveraged to ease our affordable housing crisis. The following are examples of a few such opportunities to make our policy structure facilitate the development of more affordable, walkable neighborhoods in our city.

1. Create political opportunity through city council
   We need more influential allies on city council, and thus must do what is necessary to get new, pro-housing members elected in April 2021.

2. Leverage existing political opportunity at the state level
   With a Democratic-controlled state legislature, we have an opportunity to get effective affordable housing policy passed at the state level.

3. Build upon ADU ordinance
   Both Seattle and Minneapolis implemented less-restrictive ADU ordinances many years prior to more transformative changes. In the coming years, we must advocate for loosening ADU restrictions with an eye towards broader changes down the road.

4. Prioritize looser zoning policies in RetoolCOS
   The city is engaging in a two-year process to rewrite the entire zoning code. Although there are minimal opportunities for public input, it is imperative that we communicate to them our priorities – mixed-use development, walkability, and missing middle housing (2-6 units per lot).

Examples of Accessory Dwelling Units in Colorado Springs
The Who

Coalition Members

A diverse coalition of groups – including both mainstream and more informal entities – is necessary to build the power required to reach these political and policy goals. The following stakeholder groups and organizations in Colorado Springs are particularly key to have on board. However, this is not a comprehensive list. Over time, we have interacted with a combination of these stakeholder groups, all of whom have offered varying levels of support for our housing policy advocacy.

Veterans
- El Paso County Progressive Democrats

Faith Communities
- The Faith Table
- First Congregational Church
- Temple Beit-Torah
- Solid Rock Christian Center

Teachers & Education Professionals
- District 11 Board of Directors
- Palmer High School
- Colorado Springs Education Association

Senior Citizens
- Innovations in Aging
- Colorado Springs Commission on Aging
- Age-Friendly Colorado Springs
- The AARP

Community Development Organizations
- Solid Rock Community Development Corporation
- Council of Neighborhood Organizations (CONO)
- The RISE Coalition

Social Justice Organizations
- Pikes Peak Justice and Peace Commission
- Colorado Springs Food Rescue
- NAACP
- Moms Demand Action
- ACLU
- Insideout

Environmental Groups
- Bike Colorado Springs
- Sierra Club/Beyond Coal
- 350.org
- Rocky Mountain Field Institute
- Colorado Springs Utilities

Housing & Homelessness Advocacy Groups
- Affordable Housing Collaborative
- Homeward Pikes Peak
- The Place
- Greccio Housing

Businesses
- Chamber of Commerce
- Barber Shops
- Coffee Shops

Colorado Springs City Government
- Community Development Division
- Planning Commission

Students
- Colorado College
- Pikes Peak Community College
- UCCS
- High schools (Palmer, Mitchell, etc.)
1. A strong, visible presence at public meetings is imperative. Bright blue t-shirts have been very effective for the Pro-Housing Partnership, and we recommend something along those lines to help people immediately associate an image with your message.

2. Create lawn signs to make visible such a message in neighborhood settings, not just public hearings. This generated significant media attention in Minneapolis, and could have a similar effect here.

3. Make it as easy as possible for people to communicate your message to decision-makers. This can be done through each of the following:
   - Put together a document with key talking points and necessary contact information.
   - Develop succinct, catchy, clear slogans.

4. Use social media and email listervs to:
   - Keep people engaged and connected with local goings-on.
   - Disseminate articles of interest.
   - Encourage people to attend meetings – your job is to hype up the importance of these events.
   - Infuse occasional humor into the campaign – make satirical posts about Not-In-My-Backyarders, develop funny hashtags, etc. Humor is incredibly effective at keeping people engaged.

5. Be visible in local media outlets.
   - Publish op-eds in the Gazette, Independent, Southeast Express, or the Business Journal.
   - Create a platform to widely disseminate articles about affordable housing and zoning – a website, blog, etc.
   - Build relationships with local journalists so they can highlight the importance of this issue.

6. Build and maintain relationships with influential allies, such as the following:
   - Sympathetic city councilmembers. A couple of councilmembers have been particularly supportive of our cause, offering advice about which strategic levers to pull and providing us important inside scoops.
   - City officials. Until the final vote, they run the show. After all, they are the ones who typically put new policies on the table in the first place.

A blue-shirted PHP supporter delivering remarks during an ADU town hall
Effective Framing

In building coalitions, pushing a publicly visible message, and persuading decision-makers, framing is key. This is where the dominant political context of Colorado Springs comes into play. You need to strike the right balance of catering to existing conservative/libertarian discourses, and slowly changing some of those entrenched narratives of renter stigmatization and Not-In-My-Backyardism. The following are a few of the most effective framings that can be used in different contexts, whether they be public hearings, behind-closed-doors meetings, or organized events:

1. **Messaging that caters to more conservative discourses:**
   - Supply and demand – the more housing we are allowed to build, the more we can reduce price-inflating demand for an inadequate supply of housing. We want an abundance of housing!
   - Reducing unnecessary restrictions on housing construction – we need to allow more homeowners to have the ability to build an additional unit on their property if they so desire.

2. **Common-sense visions:**
   - We need to legalize new types of housing to meet the diverse housing needs of Colorado Springs residents. In a city filled with military veterans, retired couples, young families, and college students, we must find a way to accommodate them all to maintain the vibrancy of our neighborhoods.
   - To reduce the existing strain on our infrastructure – roads, police and fire departments, etc. – we must build new housing in existing neighborhoods instead of continuing to expand outward. Sprawl is fiscally and environmentally irresponsible.

3. **Positive, progressive messages:**
   - Ending the exclusionary history of zoning – in order to stop racial & socio-economic segregation, gentrification & displacement, we must end the restrictive zoning that has historically excluded low-income and non-white families from wealth-building opportunities and dignified living conditions.
   - Minimizing our carbon footprint – if we want to reduce commute times, improve residential energy efficiency, and create the infrastructure necessary for public transit, we must build more in existing neighborhoods.

4. **Housing and the Coronavirus:**
   - Now more than ever, housing is health. Even pre-pandemic, housing-insecure families spent substantially less on healthcare. Now, secure shelter quite literally is healthcare, protecting families from exposure to the coronavirus. We need to ensure that everyone can find an affordable place to live to maintain the public health of our neighborhoods.
   - Our affordable housing crisis only exacerbates the coronavirus crisis. We need to treat our affordable housing crisis as the crisis it is to help us prepare for the next pandemic, natural disaster, or climate catastrophe.
   - The fallout of the coronavirus crisis will disproportionately impact housing-insecure families, many of whom will be unable to pay for housing without government intervention. We need to utilize every means possible – eviction moratoriums, rental assistance, and the loosening of zoning restrictions – to ensure that every resident has the secure, dignified housing they need.

“We want abundant housing in walkable, sustainable neighborhoods”
Concluding Thoughts

The coronavirus crisis has single-handedly thrust our housing crisis into the national spotlight. Across the United States, the National Multifamily Housing Council estimated that a whopping one-third of tenants didn’t make a full rental payment for the month of April, 2020. Here in Colorado, the Apartment Association found that just over 16% of tenants in their units were unable to cover their rent for this month. In light of these numbers, state and local governments have taken temporary stopgap actions. After Gov. Jared Polis issued a suggested moratorium on evictions and foreclosures on March 20th, many counties, including El Paso, formally halted eviction and foreclosure procedures. The city of Colorado Springs is trying to figure out how to use federal funds to provide rental assistance. While these are necessary measures in the short-term, the reality is that we had a housing crisis on our hands before the coronavirus arrived, which only exacerbated existing public health crisis.

While the coronavirus has forced quick action to address immediate needs, it also provides an opportunity to re-examine the policy structures that created the affordable housing crisis in the first place. To transform the housing landscape of Colorado Springs, we must challenge the existing zoning, tenants’ rights, and rental assistance policies. Only then can we ensure the collective health of all residents, prepared for another disaster like the one we have on our hands. Ultimately, the gravity of our current situation requires a similarly unprecedented movement to ensure it never happens again. Excitingly, the coalescence of many organizations around this issue in Colorado Springs has the makings of such a movement. As concerned citizens, activists, and advocates, we understand that the time to organize is now. This report is meant to propel such action; let’s sustain it for years to come.

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