

HOMELESSNESS IN EUGENE: AN EXPLORATION OF OUR
CITY'S MOST PRESSING ISSUE

By

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A THESIS

Presented to the Departments of History & Political Science
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 2020

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Matthew Eggiman for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Departments of History & Political Science to be taken June 2020

Title: Homelessness in Eugene: An Exploration of Our City's Most Pressing Issue

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Eugene Oregon has the highest rate of homelessness of any city in the United States. There are a number of factors contributing to this unfortunate designation, including drug addiction and mental illness. While these public health concerns are often (correctly) associated with homelessness, they exist in every city and do not explain Eugene's exceptional status. Therefore, this writing will focus on the relationship between municipal regulations, namely development impact fees and zoning laws, and the high rate of homelessness in Eugene.

In order to conduct this analysis, the thesis will be broken down into Three primary sections. First, this writing will explore the state of homelessness on a national and regional level in order to outline broader regional trends and contextualize Eugene's situation. In the next section this essay will analyze existing development impact fees and zoning laws as well as relevant economic data to determine the effect local regulations are having on the homelessness population. The last component will be a proposal for regulatory reform aimed at curtailing the growth of homelessness in Eugene.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professors Alison Gash and Ocean Howell for providing me with guidance during my thesis process and assisting me in completing this project. Throughout the past six months, Dr. Gash has gone to bat for me multiple times and aided me in every way she possibly could. In addition to giving me invaluable advice in regards to my research, I would be remiss if I did not mention her zealous and altruistic efforts in helping me navigate onerous administrative barriers during the entirety of the Winter 2020 term. It is clear from my experiences with her that she cares deeply for her students and harbors a great deal of integrity. I would also like to thank Rory McManama, the former head of Eugene's Community Court program, for inspiring me to pursue this avenue of research for my thesis project. Of course, I want to also thank my parents for their support every step of the way in my academic career. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Alison Gash, Dr. Ocean Howell, and Dr. Casey Shoop for serving on my Thesis Committee.

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Introduction

Though largely overlooked in the national political discourse, homelessness continues to be a serious problem in a number of cities across the United States. While this writing will focus on somewhat abstract political and economic factors, homelessness is a deeply personal issue for more than half a million people in this country¹. While most people's exposure to homelessness is the experience of walking past someone sleeping on the street, homelessness is a 24 hours a day, seven days a week experience for that person. The privilege to be behind a locked door is something most people take for granted. The obvious disadvantage of homelessness is being forced to sleep out in the elements or in a dangerous shelter. But homeless people are also forced to bring all of their worldly possessions with them everywhere they go. This presents a tremendous source of stress for homeless individuals, as they tend to have a disproportionate amount of interactions with the criminal justice system.² This is because many cities across the US have essentially criminalized homelessness by passing ordinances making it illegal to sleep, lay down, or "loiter" in public places.³ As a result, they are often obligated to attend court proceedings and/or jail sentences where bringing luggage is untenable.

In addition to institutional factors, life on the streets is filled with considerable hardship from other sources as well. Homeless people are disproportionately the victims of assault and robbery, as they are forced to sleep in dangerous conditions with no barrier between themselves and people wishing to take advantage of them.⁴ Unfortunately, many homeless people consider

¹ Meghan Henry, Rian Watt, Anna Mahathey, Jillian Ouellette, and Aubrey Sitler. *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. (Washington D.C.: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of Community Planning and Development 2019), 1.

² Forrest Stuart. "From 'Rabble Management' to 'Recovery Management': Policing Homelessness in Marginal Urban Space." *Urban Studies*, vol. 51, no. 9, (July 2014): 1909–1925.

³ Maria Foscarinis; Rebecca K. Troth, "Reentry and Homelessness: Alternatives to Recidivism," *Clearinghouse Review* 39, no. 7 and 8, (November-December 2005): 440-457.

⁴ Kathrine O'Keefe. "Protecting the Homeless under Vulnerable Victim Sentencing Guidelines: An Alternative to Inclusion in Hate Crime Laws." *William and Mary Law Review* 52, no. 1 (2010): 301.

shelters to be even more dangerous than the streets, driving some individuals to purposely avoid shelters altogether.⁵ There is also a popular perception that individuals often become homeless as a result of a serious drug addiction, but many homeless people actually become addicted to drugs *after* becoming homeless. This is because homeless people often turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism for dealing with the extraordinary stress of street life, and/or in order to self-medicate for mental health issues.⁶ Homelessness frequently triggers relapses in recovering addicts as well.⁷

While homelessness is obviously most unfavorable for those who actually experience it, high rates of homelessness also incur sizable societal costs. According to Eugene Municipal Court records, homeless people comprised a quarter of all individuals ticketed or arrested in the city during 2016 despite only comprising about 1.3 percent of the population.^{8 9} Homeless individuals also experience extremely high recidivism rates, which puts a substantial financial burden on local law enforcement.¹⁰ In fact, homeless recidivism has become such a problem in Eugene that the city has undertaken initiatives, such as the Community Court Program, which gives individuals convicted of homelessness-related offenses (open container, loitering, illegal camping etc.) community service rather than jail time, and connects them with social services once their community service has been completed. This initiative was designed specifically to reduce recidivism rates for homeless people. In 2019, the city council also passed the 1.9 million

5 David Pirtle, James Greene, and Kathy Siebert. "Why Some Homeless Choose The Streets Over Shelters." *NPR*, (December 6, 2012).

6 Timothy Johnson and Michael Fendrich. "Homelessness and Drug Use." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 32, no. 6 (2007).

7 Sabryna Linton, David D Celentano, Gregory D Kirk, and Shruti H Mehta. "The Longitudinal Association between Homelessness, Injection Drug Use, and Injection-related Risk Behavior among Persons with a History of Injection Drug Use in Baltimore, MD." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 132, no. 3 (2013): 457-65.

8 Jacoby, Kenny. "Criminalizing Homelessness: Data show the unhoused are disproportionately ticketed in Eugene." *Eugene Weekly*, (June 1, 2017).

9 Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon.*, (2017).

10 Foscarinis et al., "Reentry and Homelessness: Alternatives to Recidivism," 440.

dollar *Homeless Systems Implementation Plan* to expand shelter space and provide additional affordable housing.¹¹ These factors demonstrate that Eugene’s homelessness crisis continues to be a notable drain on the city’s resources.

The plight of homelessness certainly poses serious issues for individuals and the community, but the city’s response to the crisis has been quite limited. Though the aforementioned Community Court has helped address recidivism and assisted individuals in finding affordable housing, it’s impact has been relatively narrow and the program mostly acts as a liaison between homeless people and privately funded charities.¹² Additionally, less than half of *The Homeless Systems Implementation Plan* budget will go towards shelter space, while over half a million dollars will be spent on hiring personnel to oversee the project.¹³ To be fair, the city has also funded a number of other projects aimed at addressing homelessness, including the Overnight Parking Program, Rest Stop Program, affordable housing tax incentives for select property owners, Dawn to Dawn program, and others. However, most of these projects are peripheral, and are aimed at addressing the symptoms, rather than the causes, of homelessness. For example, the Overnight Parking Program allocates parking spaces so people can sleep in their cars legally, and the Dawn to Dawn and Rest Stop programs allow people to sleep in tents next to the highway.¹⁴

If the City of Eugene is serious about curtailing the growth of homelessness, steps must be taken which mitigate some of the root causes of the issue. To that end, the city must reduce excessive building impact fees and rezone significant portions of the R-1 (low-density residential) areas surrounding downtown to R-4 (high-density residential) zones. These measures

11 Anderson, Bryan. “EUGENE APPROVES \$1.9 MILLION HOMELESS PLAN.” KEZI, (October 14, 2019).

12 Eugene. “Community Court.”

13 Anderson. “EUGENE APPROVES \$1.9 MILLION HOMELESS PLAN.”

14 Eugene. “FY20 Approved Budget for Homelessness and Human Services.”

will work to increase the available supply of housing and lower rent prices throughout the city, thus reducing the homeless population.

In the next section, this writing will discuss broader issues related to homelessness, including the collection/analysis of data. Additionally, the following section will explore national trends in order to contextualize Eugene's homelessness problem.

Chapter 1

Data Issues

It's important to address the relationship between mental illness and homelessness here. Many homeless people suffer from debilitating mental illnesses which preclude them from effectively taking care of themselves and would likely remain homeless regardless of the cost of housing. In fact, following the process of deinstitutionalization in the 1980's, the number of homeless people doubled in some areas.¹⁵ Today, it's unclear exactly how many homeless people experience mental illness, with anywhere from 23 to 67 percent of homeless people having a mental disability.¹⁶

While issues such as drug addiction and mental health inhabit a large space within the conversation surrounding homelessness, economic factors are arguably more consequential contributors. This is the case because the proportion of people who experience homelessness due to drug addiction or poor mental health is exaggerated in many studies. This is because researchers will often determine the significance of different homelessness contributors by surveying a representative sample of the current homeless population in a given area at only one point in time, as opposed to analyzing the homeless population over a longer period. Indeed, single night point in time (PIT) counts are the primary means by which homelessness data is gathered, being employed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as state and local-level surveys.^{17 18 19} This method overrepresents mentally ill individuals because

15 Rhoden, Nancy K. "The Limits of Liberty: Deinstitutionalization, Homelessness, and Libertarian Theory. (Symposium: Law and Psychiatry, Part II)." *Emory Law Journal* 31, no. 2 (1982): 375-440.

16 Isaak, Corinne A., Kristin Reynolds, Jitender Sareen, and Jino Distasio. "The Entrepreneurship of Survival among Urban Adults Experiencing Homelessness and Mental Illness." *Journal Of Community Psychology* 47, no. 6 (2019): 1548-562.

17 Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon*.

18 Lane County Human Services. "Lane County 2019 Unsheltered Point in Time Count Summary." (May, 2019).

19 Henry, Megan, Rian Watt, Anna Mahathey, Jillian Ouellette, and Aubrey Sitler. *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of

this group tends to remain homeless for a longer period of time. Out of all of the people who become homeless, only about 30 percent of them are unable to find housing within one year, and a vast majority of this remaining 30 percent is comprised of the mentally ill, while people who find housing within a year have generally become homeless for economic reasons.²⁰ Because of both the prevalence of economic homelessness and the intractability of mental illness, this writing will focus on addressing homelessness caused by economic factors.

In addition to overestimating the number of homeless people experiencing mental illness, PIT counts also tend to underestimate the total number of homeless individuals.²¹ This is primarily the result of the method of data collection in PIT counts. In order to ascertain the number of homeless people in an area, researchers will survey homeless shelters to see how many beds are currently occupied. Then, to determine the number of unsheltered individuals, the surveyors will go out and physically count how many people are languishing on the sidewalk. This data-collection system inevitably results in the number of unsheltered homeless people being underestimated. In reference to the number of homeless people in the state, the Oregon PIT count for 2019 even explicitly states that, “This number should be understood as an absolute minimum number of people experiencing homelessness in Oregon.”²² This systematic underestimation has other implications as well. First of all, municipalities with higher unsheltered populations will underestimate their homeless populations more severely. Additionally, shelter-all communities are more likely to record increases in homelessness whereas communities with inadequate shelter space may be entirely deaf to spikes in the

Community Planning and Development, (2019).

²⁰ Ellen, Ingrid Gould, and Brendan O’Flaherty. *How to House the Homeless*. (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2010, 111).

²¹ Glynn, Chris, and Emily B. Fox. "Dynamics of Homelessness in Urban America." *Annals Of Applied Statistics* 13.1 (2019): 573-605. Web.

²² Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon.*, 2019.

homeless population.²³ Therefore, any numerical data on homeless populations presented in this writing should be interpreted as a low estimate (as the essay relies on PIT counts), especially in regions with high unsheltered populations.

National & Regional Data

In order to properly analyze the homeless crisis in Eugene, it is important to first understand national broader homelessness trends. According to the national HUD PIT count, there were 568,000 homeless people living in the United States as of January 2019. Though homelessness is decreasing in most of the country, 2019 saw an increase of three percent from the previous year, driven by dramatic spikes in homelessness in certain states, with California (+16.4%) and Oregon (+9.7%) topping the list of fastest-growing homeless populations.²⁴

EXHIBIT 1.8: Largest Changes in Homelessness by State
By State, 2007–2019

	2018–2019	2007–2019	
Largest Increases			
CALIFORNIA	21,306 / 16.4%	NEW YORK	29,490 / 47.1%
OREGON	1,400 / 9.7%	CALIFORNIA	12,292 / 8.8%
GEORGIA	944 / 9.9%	MASSACHUSETTS	3,344 / 22.1%
MINNESOTA	734 / 10.1%	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	1,201 / 22.6%
NEW MEXICO	690 / 27.0%	MINNESOTA	654 / 8.9%
Largest Decreases			
FLORIDA	-2,702 / -8.7%	FLORIDA	-19,741 / -41.1%
MASSACHUSETTS	-1,597 / -8.0%	TEXAS	-13,940 / -35.0%
COLORADO	-1,238 / -11.4%	GEORGIA	-9,196 / -46.8%
CONNECTICUT	-943 / -23.7%	NEW JERSEY	-8,452 / -48.8%
WASHINGTON	-727 / -3.3%	ILLINOIS	-5,288 / -34.1%

* Due to methodological changes, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan, and Wyoming were excluded from the list of largest changes from 2007-2019.

Figure 1: *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.*

Though the growth of Oregon’s homeless population between 2017 and 2019 was also exceptionally high at 13.2 percent, Lane County’s homeless population growth far exceeded

²³ Hanratty, Maria. "Do Local Economic Conditions Affect Homelessness? Impact of Area Housing Market Factors, Unemployment, and Poverty on Community Homeless Rates." *Housing Policy Debate* 27.4 (2017): 640-55. Web.

²⁴ Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.* 1-13.

even that number, increasing 41.6 percent during the same period.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, Lane County also contains a disproportionate amount of Oregon’s homeless population at 13.7 percent, despite comprising 8.7 percent of Oregon’s total population.^{26 27 28}

In addition to a growth in the total homeless population, the number of unsheltered individuals is also on the rise. The HUD report breaks down it’s data on a continuum of care (CoC) level. CoCs are usually divided by county, such as Lane County’s CoC. However, a few CoCs encompass multiple counties, usually in less densely populated areas. Much of the growth in unsheltered homelessness occurred in “largely urban” CoCs like Lane County (+6.6%) and in “major city” CoCs (+4.9%), while homelessness rates in “rural” and “suburban” CoCs remained fairly steady or decreased respectively.²⁹ Conversely, the number of sheltered homeless individuals has been gradually decreasing for the last five years, so the growth in the national homeless population has been driven entirely by an increase in the unsheltered population.³⁰

Oregon has the one of the highest proportions of unsheltered homeless individuals of any state at 63.9 percent, second only to California at 71.7 percent.³¹ These proportions are well above the national average, which sits at 37 percent.³² Furthermore, Oregon has the highest rate of unsheltered families with children of any US state.³³ Lane County’s position is even more severe than Oregon’s, with the highest proportion of unsheltered homeless individuals of any CoC in the state at 75.4 percent.³⁴ This proportion has been on the rise since 2016, and increased

25 Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon*. 2017.

26 Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon*. 2019.

27 World Population Review. “Oregon Population 2020.”

28 World Population Review. “Lane County Population 2020.”

29 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 17.

30 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. ii, 1.

31 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 13.

32 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 1.

33 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 37.

34 Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 19.

6.3 percent between 2018 and 2019.³⁵ As of 2019, Lane County also had the second highest percentage of unsheltered homeless people of any largely urban CoC in the country.³⁶

CoC Name	Total homeless people	Percent of all homeless people who were unsheltered	CoC Name	Total homeless people	Percent of all homeless people who were unsheltered
Major City CoCs			Other Largely Urban CoCs		
Fresno City & County/Madera County, CA	2,508	82.5%	Vallejo/Solano County, CA	1,151	81.0%
San Jose/Santa Clara City & County, CA	9,706	81.6%	Eugene, Springfield/Lane County, OR	2,165	75.4%
Oakland, Berkeley/Alameda County, CA	8,022	78.7%	Oxnard, San Buenaventura/Ventura County, CA	1,669	75.4%
Los Angeles City & County, CA	56,257	75.5%	Visalia/Kings, Tulare Counties, CA	1,064	72.8%
Sacramento City & County, CA	5,561	70.1%	Fayetteville/Cumberland County, NC	329	68.7%
Largely Suburban CoCs			Largely Rural CoCs		
Fort Pierce/St. Lucie, Indian River, Martin Counties, FL	1,499	89.7%	Lake County, CA	408	93.6%
Imperial County, CA	1,413	86.7%	Alpine, Inyo, Mono Counties, CA	214	92.1%
San Luis Obispo County, CA	1,483	79.0%	Jackson/West Tennessee	959	88.7%
Watsonville/Santa Cruz City & County, CA	2,167	78.4%	Hendry, Hardee, Highlands Counties, FL	398	87.9%
El Dorado County, CA	613	78.3%	Humboldt County, CA	1,702	82.4%

Figure 2: *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.*

The data outlined above paints a worrying picture for policymakers concerned with homelessness, particularly in California and Oregon. The high numbers of unsheltered individuals in each state indicates that municipalities in the region are severely under equipped to handle the mounting homeless population. The presence of high rates of homelessness isn't necessarily a prerequisite for unpreparedness either, as New York City has the highest number of homeless people of any CoC in the country, yet has the second lowest proportion of unsheltered individuals.³⁷

Moreover, the high unsheltered populations on the West Coast may predispose policymakers in the area to greatly underestimate the true extent of the crisis. However, even with these likely deflated numbers, Lane County still consistently ranks amongst the top CoCs in almost every homelessness metric measured by the HUD PIT count. When broken down to the city level, Eugene actually has the highest rate of homelessness of any city in the United States,

³⁵ Lane County Human Services. "Lane County 2019 Unsheltered Point in Time Count Summary." 2.

³⁶ Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.* 19.

³⁷ Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.* 13, 18.

and it is the smallest city of the top ten with the highest rates of homelessness.³⁸ Eugene doesn't just have a "big city" homelessness problem, it stands alone. The next section of this writing will explore some of the unique contributing factors which have put Eugene in this exceptional position.

³⁸ Henry et al., *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. 18.

Chapter 2

Rent and Homelessness

The idea that homelessness is linked to inadequate zoning laws and excessive development impact fees is predicated on the notion that rent prices and homelessness also share a relationship. Therefore, it's crucial that this writing sufficiently analyzes the relationship between high rent costs and homelessness. Understanding this relationship is somewhat intuitive, as an increase in rent price beyond one's means to pay it will leave that person with no other option than to move in with someone they know or become homeless. Because the former option is not available to everyone, rent increases are strongly associated with increases in homelessness.^{39 40 41} The following figure is a graphical representation of median rent prices and homelessness on a state level using data collected from the 2008 HUD PIT count and the 2007 American Community Survey.

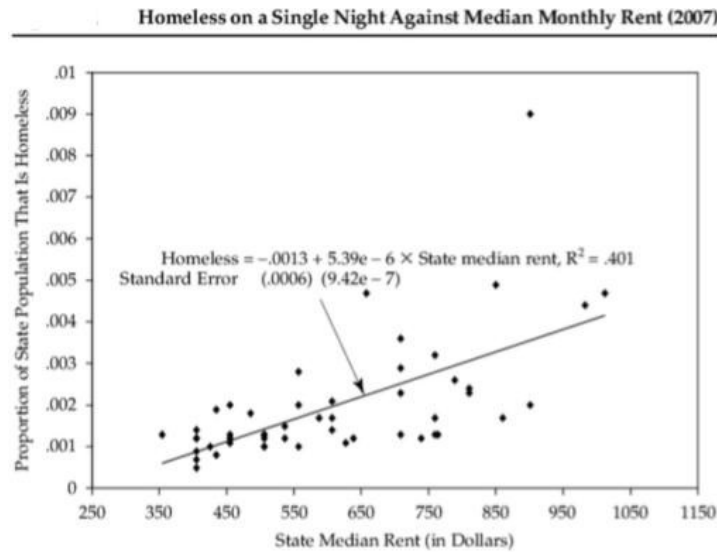


Figure 3: Ellen, et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 113.

³⁹ Ellen et al., et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 112.

⁴⁰ Berlin et al.. "Homelessness: Why Nothing Has Worked--And What Will."

⁴¹ Hanratty, Maria. "Do Local Economic Conditions Affect Homelessness? Impact of Area Housing Market Factors, Unemployment, and Poverty on Community Homeless Rates."

It's worth acknowledging that this data is somewhat dated and represents the relationship between median rent and homelessness on a national scale. However, the same principle applies to Eugene contemporarily. The graph below displays the relationship between median rent and homelessness in Eugene using data collected from Oregon's 2019 PIT Count Survey and the Zillow Rent Index.^{42 43}

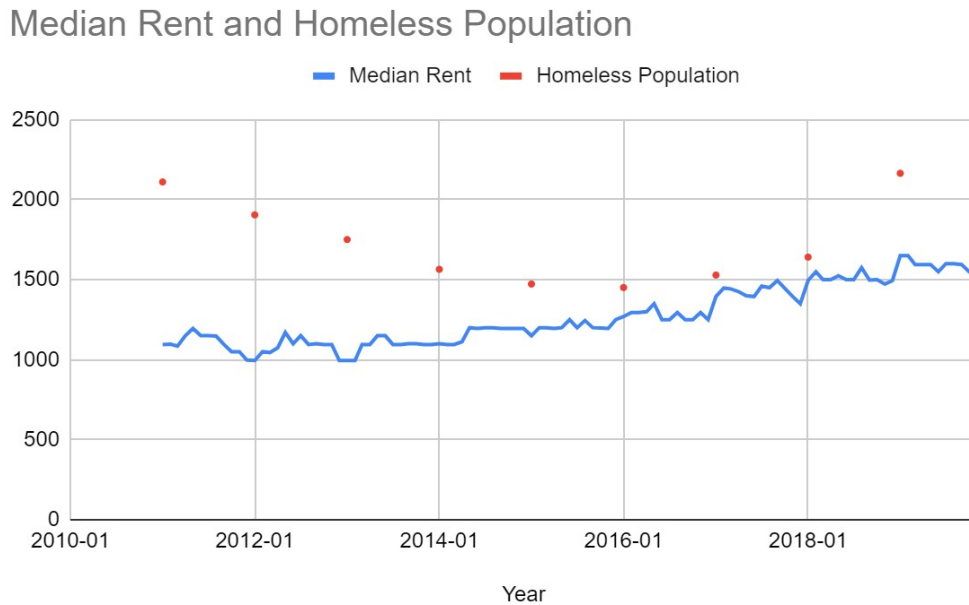


Figure 4

This graph shows a clear correlation between increasing rents and homeless population growth in Eugene. Given the city's extreme homelessness problem, it might be surprising to learn that up until 2016, the city's homelessness rate was actually decreasing. However, once median rent prices began to increase in 2014, this trend began to slow until it entirely reversed course, leaving the city with a homeless population growing at an exponential rate.^{44 45}

Zoning Laws

⁴² Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon*.

⁴³ Zillow. Zillow Rent Index.

⁴⁴ Oregon. Housing Community Services Department, Issuing Body. *Point-in-time Estimates of Homelessness in Oregon*.

⁴⁵ Zillow. Zillow Rent Index.

Though a myriad of factors contribute to determining rent prices in a given area, local zoning laws play an important role in that process. Furthermore, zoning laws can also dictate the layout of a city, and in some cases, make life more comfortable for a city's residents by keeping noise and pollution out of residential areas, providing walkable spaces for pedestrians, and making the city more aesthetically pleasing. Because zoning laws are so influential, inadequate zoning laws can have serious detrimental effects on a community. Specifically, restrictive zoning regulations create an artificial scarcity of housing which leads to rent increases and results in greater amounts of homelessness.^{46 47}

Housing prices, just like any other commodity, are affected by the law of supply and demand. If a city government passes restrictive zoning laws which impede profitable property development or limit urban density, such as arbitrary height limits for buildings, mandating the construction of parking garages, or instituting excessive minimum lot size requirements, the government can create an artificial scarcity of housing. This artificial scarcity drastically raises housing prices, and can be a major driving force behind gentrification.^{48 49} Restrictive zoning laws have negative effects beyond simply raising the price of existing housing. These regulations can also inflate the housing prices of neighboring cities that do not have these regulations, as well as reduce the value of currently undeveloped areas within overregulated municipalities.⁵⁰ Additionally, the increased housing prices and gentrification caused by excessive regulation has eliminated traditional homeless shelter space and made it substantially harder to construct new shelters due to the opposition of local residents.⁵¹ Furthermore, heavy regulation actually

46 Berlin et al.. "Homelessness: Why Nothing Has Worked--And What Will."

47 Ellen et al., et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 112.

48 Ellen et al., et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 117.

49 Berlin et al.. "Homelessness: Why Nothing Has Worked--And What Will."

50 Ellen et al., et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 116.

51 Triplett, William. "Ending Homelessness." CQ Researcher, 18 June 2004.

discourages the construction of new housing in general, despite inflated property values, thus exacerbating the imbalance between the supply and demand of housing.⁵²

There are other specific indicators which demonstrate this trend is present in Eugene. If the housing supply does not grow to match demand, rents in a city become highly price elastic. This means that the price of a commodity (in this case housing) will increase or decrease more dramatically than changes in demand. This trend is evident in Eugene, as the population has increased 8.2 percent since 2012, while the median rent has increased 55.8 percent during the same period.^{53 54}

In regards to housing policy, another important aspect of zoning regulation is the urban growth boundary (UGB). This regulation's definition is in its name, as the urban growth boundary determines the limits of urban sprawl and helps protect natural and agricultural land from urban development. Though not always synonymous with the "city limits" of a municipality, these happen to overlap substantially in Eugene. Extending the UGB could potentially increase the available supply of housing in a city, assuming that the incorporated land is zoned for residential development. Despite the fact that a 2007 State mandate ordered Eugene and Springfield to establish their own UGBs in order to accommodate population growth (Eugene and Springfield previously shared a UGB), and the Eugene City Council has made plans to modestly extend the UGB, the newly incorporated lands will not be zoned for residential development of any kind.⁵⁵

In addition to UGBs, residential zoning regulations are also key to controlling the supply of housing in a city. Assuming a city's UGB remains stagnant (Eugene's UGB has gone mostly

52 Ellen et al., et al.. *How to House the Homeless*. 117.

53 World Population Review. "Eugene, Oregon 2020."

54 Zillow. Zillow Rent Index.

55 Eugene. "Urban Growth Boundary (UGB)." Planning Division.

unchanged since it was first established in 1982), creating greater urban density through rezoning is one of the only ways to increase the total supply of housing.⁵⁶ In Eugene, there are four primary residential zones: low density residential (R-1), medium density residential (R-2), limited-high density residential (R-3), and high density residential (R-4).⁵⁷ Figure 5 is the zoning map for Eugene. It illustrates the extent to which R-1 zoning predominates the city’s landscape. It’s also worth pointing out that the orange areas on the periphery of the city are agricultural land and not R-4, as the colors on the map are similar.

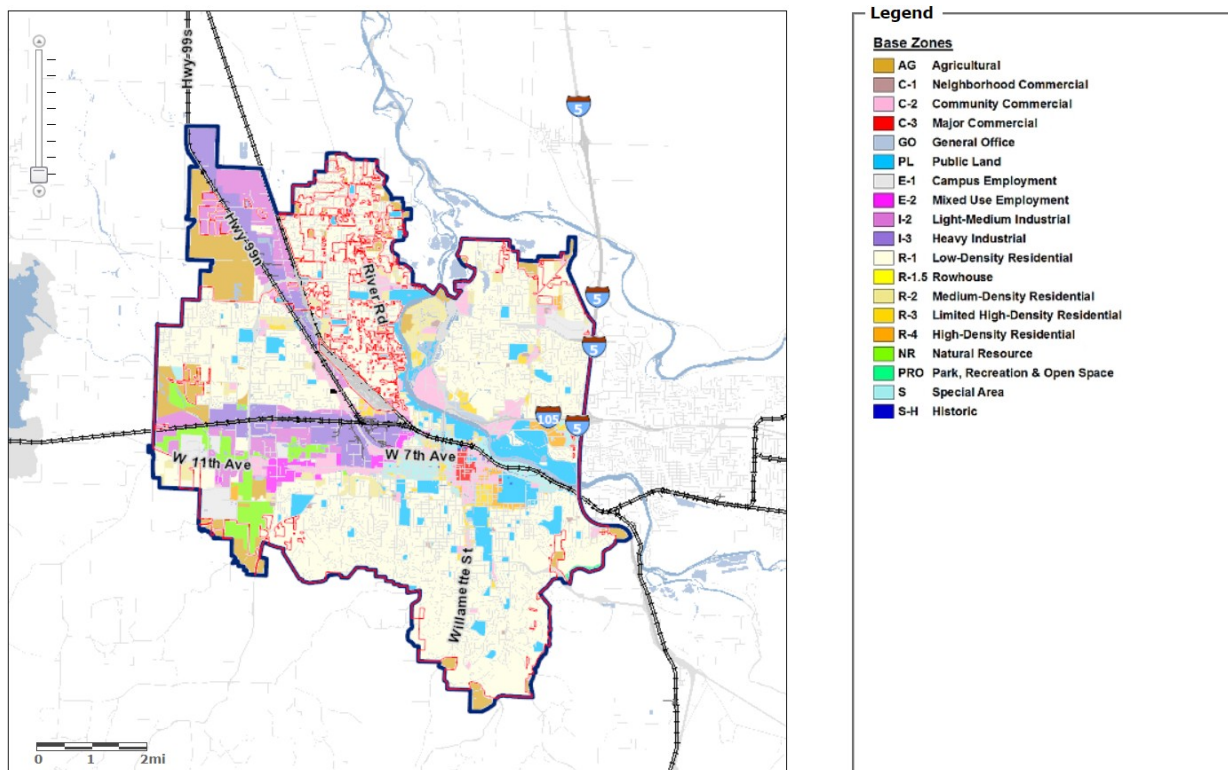


Figure 5: Eugene. “Eugene Zoning Map.” Planning Division.

R-1 zones are designed for single-family dwellings, and are not subject to any minimum density restrictions. Additionally, buildings within R-1 are limited in height to 30 feet, have a minimum setback of 10 feet from the street, are only allowed to cover a maximum of half the lot on which they are located (with a maximum lot coverage of ten percent for alley access lots), and

⁵⁶ Eugene. “Growth Management and Population.”

⁵⁷ Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, 9.2700-9.2730 January 21, 2020.

have at least one parking space.⁵⁸ Certain R-1 zones are subject to specific regulations which further limit density, as areas within the boundaries the Amazon Neighbors, Fairmount Neighbors and South University Neighborhood Association are not allowed to have dwellings which house more than three unrelated individuals or have more than three bedrooms (unless issued a special permit from the city).⁵⁹ Additionally, buildings in R-4 zones are subject to a building height restriction of 30 feet if they border R-1 housing, which many of them do.⁶⁰ All of the guidelines above are intentionally designed to ensure low density in and around R-1 zones. The prevalence of R-1 zoning in Eugene is one of the most significant barriers to fostering greater urban density in the city, as R-1 areas inhabit more space within Eugene than any other designation (either residential or commercial) by a huge margin.⁶¹

As demonstrated by the map above, R-2, R-3, and R-4 zones in Eugene are extremely restricted in size, but even the most dense residential zoning is limited in several ways. For the portion of R-4 housing which does not border R-1 zones, buildings are limited to 120 feet, which equates to roughly eight storeys. R-4 buildings are also limited to 112 units per acre, but can have as few as 20 units per acre. Though they are not technically limited in terms of lot coverage, buildings in R-4 must allocate at least 20 percent of their development site to “outdoor living areas.” R-2 and R-3 buildings are also subject to this stipulation.⁶²

Despite rising rent prices and a growing homeless population, most of Eugene’s residential landscape remains off-limits to high density residential development. From a political perspective, these housing conditions are somewhat understandable, as a number of politically-active homeowners associations fiercely oppose high density development in their

58 Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, Table 9.2750.

59 Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, 9.2751 19(1).

60 Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, 9.2751 3(a).

61 Eugene. “Eugene Zoning Map.” Planning Division.

62 Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, Table 9.2750.

neighborhoods and would certainly make it a priority for any such development to take place.⁶³

Later on, this writing will explore the beneficiaries of Eugene's current housing policies, but the next section will analyze another important factor restricting housing development in Eugene: development impact fees.

Development Impact Fees

Development impact fees (DIFs), also referred to as building impact fees, are present to some extent in many cities across the US. These fees are levied by local governments on property developers building new projects in their city. DIFs can mitigate the costs a city takes on when a new project is built, such as hooking the building up to the power grid and connecting other public utilities. They can also be a substantial source of revenue for a city (assuming new properties are being constructed). Much like restrictive zoning laws, excessive DIFs can put upward pressure on rents and limit the supply of housing.⁶⁴

DIFs are theoretically supposed to be a progressive tax, as they are often directly levied on large corporations responsible for developing a property. In reality, DIFs operate as a regressive tax on renters. This is the case because after paying the fees associated with the development project, property owners simply translate those costs onto their tenants in the form of higher rents.⁶⁵ This fee-driven rent increase causes an increase in rent prices in existing properties as well because the market rent is inflated by these DIFs.⁶⁶ As a result of inflated rent

⁶³ Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 9, 9.2751 19(1).

⁶⁴ Huffman, Forrest E., Arthur C. Nelson, Marc T. Smith, and Michael A. Stegman. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" *Journal of the American Planning Association* 54.1 (1988): 49-55. Web

⁶⁵ Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 55.

⁶⁶ Lawhon, Larry Lloyd. "THE EFFECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IMPACT FEES AND GROWTH ON THE PRICE OF HOUSING IN HIGH GROWTH COLORADO COMMUNITIES: A COMPARISON OF TWO CITIES." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-9. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43031055. Accessed 2 Mar. 2020.

prices, developers in high DIF zones also tend to build more luxury housing and neglect the construction of lower quality units which might be accessible to low-income individuals.⁶⁷ This is all assuming that developers choose to build in a heavily taxed area at all, as high DIFs increase the developers risk of constructing a new building by increasing the price of the initial investment. Developers often respond to this increased risk factor by further increasing rents or refusing to build altogether.⁶⁸ All of these effects caused by high DIFs can effectively price low-income tenants out of heavily taxed residential areas, thus fuelling gentrification if it's viable for low-income individuals to move, or putting them out on the street if it's not.⁶⁹

Cities such as Eugene are uniquely sensitive to the upward price pressure caused by DIFs. In some cities, high rents will encourage residents to seek a substitute for their current dwelling. This is easier if there is a large supply of similar quality housing in neighboring municipalities which are not subject to high DIFs. However, in small urban areas which are relatively isolated from other major population centers, such as Eugene, there is a lack of local substitutes. This greatly increases the costs associated with moving, as a tenant might have to move hours away to find comparable housing, which would likely require them to seek new employment opportunities as well. These conditions result in increased incentives for residents to remain in their current community and makes them willing to pay higher rents if they are able.⁷⁰ This trend is compounded further by Eugene's high student population. There are several colleges located within the city, including Northwest Christian University, Lane Community College, and the largest college in the area, the University of Oregon, which currently serves 22,760 students (13.3% of Eugene's total population).^{71 72} College students are essentially a

67 Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 52.

68 Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 55.

69 Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 52.

70 Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 50.

71 World Population Review. "Eugene, Oregon 2020."

72 Admissions. "Quack Facts." UO Facts.

captive audience and are generally insensitive to changes in rental pricing. This is evidenced by the steady rates of enrollment in the University of Oregon since 2012, in the face of the dramatic rent increases in Eugene.⁷³

Sadly, Eugene charges developers enormous DIFs for building new housing in the city. The Flats @ Chase, a privately owned development providing housing for students which is currently under construction, had to pay 6.6 million dollars in fees to the city on a project valued at 18.4 million (the latter number excludes the cost of DIFs). The city effectively raised the cost of this project by 35.9 percent.⁷⁴ The Flats @ Chase contains 85 units total, so Eugene's DIFs have added 77,647.06 dollars per unit to the cost of construction. Though the cost of DIFs vary widely from city to city, the standard per unit cost of DIFs for multifamily housing in most municipalities averages around 20,000 to 30,000 dollars.⁷⁵ As of this writing, there is no indication that the city is planning on reducing the cost of its onerous fees. On July 1 of this year, the city is planning to actually raise the Construction Excise Tax (one of the many DIFs imposed by the city) by 66 percent from its current level.⁷⁶ Eugene also has a transient room tax, which is designed to extract fees from tourists to the city, but also applies to low-income individuals living in trailer parks and mobile homes and increases rents in affected areas by 4.5 percent.⁷⁷

Eugene's excessive DIFs make it substantially more difficult for private developers to build profitable rental properties within the city. When also taking into account the city's zoning regulations which heavily favor low-density development, it becomes extremely difficult to expand high-density development anywhere in Eugene. Excessive DIFs and restrictive zoning laws have made housing in Eugene artificially scarce, overpriced, considerably sparse, and

⁷³ Office of the Registrar. "Course Enrollments by Headcount (Fall 1994 - Fall 2017)."

⁷⁴ Morris, Shayla. "The Flats @ Chase Project Costs." March 2, 2020.

⁷⁵ Raetz, Hayley, David Garcia, Nathaniel Decker, Elizabeth Kneebone, Carolina Reid, and Carol Galante. "Residential Impact Fees in California." Turner Center, 7.

⁷⁶ Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 3, 3.732.

⁷⁷ Eugene City Council. *The Eugene Code*. Chapter 3, 3.772.

unresponsive to population growth . These conditions have resulted in skyrocketing median rent prices which have put a squeeze on low-income renters and lead to increasing rates of homelessness for those unable to accommodate the higher cost of living in the city. Though low-income individuals have suffered the most from the shortage of housing and regressive DIFs, all renters in Eugene are adversely impacted by the greater share of their paychecks going towards paying for housing.

If high DIFs and restrictive zoning laws have a negative impact on renters and contribute to homelessness, it's fair to ask who benefits from the status quo. The answer is middle to high income property owners in the city. This is because high DIFs and housing shortages increase property values for homeowners and allow landlords to charge their tenants inflated rental prices. Building upkeep costs remain fairly steady regardless of rental market forces, so artificially inflated rental markets can lead to windfall profits for landlords without additional investments to improve the quality of their property. If the laws changed to make it easier to develop more housing in the city, then rents would decrease across the board, building upkeep cost would stay the same, and landlords would experience smaller profit margins.⁷⁸ The next section of this writing will analyze current government strategies for addressing the homelessness crisis and outline other possible solutions to Eugene's dire housing situation.

78 Huffman et al. "Who Bears the Burden of Development Impact Fees?" 52.

Chapter 3

Affordable Housing?

Expanding affordable housing is frequently discussed as a solution to homelessness across the country. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, affordable and public housing are two different things. Affordable housing is defined as housing which costs tenants no more than 30 percent of their monthly income. These units are privately owned and are usually incorporated into a larger apartment complex which contains a majority of units priced at the market rate. Conversely, public housing is owned by the government, managed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and exists for the express purpose of providing homes to low-income individuals.⁷⁹

The housing initiatives that the Eugene City Government has pursued thus far have focused on the expansion of affordable housing opportunities in the city. For example, the city has opted to extend modest tax incentives to local developers through measures such as the Low-income Rental Housing Property Tax Exemption. Though this strategy is a step in the right direction, the initiative is extremely limited in scope as it applies primarily to property already held by non-profit organizations and fails to completely offset the costs of new affordable housing construction.⁸⁰

However, the city is also in talks to extend tax incentives aimed at private developers who designate a portion of their property for affordable housing as part of the High Density Residential Downtown Redevelopment Strategy (RDRS).⁸¹ These tax incentives are essential to maximizing the beneficial impact of additional affordable housing. This is the case because if the

⁷⁹ Beaver, Alex. "What is the Difference Between Affordable Housing and Public Housing?" Olympia Management Inc., 2020.

⁸⁰ Eugene. "LITE and LIRHPTE" 2014.

⁸¹ Eugene City Council. "Eugene City Council Agenda Item Summary." Planning and Development, October 24, 2016.

city were to simply mandate that private developers provide a certain number of affordable units, the cost of those units would simply be translated onto the rest of the units in the development, which could price out middle-income individuals who cannot afford the increased cost but are too wealthy to apply for the affordable units. Mandated affordable housing allocation can be even more detrimental in developments where units are sold rather than rented. This is because if a prospective renter is wealthy enough to qualify for a loan to pay for an affordable unit, they are not poor enough to qualify to buy the unit in the first place. Areas subject to these kinds of laws often have so called “affordable” units sitting vacant.⁸² It is important to mention that the RDRS has not yet gone into effect, and the City Council continues to deliberate on the issue. Part of the plan involves constructing 1000 new high density homes around the downtown area, an aspect of the measure that has actually garnered a fair amount of public support.⁸³

Despite the necessity of this tax incentive for developing profitable, affordable housing, it has been vehemently opposed by members of the community surveyed by the city council.⁸⁴ This is likely the case because such a tax break might be perceived as the City Government giving tax dollars to large businesses, which is honestly a fair interpretation. In proportion to its size, Eugene lacks a sizable tax base from which to extract funds for public projects, including affordable housing initiatives and adequate homeless services. In 2018, Lane County commissioned the “Lane County Shelter Feasibility Study,” in order to make recommendations on implementing affordable housing and additional shelter space. The study found that the poverty rate in Eugene is 44.1 percent higher than the national average, the percent of people over 65 is 19.9 percent higher than the national average, the proportion of working age people in the labor force is 6.6 percent below the national average, and the proportion of people under 65

82 Hamilton, Emily. “The year of housing reform.” Vox, The Weeds. February 20, 2020.

83 Eugene City Council. “Eugene City Council Agenda Item Summary.”

84 Eugene City Council. “Eugene City Council Agenda Item Summary.”

on disability assistance is 41.5 percent higher than the national average.⁸⁵ The report even suggested that the city solicit private donations in order to cover the costs of its proposed projects.⁸⁶ These findings indicate that the Eugene government is unequipped to deal with the financial burden of providing sufficient social services to address the city's homeless crisis.

Rezoning and Fee Reduction

In addition to the RDRS, the City Council has also amended parts of the city code in order to promote greater urban density. In May of 2017, the minimum density per acre requirements for R-2 buildings was changed from 10 to 13. Though this action was a positive measure, it's impact on homelessness and housing affordability will likely be somewhat limited. This is because the updated statute does not apply to any lot under 2,780 square feet or any exclusively affordable housing development, and R-2 zones inhabit a relatively small portion of land in Eugene.^{87 88} However, the existence of the RDRS and this update to the City Code indicate that the City Government has finally begun to realize that promoting greater urban density is a promising solution to the city's housing shortage. The State Government has also reflected this perspective in passing House Bill 2001 which allows homeowners to build accessory dwellings within single-family residential zones. This bill has the potential to substantially increase the supply of housing across the state and will likely have a noticeable impact on rental prices in Eugene given the city's high amounts of R-1 land and large proportion of student renters. While this bill has yet to go into effect in Eugene, the City Government will be required by law to implement it into the City Code by June 30, 2022.

⁸⁵ Technical Assistance Collaborative. "Lane County Shelter Feasibility Study." December 2018, 10-11.

⁸⁶ Technical Assistance Collaborative. "Lane County Shelter Feasibility Study." December 2018, 32.

⁸⁷ Eugene City Council. The Eugene Code. January 21, 2020, Chapter 9, Table 9.2750.

⁸⁸ Eugene. "Eugene Zoning Map." Planning Division.

While these new regulations will hopefully slow the growth of homelessness in Eugene, more drastic actions must be taken to reduce the homeless population. The City Council should rezone all R-1 residential areas north of East 19th Avenue, west of the UO main campus, south of the Willamette River/Division Avenue, and east of River Road/Chambers Street to R-4 housing. These boundaries were selected due to the area's proximity to downtown (commercial zones), convenient access to public transit, and close proximity to existing R-2, R-3, and R-4 zones. The space's closeness to downtown and its access to public transit would encourage residents in this area to walk, bike, or take the bus to work, thus reducing the need for excessive parking infrastructure. The area's proximity to other higher density zones is important for aesthetic reasons, as these new high-density residences would not appear as an island of skyscrapers in the midst of a sea of houses, but would be incorporated into the existing urban environment.

This measure would allow for significantly greater urban density in the outlined area, dramatically increase the city's supply of housing, and reduce rents across the city by mitigating the current housing shortage. The rent reduction that would accompany an increase in R-4 housing would ease the financial strain of housing costs on low income individuals and make it easier for people who are currently homeless to afford housing. This writing does not recommend expanding the UGB however. While it's possible that such a step would increase the available supply of housing, there's no guarantee that newly incorporated lands would be zoned for residential development. Additionally, expanding the UGB is a long, arduous, and complicated process, involving both local and state agencies. UGBs are typically changed once every decade or more, and expanding the UGB raises environmental and agricultural concerns.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Eugene. "Urban Growth Boundary (UGB)." Planning Division.

For rezoning efforts to maximize their positive impact, Eugene must also reduce its residential DIFs by eliminating the Construction Excise Tax, Electrical Permit Fee, Mechanical Permit Fee, Plumbing Permit Fee, Service or Feeder Permit Fees, Renewable Energy Systems Fees, and Zoning Plan Check Fee. Most of these charges scale with the square footage or value of the building, so larger construction projects would not have to factor these variable costs into their budget. For a building like The Flats @ Chase, eliminating these fees would reduce its construction cost by roughly a quarter of a million dollars.⁹⁰ While this reduction still leaves Eugene's per unit DIFs well above the average, it would not be feasible to slash DIFs by almost 40 percent given local political opposition to even minor development tax breaks. Ideally, the city should cut DIFs to the point where developers are paying per unit fees within the average range, but it's unlikely any City Council Person would endorse such a measure at present. However, even limited DIF reductions will help curtail the adverse effects of Eugene's current level of taxation and encourage more developers to pursue projects in the city.

There's also the concern that eliminating these DIFs would lead to a reduction in funds for the already cash-strapped city. This is hardly an issue, as no new permits for R-4 housing have been issued in over a year.⁹¹ In fact, reducing barriers to new development and encouraging the expansion of R-4 housing would provide residential space for thousands of additional Eugene residents who would live, work, and pay taxes in the city for years. The only group who would be any worse off as a result of an expanded housing supply would be Eugene's landlords. This could be interpreted as one of the plan's advantages as well, because the costs of cheaper housing would be distributed progressively.

⁹⁰ Eugene City Council. "Construction and Development Fee Schedule." July 1, 2019.

⁹¹ Eugene. "Building Permit Search Results." Planning and Development Department.

Conclusion

The fact that Eugene has the highest rate of homelessness of any city in the US indicates that decisive and substantial action be taken to address this growing problem. While the City Government has taken small steps to increase urban density and is talking about further subsidizing affordable housing, it continues to raise development impact fees, which have many of the same adverse effects as low-density zoning. The City Council can and should be doing more to combat the growth of homelessness and end the city's housing shortage. While Eugene's government crawls toward an adequate response to homelessness, thousands of Eugene residents are left sleeping on sidewalks, under bridges, and in alleys every single night.

Of course, the entire homelessness issue cannot be laid at the feet of Eugene's government. Homelessness rates are on the rise all up and down the West Coast, and there are a myriad of issues intersecting with homelessness, such as drug addiction, mental illness, sexual assault, racism, and healthcare, which the Eugene City Council has very limited control over. But the City council can help people who have become homeless for economic reasons, as instituting policies which lower rent prices will help get people off the street and improve the financial situation of all renters in the city.

It's crucial that these measures be enacted as soon as humanly possible, because the plight of homelessness is about to get much worse. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the US unemployment rate has hit its highest levels in the history of this country. The US Department of Labor's phone lines have been overrun with desperate people trying to collect their unemployment benefits. Already, businesses are closing left and right, and entire industries might never recover from the economic abyss into which the US has descended. Hundreds, if not thousands of small businesses have gone under, and former industry giants such as JC Penny

have filed for bankruptcy. The economic situation is so dire that the current *Republican* administration has signed off on direct cash subsidies for almost every adult in the country, an unprecedented move.

Along with the extreme likelihood that there's an impending explosion of homelessness on the horizon, homeless individuals are unable to self isolate and spend their entire life in public. For those lucky enough to find shelter space (an increasingly remote possibility in Eugene), they are also highly susceptible to infection as many homeless shelters have dozens or even hundreds of beds in close proximity to one another with no physical barrier separating one person from another. Furthermore, homeless people are unable to afford medical treatment which a COVID-19 infection might require, so the mortality rates will likely be higher amongst the homeless population. Essentially, COVID-19 will have a much greater impact on the homeless population and is creating untold numbers of additional homeless people.

Though a certain proportion of homeless individuals will never be able to effectively support themselves, people who become homeless for economic reasons are almost always able to get off the streets if given an opportunity. This latter section of the homeless population is the demographic this writing's proposal is designed to help, and is also the demographic being put on the streets by the economic repercussions of COVID-19. The absolute last thing the Eugene City Council should be doing is keeping laws in place which erase opportunities for people struggling to find a home.

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