

Housing or Food - How Does Our Community Solve The Puzzle?

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Would you tell your children there is **no food** because you gave all your money to the **slumlord**? Or would you buy groceries and risk another eviction, knowing that each time the money doesn't stretch far enough to pay the full rent, that it is harder and harder to get housing?

That is the **agonizing dilemma** of thousands of mothers and fathers and grandparents raising grandchildren as they experience the "persistent shortage of safe affordable housing". **Eviction**, if they don't give every penny to the landlord. **Homelessness**, because they can't find anything else when wages are low and rents are rising and eviction records are counted against them. Plus, landlords may not want families with children; that is illegal discrimination but common practice. **Substandard**, because that may be all someone will finally agree to rent to them.



If our community had more housing, in decent condition, with rents affordable for families, then children could eat and not change schools four times a year and not go to the hospital in asthma crisis. And parents could smile instead of being depressed and stressed as they have to choose food OR roof OR health but not all three.

Housing our community's families will take **collective action by many people**, complicated but feasible.

- We will need to expand the **quantity and quality of housing choices**, building new

apartments and houses throughout the city and rehabilitating the substandard places to counter that “persistent shortage”.

- We will need to help families **access housing**—and keep from losing it again—through a range of services: education about tenant rights and responsibilities, job training to increase income, rental supplements so families don’t have to spend all their income on rent, fair housing advocacy to get into housing, mental health and supportive services, maybe legal representation in eviction hearings.
- We will need **unprecedented collaboration** among organizations with the capacity, credibility, and accountability to implement the construction and services.
- And we will need **money**—lots of it—from government, business, and philanthropy to fund this work, but the Return on Investment will be measured in property values, employment, health, stability, and public safety.

Greensboro’s **housing bond referendum** <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/index.aspx?page=4958> on the November ballot, will leverage the investments and community service to launch the work of Housing Our Community. The bond will support:



Healthy children in healthy homes by investing in building new affordable homes and repairing unhealthy places to reduce the persistent shortage of safe affordable housing.



Aging gracefully at home by helping seniors make accessibility modifications to their homes and building new affordable and accessible apartments for those who are downsizing.



Investment in construction and real estate jobs and expanding the tax base by increasing the equity of surrounding properties. The bond will leverage private investment and much of it will become a revolving loan fund.



Stronger, safer neighborhoods by allowing code enforcement to repair dangerous vacant and boarded-up properties where fires, vandalism, and other criminal activity impact community safety and property values.



Ending homelessness by building supportive housing for persons with disabilities and expanding the supply of affordable apartments so that individuals and families can live stable, productive lives.

With all the people and moving parts, the effort will be like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Remember doing **jigsaw puzzles**? The completed picture is on the box top—the vision of what it will look like when all the pieces are in place and connected. But the process of putting that picture together from the jumble of small, irregular-shaped pieces—some of them upside down or falling off the table—takes time and concentrated attention. There are the edge pieces that define the parameters, the inside pieces that connect on four sides. There are the ones that are similar to each other—such as the sky at the top or water at the bottom—and the pieces that connect to sky on one side and trees on the other. When we aren't sure where a piece fits, we can look at the picture on the box to guide us but we still usually need to try several places until we find the right connections. If some pieces are missing, the picture has holes in it.



Community engagement for [Housing Our Community](#) is like that. We (hopefully) have a shared vision of what we want our community to look like when we get finished (?) but the process takes lots of time and often trial-and-error as we figure out the partnerships and patterns that work. Everyone has a place for unique contributions, so how do we find that perfect spot? We connect people and organizations with similar interests but we also have to have those who can bridge the groups—housing with health, black with white, English-speaking with dozens of languages, public responsibility with private investment. And we have to have the boundaries—those who say that “here is the line we cannot cross” in order to achieve our vision.

Here are some of the clusters of pieces on the table that could make a full picture.

- The Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro and the City of Greensboro have jointly launched the Housing Our Community initiative and are leading **stakeholder engagement**.
- Greensboro's **InvestHealth** team won a community planning grant from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to incentivize investment in housing interventions that improve health

outcomes for children with asthma. UNCG's Center for Housing and Community Studies is partnering with the City of Greensboro, Cone Health, East Market Street Development Corporation, and Greensboro Housing Coalition to lead this process.

- Social service organizations who have partnered for many years to **end homelessness**, using the Housing First model of moving people into housing, then surrounding with supportive services, recognize the urgent need for affordable housing to move to!

Questions:

- Could legal counsel in eviction hearings greatly reduce housing loss? (see New York's proposal http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/nyregion/push-to-provide-lawyers-in-new-york-city-housing-court-gains-momentum.html?_r=0)
- Could workforce development programs to teach housing maintenance skills simultaneously improve the quality of rental housing conditions and the income of tenants?
- Could a team focus on the problem properties (ones with multiple code violations, fires, police calls, and evictions) bring these into compliance with minimum housing safety codes more quickly?
- Can neighborhood organizing empower communities to revitalize without displacement of current residents that often happens with gentrification? With a history of segregation laws, can we respect communities' cultural heritage while moving towards an inclusive and vibrant future?
- Can we quantify the financial benefits of investing in safe affordable housing, as well as the quality of life improvements, to encourage investment?

I will be exploring these questions as we move ahead with Housing Our Community and welcome comments and ideas!