

Olympia Rental Housing Solutions Focus Group Structure

Discussion Draft: November 30, 2021

Logistics

- Prep note-takers
- Room set up; food/beverage/flip charts et al (or Zoom if virus still a challenge)

Introduction/Setting the Stage

Welcome from Christa:

- Renter solutions background
- Overview of recent legislative updates, moratorium updates and impacts
- Description of next steps, process and outcome framework
- Christa role/Introduce Jason/Jason role
- (Introduce Dani, other special listeners)
- Hand off to Jason

Process Overview by Jason:

- 90 minutes
- Safe place /ground rules – trying to find fairest way forward, understand can be emotional, etc.
- State has adopted some new protections and rules as described by Christa
- Rent control is not allowed under Washington State constitution, so focusing on “what else”
- Set questions, but may chase down interesting ideas or takes for deeper understanding
- This is a complex issue with many moving parts – but top goal is keeping people housed
- The City understands and is addressing things like supply, affordability
- OUR FOCUS is on potential policies that can help stabilize the situation in the near term
- So, let’s see what you think about some of the different ideas we’ve heard about

Introductions:

- (Renters describe rental situation; Landlords describe holdings; Advocates describe emphasis areas)

Q1: Do you agree that this is a particularly challenging time to be a renter?

If you don’t agree, why?

If you agree, why? Do you think it is due to:

- Impacts of COVID
- Natural Change in market conditions
- Other factors such as lack of housing stock
- Stagnant wages and rising housing costs
- Some combination of all the above

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Q2: How long do you think renter conditions will remain challenging: weeks, months, years? Why?

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Renter Solution Concepts

Many communities maintain a landlord registry or licensing structure. The registry structure varies from one city to another. Some cities use it as a tool to ensure that safe housing standards are maintained and require periodic rental home inspections. Others use it as a more loosely, unenforced policy and program to facilitate communications about landlord training programs, renter rights and changes to laws and ordinances.

Q3: Do you think a landlord registry makes sense for Olympia? Why or why not?

What beneficial purposes might a landlord registry serve in Olympia or Thurston County?

If you support a registry, would you make landlord registration voluntary or mandatory?

Would you include mandatory home and apartment inspections?

Would you exempt certain landlords based on any specific criteria?

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During our stakeholder interviews, we tested a number of policy options other communities have used to try and stabilize rental housing. Examples include:

- A longer payment period for move in costs (State law currently allows for installment payments over a two or three month period, depending on the length of tenancy);
- reduced screening requirements; and
- limiting the total amount of deposit expenses a landlord can charge at move-in time

Renter advocates generally say any and all of those policies would help. Landlords are generally opposed and say those policies could actually make things worse for renters. They suggest that by introducing more renter protections, we would actually be increasing risk to landlords and that landlords might respond by, a) becoming even more selective in who they rent to; b) increasing rents or deposit amounts to protect against increased risk; or c) leaving the rental market all-together, thereby further reducing affordable stock.

Q4: Are there any solutions you think might actually cause unintended consequences for renters?

If so, what kinds of impacts and how might they be mitigated?

If you disagree, why?

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Q5: Some peer cities have instituted relocation assistance programs to help low-income renters cover the upfront costs associated with securing a new rental unit when compelled to move. State law authorizes and provides guidelines for implementation. These programs are tied to a substantial remodel, demolition or change of use scenario. The program requires landlords to pay up to half and the City to pay the remainder of relocation assistance, with a cap of \$2,000 in assistance, although that amount can increase annually over time. **Do you think a relocation assistance program would be helpful in Olympia?**

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Q6: Some peer communities have introduced screening restrictions to facilitate housing access for higher-barrier renters – i.e., those with criminal or credit history challenges (Jason to provide prompts). Others promote the use of reusable screening reports to reduce costs associated with multiple applications. **What types of prospective tenant screening solutions do you think might work in Olympia?**

Are there any screening solutions that give you concern, and what or why?

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Q7: Other renter solutions could include better dissemination of information or even more proactive technical assistance for renters and landlords alike. I'd like to introduce several possibilities and ask for your initial response. After that, we can circle back and dive into any you find of particular interest...or concern. (briefly explain purpose of each item below)

Housing Ombudsperson?

Required provision of renter rights and information packets?

Permanent alternative dispute resolution process?

Low interest loans or grants to landlords for repairs in exchange for rent stability?

Q8: Some cities have placed limits or caps on deposits, move-in fees, late fees and even pet fees. **Do you believe Olympia should explore any or all of these ideas?**

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Q9: **What do you think about extending the notice period for proposed rent increases? It's currently 60 days. Some cities have extended the notice period to 90, 120 or even 180 days with the goal of buying more time for renters who may need to find a more affordable rental alternative.**

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Q10: State Legislature just passed a Just Cause eviction law to require landlords to provide one of several defined reasons for ending a month-to-month or term tenancy, but gave a couple of exceptions for some 6-12 month leases (which can be ended for no reason with 60 days' notice). One option we've heard is to expand the Just Cause eviction rule to include Just Cause eviction requirements for any and all tenancies. **In your opinion, what might be the pros and cons of implementing that in Olympia?**

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Q11: **Can you think of other solutions that might work to stabilize or support renters in this market?**

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