A conversation with Alan Durning, July 5, 2016

Participants

- Alan Durning – Executive Director, Sightline Institute
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Alan Durning.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Durning of the Sightline Institute (Sightline) as part of a grant update. Conversation topics included Sightline's current and upcoming projects and an update on the Seattle for Everyone campaign.

Current and upcoming projects

Accessory Dwelling Units

A Seattle City Council member has put forth a proposal to implement most of the recommendations of the city's Housing Affordability and Livability Advisory (HALA) Committee. Part of a HALA recommendation on accessory dwelling units (ADUs) was excluded from this proposal; Sightline is working to ensure its inclusion, and plans to publish an article on the topic of ADUs in Seattle.

Mandatory Housing Affordability program

Sightline is working on several research projects in preparation for the City Council's discussion of the proposed Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) program, which would link upzones with affordable housing mandates.

Loosening occupancy limits

Sightline has hired a recent law school graduate to produce a legal memo summarizing court case precedents and statutes on occupancy limits. Sightline's hypothesis is that state and federal fair housing laws may provide grounds for a legal strategy to loosen occupancy limits. In Seattle, the number of micro-apartments permitted per lot is limited by occupancy limits; for example, a structure with space for 10-12 units might have an occupancy limit of 8 people. Occupancy limits can also be a constraint on ADU construction, as many cities do not increase occupancy quotas for ADUs. In Portland, Oregon, ADU rules are more lenient and continue to improve, but occupancy is still generally limited to 5 unrelated adults per lot.

Barriers to condo construction

In Seattle, only a small proportion of new units being developed are condominiums, and most of them are high-cost units. Sightline is working with the University of

Washington's Runstad Center For Real Estate Studies to identify barriers to condominium construction.

Foreign ownership and housing affordability

Sightline is collecting data on the relationship between foreign ownership and housing affordability in an effort to develop a clear understanding of this issue.

Exclusionary zoning

Sightline staff member Dan Bertolet wrote a paper summarizing the main arguments against exclusionary zoning. Sightline plans to publish a similar paper on the topic of inclusionary zoning, including affordable housing fees and mandates.

Zoned capacity

Sightline plans to publish a response to opponents of increasing zoned capacity. Sightline believes that if current zoned capacity was sufficient, housing prices would not be increasing as quickly as they are. As this is a complex issue, Sightline is aiming to produce an intuitive and succinct counter-argument.

Data mapping projects

Displacement

Sightline is conducting background research for a 2-part series of articles on displacement in Seattle. Displacement is often the main focus of opposition and concern in both focus group sessions and council debates. Many people believe that the main cause of displacement is the replacement of old affordable buildings with expensive, high-rise condominiums, and that the solution is to stop new development. Through its research, Sightline has found that, by a factor of 10-30 fold, most displacement is caused by rising rents rather than actual demolition.

For the first article, Sightline staff members Dan Bertolet and Margaret Morales are working with a geographic information system (GIS) consultant on a large data mapping project. They are collecting city- and zone-level data on demolitions, construction, and prices in order to compare the number of available units in new multi-family developments vs. what was previously on those sites. The ratio of available units in new vs. old developments looks something like 100:1, as most sites were previously occupied by parking lots or underutilized low-rise commercial, or low-unit residential, buildings. This research is almost complete. Sightline hopes it will be used by advocates, and will generate both initial media attention as well as recurring proof points for future coverage.

Missing middle housing developments

Sightline is using GIS mapping to collect concrete data, including photographs, on how new missing middle housing development (for example, replacing an older single-family home with a 2- or 3-apartment row house, rather than with a large mansion) can increase the availability of affordable units.

Grandfathered housing in single-family zones

Sightline is working with a GIS consultant to develop an interactive map, including photographs, of ADUs and grandfathered duplex, triplex, and small apartment buildings located in single-family zones. The aim is to reduce resistance to these types of housing.

Focus groups

Sightline hired a firm to conduct a series of focus groups to identify ways to increase support, among both homeowners and renters, for its policy goals. Analysis of the results is ongoing.

Communications and story-telling

Sightline has several communications projects in the pipeline. It hopes that with the right messaging, its efforts will have a long life-span and provide models for similar initiatives in other cities. In its "Faces of Growth" project, for example, Sightline plans to use the "Humans of New York" approach to tell the housing stories of Seattle residents. The stories would be accompanied by photographs of the subjects in front of their homes. Rather than abstractly referring to "residents" or buildings, this type of storytelling helps focus the conversation on real people, with the aim of increasing openness to change and new neighbors. It has been well received in previous Sightline presentations. Sightline is seeking a coordinator for this project, and expects it will also have to hire a photojournalist or portrait photographer.

Seattle's zoning history

Sightline would like to publish a document on Seattle's zoning history. A similar document produced for Portland, Oregon showed how the city's current population influx has been accommodated less effectively than previous ones, which had lead to much more construction.

HALA recommendations and the Seattle for Everyone campaign

Opposition to the HALA recommendations

As expected, opponents to the HALA recommendations are uniting and organizing themselves. Two different groups have filed appeals in the following areas:

1. **ADUs** – Opponents have filed legal documents arguing that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should be completed before the proposed ADU rules are implemented. This appeal will, at a minimum, delay city action by 5 or 6 months. The appeal will be examined by a city hearing review officer in a process set up under the Washington State Growth Management Act.
2. **MHA program** – Residents of a downtown luxury high-rise apartment building have demanded a "tower spacing policy" in order to stop the construction of a similar neighboring tower. They have hired lawyers and

are well-funded. This appeal may also delay approval of the HALA recommendations.

Seattle for Everyone coalition

Seattle for Everyone is developing lists and caucuses of activists in neighborhoods across the city. It has worked with many neighborhood groups to speak in favor of the HALA recommendations at community and neighborhood meetings. While it is not essential to match opponents' numbers at meetings, a significant physical presence can help Council members feel free to vote their consciences in support of the HALA recommendations. So far, the numbers of HALA supporters have matched those of opponents at several critical meetings.

The Seattle for Everyone coalition continues to work relatively well, though as expected has dealt with some internal tensions and disagreements.

Sightline's role

Dan Bertolet and Margaret Morales, along with Sightline's communications team members (including Serena Larkin, Anna Fahey, and Keiko Budech) are coordinating efforts closely with the Seattle for Everyone team. Communications staff have provided coalition members with guidance around messaging and storytelling, and Sightline employees have attended community forums in an effort to increase attendance of HALA recommendation supporters.

Sightline's current efforts are focused on the adoption of the MHA framework. Next year, it will focus on important upzoning debates. Much of Sightline's current research will help lay the groundwork for those efforts.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations