

A conversation with Alan Durning, October 25, 2016

Participants

- Alan Durning – Executive Director, Sightline Institute
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project
- Nicole Ross – Operations Associate, 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. Alan Durning of Sightline Institute (Sightline) as part of an update on a \$400,000 grant that the Open Philanthropy Project made to Sightline in October 2015 to support its work on housing and urban development. Conversation topics included media attention, implementation of the HALA recommendations, Seattle for Everyone membership and staffing updates, communications work, and next steps after the HALA recommendations are implemented.

Media attention

Sightline has received a lot of media attention recently. Six major articles have been published, and Sightline plans to publish four more pieces in the near future:

1. A piece on the literature on inclusionary zoning. This is the last of a set of major foundational analyses that Sightline plans to publish this year; it previously published a similar piece on exclusionary zoning. After this series of foundational analyses is complete, Sightline plans to publish articles focused on narrower issues and current controversies.
2. An analysis of two documents recently released by the Seattle mayor's office: the proposed upzones for a large part of the city and a revised, more detailed chart of inclusionary mandates and fees associated with those upzones.
3. A map showing all accessory dwelling units (ADUs) that have been built in Seattle in the last 10 years and all of the existing grandfathered multi-unit housing in single family zones. Once this map is complete, Sightline will be able to analyze questions such as whether the residents in these dwellings have access to assets of the community such as parks and good schools.
4. A map showing all demolitions of old housing and construction of new housing in Seattle and the prices of each. This map will demonstrate that while new houses are inevitably more expensive than hold houses, new multi-unit housing is cheaper than new large single-family houses. For example, a house that sells for \$600,000 can be torn down and replaced with

either 3-4 townhouses or row houses that each cost \$600,000, or one mansion that costs \$2 million.

Implementing the HALA recommendations

Mandatory Housing Affordability program

Seattle's mayor has filled in the details of the proposed Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) program, which HALA recommended but didn't specify in detail. The program links upzones with affordable housing mandates. The mayor's proposal spelled out in more detail what the associated mandates and fees will be. The city of Seattle then released a revised MHA schedule, which slightly increases requirements of developers in South Seattle and other areas which have historically been centers for communities of color. These revisions came in response to pressure from social justice groups concerned about displacement in these areas. The revisions largely do not affect the rest of the city. The areas covered by the revised MHA schedule account for perhaps 20% of the area covered by MHA.

Upzoning

The city recently released its first set of drafts of upzones for most multi-family zones and "urban villages" (areas of the city designated as growth hubs). The HALA recommendations will come before the city council one at a time. Sightline hopes to get all of the proposed upzones passed in the next year so that most residential zones are planned (with the exception of single-family zones, which will be affected by the ADU recommendations).

Implementing HALA recommendations for ADUs

A proposal including almost all of the HALA recommendations relating to ADUs may be adopted by the end of 2016. The hearing examiner has heard the arguments, and a decision is expected soon. Progress on this was slowed by a legal appeal to create an environmental impact statement for the proposal.

About 50 ADUs per year are built in Seattle, whereas there is likely demand for about 500 per year. This proposal addresses a small number of restrictions that have prevented many ADUs from being built:

- It eliminates the requirement that additional off-street parking must be provided for each ADU.
- It modifies the requirement that the owner live on-site to apply to the first year only.
- It would allow a single-family lot to have both an in-law apartment and a backyard cottage.
- It would allow larger ADUs to be built and placed in more locations on a lot, which removes some practical barriers.

These revisions are likely to increase the rate of construction of ADUs.

Facilitating the process of building ADUs

The ADU proposal includes a provision that the city of Seattle will create pre-approved templates to facilitate the process of building ADUs for homeowners. There are a few people in other cities who are creating business models for helping homeowners to go through the process of building ADUs, but Mr. Durning is not aware of anything similar in Seattle. In Vancouver, BC, there are companies that prefabricate components of ADUs in small warehouses and offer different sets of plans that can be varied according to individuals' needs. These companies are each building about 20-30 ADUs per year. Mr. Durning expects similar companies to arise in Seattle after the proposal is passed.

Much of the focus in the media and in public discussions of ADUs is on backyard cottages, which are relatively easy to standardize. It is often significantly more affordable to convert basements into apartments, but these cannot be standardized.

Parking reforms

The HALA-recommended parking reforms have not had much media attention, but are gradually making progress. Mr. Durning expects to know more about whether the proposed reforms will have enough votes to pass through the city council by January or February 2017, when the budget is finalized.

Microhousing

Sightline recently published an article called "How Seattle Killed Micro-Housing" that generated a lot of attention. The article lists Seattle's Construction Codes Advisory Board, which is responsible for setting local building codes, as having several roles in killing micro-housing. As a result of Sightline's article and support from the mayor's office, this advisory board has begun a 6-month review process to examine all of its codes to determine whether they are biased against small units.

Seattle for Everyone membership and staffing updates

Puget Sound Sage has left the Seattle for Everyone coalition due to other commitments, but will continue to support the HALA recommendations. The Seattle for Everyone membership roster is otherwise unchanged.

Seattle for Everyone has hired Erin House as its new field organizer and is working with her on its "yes in my backyard" (YIMBY) mobilizing and organizing work.

Communications

Since our last update, Sightline has conducted 3-4 more communication-strategy seminars for different members of Seattle for Everyone, some of which were for developers.

Sightline's communications team has been collaborating with Seattle for Everyone's communications staff on social media, speaker training, and materials, and it conducted and published the results of a big media audit.

"Faces of Seattle"

Sightline is working on a communications project called "Faces of Seattle" that will involve creating 24 portraits focused on housing stories. Each portrait will include still pictures with audio and written vignettes, which would lend themselves well to social media and could also be used in slide decks, in videos, and on bus boards or other display ads (if there were funding to do so).

This project is moving along well. Sightline has hired two photographers and is working with them to identify subjects. If the project goes well, Sightline may consider expanding it e.g. by taking video footage of the subjects.

Next steps after the HALA recommendations are implemented

Sightline's initial goals were to 1) implement the HALA recommendations and 2) tell the story of HALA nationally. It has not done very much work on the latter, but HALA's reputation has nevertheless spread. The White House Housing Development Toolkit that was published in September 2016 embraces the YIMBY agenda.

Mr. Durning hopes that many of the HALA recommendations will be implemented in the next year and that Sightline will continue this work in Seattle and expand it to other cities.

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