

Keep Affordable Housing in Forgotten Communities Act

Housing and Forgotten Communities

Hardworking people should be able to find housing in the communities they grew up in. To keep communities strong and vibrant, we need to ensure that existing residents can stay put and kids can eventually afford to rent or buy near where they were raised. This especially true in forgotten communities – places where opportunity dried up as factories and plants closed.

But too often this isn't the case.

Looking Up for Who?

Now, as we work to revitalize these towns and cities, the people who stayed and stuck out the hard times are being priced out. Those same residents that came up with revitalizing projects — from converting closed factories into startup incubators, to renovating abandoned rail lines into greenspace — are now being pushed out of existing affordable housing by rising rents and private equity buy-ups.

So the community they fought for decades to preserve is broken and scattered right as things start to look up. Many can only find affordable housing options in another forgotten community, fearing that the same displacement will happen again.

These critical revitalizing efforts need to happen in these communities – but they must also include housing opportunities for the people who call these communities home. We need to be investing in the whole community, not just the parts that big businesses and luxury developers can profit off of. That means investing in the people who have been there – and the housing that will let them stay.

Solutions

Infrastructure policy needs to incorporate housing considerations from day one, making a plan for housing just like we do for traffic. Those plans should prioritize models that keep housing affordable for existing residents.

Community land trusts (CLT) have been active for years and proven that their model works. CLTs buy land and preserve the housing as affordable forever. Homeowners can stay and profit from their investment, and the home will stay achievable for the next working-class owner. And we can do it for relatively cheap – much cheaper than building new units or trying to undo displacement after costs have already risen.

Proactive strategies to reinvest the value created through infrastructure investments can keep the cycle of economic improvement going.

If we don't plan accordingly, government will waste money and get bad results. But if we invest wisely now, communities will flourish and middle- and lower-income residents will remain and benefit.

The Keep Affordable Housing in Forgotten Communities Act would bring proactive housing considerations to the Reconnecting Communities Grant program. This new program is still evolving, so the time is ideal to learn from past successes and apply them to new projects. The bill helps grant recipients who are looking to redevelop community-severing highways for new uses consider the impact on housing. They would have to evaluate the impact of the project on workforce housing in the neighborhood, and could use the grant funding to plan for long-term affordability, create or preserve long-term affordable housing units in the neighborhood, and support the creation or expansion of community land trusts.