

Imagination and Vision: Keys to Solving Los Alamos Housing Issues By Stan & Joan Primak

The secret is out. Los Alamos County is number one on the list of median household income in the United States. At \$93,089, one could assume that most of our County's 18,305 residents can afford to buy homes here. But what of the estimated 5,000 to 6,000 commuters driving into Los Alamos each work day? With the average price of homes in Los Alamos at \$296,797, New Mexico's average home price at \$135,800, Santa Fe's at \$219,600 and the Nation's at \$170,800, it seems a "no-brainer" that those on the lower end of the earnings scale would live elsewhere. Even those on the higher end of the earnings scale can figure on getting more for their money elsewhere. For those wanting to live and work in Los Alamos and not being able to afford it, the issue is very real. For those wanting to live and work in Los Alamos and wanting more choice in housing at fair market pricing, the issue is also very real. Either way, we, as a community, face a housing problem. What are we doing to solve it?

It is often said that defining a problem is the first step to resolving it. In the case of increasing our community's availability of housing in the County, both affordable and market-rate, there is a group of committed citizens taking the necessary first steps to solving housing and other key issues. The Los Alamos Commerce and Development Corporation, a not-for-profit corporation that serves Los Alamos and Northern New Mexico, we work to provide for a viable community by enabling a sustainable economy. Our activities are focused on providing assistance to small businesses as well as on improving economic outcomes in our region.

As a board member of LACDC, it is my current task to inform citizens of the Los Alamos community and Northern New Mexico what key housing issues we face and what we can do to solve them. My credentials for this task are basic: resident of Los Alamos, 26 years; home builder in Los Alamos, 9 years; teacher LAHS Building Trades Program, 14 years; survivor of Cerro Grande Fire, 5 years. As I see it, two key housing issues in Los Alamos are land cost and house size as they relate to affordability.

Los Alamos' history and geography are unique. From the Boys Ranch School days, to the closed community it became, nothing about this place is ordinary, including housing. Any one can see approaching the top of the Main Hill Road that the place itself is extraordinary. Physically, it is both rugged and beautiful. Looking more like a National Park than a town site, Los Alamos is a hiker's paradise and a builder's challenge.

After the Cerro Grande Fire destroyed hundreds of homes here in May, 2000, a building frenzy occurred. Unexpectedly, many burned duplexes and quad residences were not replaced. In their place, many large single-family homes were built. Lots that formerly had housed up to four households, now housed only one. Surprisingly, land prices continued to go up, in spite of the charred landscape. Demand seemed to outpace supply.

With no end in sight for this "bigger is better" housing trend, where are we headed as a community with regards to affordable housing? With limited land and skyrocketing prices, it seems we are a captive audience. Do we want to limit the possibilities of who can actually afford to live here? Are we so economically homogeneous that we have no desire to house our public servants, our service workers, and others who may choose to live here? I think not. As I see it, vision and imagination are key concepts we can put to use in facing our housing future. Looking to other communities with similar housing problems, we need not look too far.

We may find models that will work for us here and may not necessarily need to re-invent the wheel.

Recently on a trip to Boulder County, Colorado, I visited a unique residential housing community: Holiday Neighborhood. It is unique and an excellent example of dealing with high land costs and limited space for housing. Because Boulder County, Colorado has a green space ordinance which prohibits building within it, which surrounds the City's developable lands, vision and imagination come into play for building affordable homes. By increasing numbers of units on the lots in this residential development and making use of good design techniques both inside and out, these developer/builders have created a very desirable and affordable community for its citizens. It is a win-win situation. Now I ask myself: If Boulder, Colorado can do it, why can't we? The answer is before us. We can. By looking at similar communities, we have models for solving affordable housing issues. It is worth taking a closer look. Why not take a trip up to Boulder and check it out? And keep repeating to yourselves: vision and imagination.

For more information on the award-winning Holiday Neighborhood housing development in Boulder, Colorado go to www.holidayneighborhood.com or www.Terrain.org/articles/16/wann.htm