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Painting the Town Green: Affordable Housing and the Environment

UB Law Forum

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Law School Report

CLINICS: IMPACTING THE COMMUNITY



Painting the town green

Bold ideas on affordable housing and the environment

Some facts for your consideration:

- Houses cause 17 percent of the United States' greenhouse gas emissions.
- Flooding spawned by global climate change threatens low-lying coastal areas that are home to 634 million people.
- People with low incomes suffer the most from pollution. In the United States, for example, 20 million people suffer from asthma, disproportionately present in the poor.
- A compact fluorescent light bulb saves its owner \$68 over its lifetime.

Those were some of the startling figures

brought forth in a roundtable, titled "Affordable Housing and the Environment," held Aug. 15 under the sponsorship of UB Law School's Affordable Housing Clinic. The forum, which attracted about 40 people, was held in downtown Buffalo. It was presented in conjunction with the Law School's celebration of Affordable Housing Month.

UB Law instructor **Sam Magavern** presented a draft report that grew from his "Green Cities" class in the spring 2007 semester. Students from that 13-member class, as well as a panel of local housing experts, listened as Magavern ticked off the

high points of the report, "Affordable Housing and the Environment in Buffalo, New York."

The overall message was win-win – that environmentally friendly housing can also be affordable for those with low incomes. "You might think that greener housing is more expensive," Magavern said, "but the research shows just the opposite. Over the life of a home, a greener home will save the owner large amounts of money, mainly by lowering utility bills."

For Buffalo, whose housing stock is the oldest of any city in the country, green housing is less about new construction

UB Law instructor Sam Magavern: "The single most important thing we can do for affordable housing and the environment is to fight sprawl and revitalize the central city."



Kevin V. Connors, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Architecture, addresses the forum.

than about "preserving, rehabilitating and weatherizing our existing housing stock," he said.

That makes housing more affordable. Rents in Buffalo are famously low, Magavern said, "but that does not necessarily mean that housing is affordable." Nearly half of renters in the city are paying 30 percent or more of their income in rent. "That is the ninth-worst rate in the nation," he said. "To say that Buffalo has an affordable housing market is very misleading. For low-income renters, that is not so. It is not that housing is too expensive, but that people's incomes are too low to afford it."

Adding to the burden, he said, are utility rates that are 30 percent higher than the national average. So weatherizing existing homes, replacing inefficient appliances with Energy Star brands, installing compact fluorescent bulbs, and moving toward solar-powered water heating and home heat, are essential. Such moves not only reduce a home's impact on the environment, Magavern said, but also make housing more affordable.

The challenge, he said, is to persuade developers and residents that "green" elements are worth the initial investment. "We need to consider the full life cycle of housing and not just what it costs to build it," Magavern said. "So many of these green features cost the same or a little more, but save money over the life of the house." And there are benefits that cannot be quantified: the health of those who live in the house, for example, which may be improved when emissions are reduced; and the reduced load on the environment, locally and worldwide.

Finally, he said, "the single most important thing we can do for affordable housing and the environment is to fight sprawl and revitalize the central city. We have all this housing stock in the city. If we demolish it and build elsewhere, we really see a triple impact" in terms of disposing of demolition debris, the environmental cost of new building, and the increased transportation impacts of residents commuting from far-off suburbs.

Before a more general discussion with the audience, four local housing experts added their own comments.

Architect **Kevin Connors** of *eco_logic STUDIO* acknowledged the great architectural diversity of the city's houses. "We can capitalize on the character and integrity of our housing stock," he said. "Affordable housing does not have to be cookie-cutter. We have incredible variety here." He also suggested that Buffalo and Erie County should become leaders in the move toward energy-efficient housing, even establishing "zero-energy affordable housing" as a demonstration project.

Aaron Bartley, executive director of the advocacy group *PUSH Buffalo*, noted that "poor people in Buffalo are our greatest environmentalists. They consume fewer utilities; they tend to walk a lot more. The car ownership rate in Buffalo is second-lowest in country, so they are driving less

and taking the bus a lot more. So how do we build on that culture?"

Bartley stressed that as the city demolishes abandoned houses, and as developers rehabilitate some houses, it is important to maintain the housing density, block by block. He pointed to the area around the *Broadway Market*, where only one or two houses remain. "That could be the future of our city," he warned.

Michael Riegel, vice president of the non-profit housing group *Belmont Shelter Corp.*, spoke about the tricky business of securing funding to build affordable housing. "The extent to which we are able to use green techniques is dependent on the source of funding," he said. "The rules and regulations of public funding sources – federal, state and local governments – really dictate a lot of the things we can do and the money we can spend. Sometimes a developer may not be rewarded for doing things that will save the tenant money over the years. You get rewarded for doing more for less than your competitors."

Competition for funding is fierce, and projects are rated on a point system. Fortunately, he said, funders are starting to realize that "green" construction saves money over the long run, and are adjusting their point systems accordingly.

Thomas Van Nortwick, regional director of New York State's Division of Housing and Community Renewal, spoke from the funder's perspective and acknowledged the shift in attitudes toward environmentally friendly projects. "We want to say to the development community, it is really a partnership," he said. "Yes, utilize the least amount of our resources to do what you are going to do. The expense of doing affordable housing is not going down. These green elements can cost more in the short term. We are saying to the developer, we will give you more points if you use less money from us. But we have added points to the scoring for green elements. There is a very high priority to the whole concept of green. We're looking for ways to encourage developers to use more green techniques."

Magavern's full report is on the Web at <http://green-housing-buffalo.wikispaces.com>.