Coming to Consensus:
The 2008 Joint Agenda on Housing and Homelessness

In this issue of My View I review the 2008 Joint Agenda on Housing and Homelessness through the eyes of three housing advocates and the Vice-Chair of the House Housing Committee. I wanted to review the agenda because the low and moderate income citizens of Washington still face several escalating challenges to secure a decent, affordable home, whether they want to buy or rent. These challenges—and a desire to change the paradigm in the Legislature around affordable housing—led advocates to develop the 2008 Joint Agenda. By presenting this discussion, I hope to promote a productive conversation in the upcoming legislative session.

Despite the huge efforts made statewide on the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness over the past several years, state homelessness figures rose in 2007 from 2006. One estimate tells us that close to 4,700 families with children are homeless in Washington State. Median home prices are out of reach for families with median incomes. Affordable rentals in many communities are reaching near-zero vacancy rates. Our freeways are clogged with commuters who can’t afford to live near their work place. The nation’s sub-prime mortgage crisis is wreaking havoc in the mortgage markets. The list, unfortunately, goes on.

Ben has led efforts in building a consensus for the 2008 Joint Agenda, which provides a road map of suggested funding allocations and legislative reforms, including both short- and long-term solutions. “We realized that we needed to build a multi-year agenda,” Ben says, “something big and audacious and visionary that we could take to Olympia and say ‘this is what we think needs to be done.’”

The 2008 Joint Agenda was put forward in mid-October by a broad coalition of housing, homelessness, homeownership, and human services advocates and, says Ben Gitenstein, Executive Director of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA), “It’s our way of saying, this is the vision.”
Here are several of the policy and funding requests the agenda puts forward (a more extensive summary is included on page 7):

- Additional resource allocations to the Housing Trust Fund (HTF); renewing the Washington Families Fund (WFF); and increasing the budget for the state’s Transitional Housing Operating and Rent (THOR) program.
- Tax exemptions to increase housing production, strategic investments to spur affordable housing near jobs, and preserve critically needed housing.
- Suggestions for funding housing and support services for vulnerable populations, including Department of Corrections re-entry programs, community-based supportive housing for people with mental illness, and affordable housing for youth aging out of the state’s foster care system.

**Efforts to change the dynamic**

Ben, along with many other affordable housing and homelessness advocates, began working on the 2008 Joint Agenda earlier this year. One of their goals is to spur changes to the law-making dynamic in Olympia. “For a long time,” Ben says, “we’ve had very strong leadership support in House, particularly from Speaker Frank Chopp.” Now advocates are looking to inspire a similar commitment and leadership on the Senate side, as well as support for significant funding for housing and related support services from the Governor’s office. As such, the 2008 Joint Agenda is addressed to all three branches of state government.

“During the last legislative session,” Ben points out, “Governor Gregoire came out with the largest recommendation ever for the Housing Trust Fund (HTF): $140 million. The House matched it. And then the Senate came out with a smaller, $100 million recommendation, which was eventually negotiated to $130 million. We left that session saying ‘we have to change this dynamic—we have to do something differently.’”

Key to this, for the agenda’s constituencies, has been building new relationships in the Washington State Senate, and continuing to foster those built in the House.

As Ben describes it, this summer just happened to be a time when housing challenges were reaching a new level of public consciousness. Spokane was in the news for losing many affordable rental units downtown to commercial development and other uses. Condo conversions in the Puget Sound area were getting a lot of press, as was the rise of the subprime lending crisis. In addition, he says, the growing challenge of people being released from our prisons into homelessness “really galvanizes several senators.” And homelessness is beginning to take center stage as a concern for communities.

“People from all across our constituencies” requested meetings over the summer with their Senate and House representatives, Ben says. “On the relationship side, we’ve already seen tremendous success.” Speaker Frank Chopp and Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown have responded by establishing a team of legislators in the House and the Senate who will serve as “housing champions,” he reports. These champions have been enlisted to help move housing-related reforms forward. Senator Brown, Ben says, is poised to expedite critical housing issues on the Senate side: “a priority package of housing investments and reforms that will move quickly in the legislative session.”

**A bigger tent**

In addition to encouraging new relationships with the people who make and sign the laws in Olympia, those involved in initiating the agenda’s framework knew that an additional key to success would be to enlarge the tent of supporters to their cause. “The agenda’s reforms include infrastructure funding: the money the state hands out to local governments,” Ben explains. “Many local governments are not stepping up on affordable housing, on building for the future. They’re also not stepping up on transit-oriented development.” One of the ways these framers hope to inspire change is to change the way those funds are distributed—to encourage local governments to plan and develop wisely.

Ben explains, “We brought together a coalition that included the Cascade Land Conservancy, Futurewise, Realtors, and cities, to look at how we could change this: How could infrastructure money be funneled to projects or local governments that are doing smart things, that are building transit-oriented development, and use that as a lever to drive a different kind of practice at the local level?

“The tent we represent has grown a lot. This has been an interesting process; we recognize that one of the prices of success is a loss of control. As housing advocates, we have been very successful for an issue area that hasn’t been the centerpiece of the agenda in Olympia. Now we’re trying to move this front and center, which brings new opportunities and regulatory reforms we’ve wanted for a long time.”

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The magnitude of the problem

“The 2008 Joint Agenda has brought the size and the magnitude of this problem—and deserves high attention from Olympia,” says Governor Mike Lowry.

“On anyone’s agenda, the availability of decent, affordable housing here in Washington ought to be in the top three,” Mike says. “When you take a look at the real needs that people are facing, as well as the important relationship of these to our overall well-being and overall economy, these things all go together: Education, transportation, and affordable housing.”

Mike obviously knows how things get accomplished in Olympia, but he’s also become an old hand at helping get affordable housing built for our citizens, one precious home at a time. Since he left the governorship, one of his many significant contributions to the people of our state has been founding and serving as executive director of the Washington Agricultural Family Assistance (WAFA) program, a homeownership program for our state’s agricultural workers. Since its launch about five years ago, WAFA has built 18 homes in Ephrata and Royal City. Their biggest undertaking yet, in Quincy, will break ground in a couple of months: 16 to 24 houses will be built for agricultural workers to purchase and own.

“The affordability effect has definitely grown in the last couple of years,” Mike says. He points to Spokane’s recent struggle with housing those who lost their homes to downtown redevelopment. “Spokane is dealing with a near-zero vacancy rate, both the availability of affordable housing and then what that does to prices. That is one important example. It shows how hard things are hitting there.”

But as he points out, the crisis is not just in Washington State’s cities. “What are WAFA’s challenges?” he poses. “Lot prices are going up—even in Quincy, Washington. We work very hard to get our prices down—real hard! But for a developed lot, the prices are now double what they were when we built our first houses in 2002. And this is getting the best price we can get.”

Mike describes how last February, when he was down in Olympia for housing and homelessness advocacy day, he joined with others who gave speeches in front of the Capitol. For Mike, the most moving talk came from Neil McClanahan, undersheriff from the Thurston County Sheriff’s Office. McClanahan told the assembled crowd, “we ought to be calling this a school kids’ issue—there are 600 kids who are homeless who are trying to go to school in Thurston County.”

“The numbers make us numb,” Mike says. “We say things and we don’t really ask, What is it we just said here? You don’t have to look very far to find a dire and totally unacceptable situation that needs to be addressed.”

Smart Investments

Mike points to how critical HTF funding has been for the families who have purchased the homes WAFA has built. “There are 18 families now living in their homes from our program. We had a $300,000 HTF grant for downpayment assistance. That assistance is critical. The families have got their first mortgage and they’re homebuyers.” These homes were also able to tap into construction loans from the Housing Finance Commission and the HTF.

Both of these have already been paid back—on time, Mike stresses. WAFA’s homes in Quincy will receive similar funding support through an HTF downpayment grant plus construction financing.

Over the years, Mike, who grew up on a wheat farm in St. John in eastern Washington, has developed a great appreciation for the vital work that people in agriculture contribute in our state. “Everyone who’s involved in the agricultural community here, in central and eastern Washington, knows that having a stable workforce is critical. In the competition worldwide, the stability of the workforce is probably the most important factor in our ranchers and farmers’ being able to survive and make an economic go of it. There is definite community support for our homeownership program. Of course there’s great value to the community in homeownership: people are a stable part of the community, they’re paying taxes, their kids are in the schools: it all brings a tremendous value.

“I’m hoping that this coming legislative session, and it’s an investment that would give great return, for a $100 million capital infusion into the HTF. The HTF is an investment we get a great return on. One of the
things this broad coalition points out is that we get five-and-a-half dollars back for every dollar invested through the HTF.”

Mike brings up the state’s current reserves. “It’s very important to have a good reserve. Of course the economics are going to be changing, but it is also good economics and good business that smart investments are made with the amount that is above that sound reserve. It’s a smart move to invest them in programs that will be saving us money. And the HTF saves us money. We get a great return, but even more important than that, it’s critical to our overall well-being as a state.”

Working to Change the Tide

Since 1997, Nola Renz has been executive director of Helping Hand House (HHH), a nonprofit provider of emergency and transitional housing and homeless prevention services in Pierce County, in south Puget Sound. For the past two years, she has also served as board president of the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH)—and was recently elected to another two-year term in this role. Since last spring, she’s collaborated with Ben and others on the 2008 Joint Agenda. Clearly, her knowledge of the scope of homelessness in our state, as well as her efforts to respond to homelessness both statewide and in those communities that HHH serves, have given her a nuanced perspective on what the issues are, and what will be required to solve them.

I asked Nola for her thoughts about the 2008 Joint Agenda’s goals of reaching out to various constituencies, to make them part of the solution. “It makes so much sense,” she says, “if we’re building on this agenda in an ongoing way.” She gave the example of meeting with one of her legislators about the Washington Families Fund (WFF): “It really helps if someone is engaged—and you can continue to work with them over a long period of time.” On the Senate side, she adds, “we’re definitely trying to make some inroads.”

Nola emphasizes how difficult it has been to get the general public to engage with homelessness issues. “The Coalition is trying to beef up our publicity. Marketing may sound odd, but we realize that in general, people just don’t think about the issue. We’re trying to find ways of getting it before people, so that they’ll want to do something about it, to help solve the problem, to support legislation, and help change the tide. There’s no reason, in this incredible country, to have homelessness.”

As with Governor Lowry’s WAFA, HHH’s innovative programs and its successes with the people it serves have benefited from state resource allocations that are a cornerstone of the 2008 Joint Agenda’s long-range planning policies. For example, the WFF, which has been critical in providing services to help end family homelessness, will see its initial $6 million investment from Washington State fully committed this fiscal year. The beauty of WFF is how it has leveraged that $6 million—private foundations and other funders have fully matched that amount to help homeless families. The 2008 Joint Agenda asks for a renewal of funding for WFF of $8 million.

By early next year, HHH will be overseeing a total of 66 units of supportive housing for formerly homeless families. Eight of these homes, in rural Pierce County, are part of
the Rural Bright Futures Transitional Housing Program, a partnership between WFF and HHH. Nola’s organization provides long-term transitional housing and wrap-around case management services to residents of these homes.

They can’t do it alone

Those who know Nola know her as tireless and totally committed to solving homelessness in our state. Each year, WSCH’s annual conference in Yakima draws hundreds of supporters, who come together to build on strategies and incorporate great ideas and best practices. I brought up her moving speech during the 2006 conference, in which she shared her personal story of her own experiences of homelessness as a child and single parent. “So many times,” she relates, “our families at HHH have the same kinds of stories. And when we start believing in them, they just bloom. They just need people to see that they have potential and they don’t want to be where they are. They can’t do all those pieces alone.

“At HHH,” she says, “we turn away between 25 and 50 families a month that are looking for housing. The rent and utilities assistance we give out—we turn nine away for every family we serve. And I know some of those people end up becoming homeless. Serving a rural area, as hard as you try, homeless families outside of a city are really hard to count. If they’re homeless, they become invisible. 14,000 children in our state last year were identified as homeless through OSPI [Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction].”

With the 2008 Joint Agenda, the hope, Nola stresses, is to find ways to help both individuals and families. “This is such an incredible time to have so many people focused on this issue with this agenda,” she concludes.

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We’re all working together on: this is what we need to do, this is why. Coming to consensus has been very important. And then to have the support of the legislature: It’s an exciting time, to see what the future holds for this work.”

Can We Afford It?

Representative Larry Springer represents several urban and rural communities east of Seattle in King County, including his hometown of Kirkland where he served as mayor for four years. He brings a thoughtful and balanced perspective to his work in the House, and has clearly done the same in assessing the agenda’s merits. “The agenda that the coalition presented us with is an ambitious one and I applaud them for the work,” he says. “The topic of housing is so complex; you have to craft a package of bills, because there are so many ramifications for people of different income levels.”

As an example, Larry points to the 2008 Joint Agenda’s initial take on resources for the next session, specifically, a request for an additional $100 million allocation to the HTF. He says he thinks they’ll be able to gather widespread support for an increase to the HTF in the legislature. “But it’s a matter always of whether or not the dollars are there—the competing interests … But I think much in this particular supplemental budget period will depend on what our revenue forecasts look like.”

Of particular interest to Larry, since he’s the prime sponsor of the bill, is the 2008 Joint Agenda’s request for a $10 million increase in the THOR program. Currently funded at $5 million per biennium, THOR provides transitional housing and rent assistance to homeless families with children. “What we’re trying to do is to add the $10 million to that program and expand its eligibility to individuals. It clearly has a track record that is very impressive. It demonstrates how important it is, when you are dealing with homeless individuals, that you can’t simply provide a roof—there need to be support services to go with it: financial literacy, job training, mental health services—“Where homelessness is concerned, I have become a convert to the concept of Housing First,” Larry says. For those unfamiliar with the concept, the Housing First imperative is to help homeless people secure stable, relatively permanent housing at the outset. They are then better positioned to benefit from the supportive services they receive. “This was new to me three years ago, but I’m now convinced it’s probably the best model. There’s a lot of evidence nationwide, that the cost of homelessness to society is much greater than the cost of simply building a house and putting somebody in it and letting them live there for free.”

It’s clear that the kinds of costs that the 2008 Joint Agenda presents to the state’s budget will be carefully weighed. “In the agenda are a number of reforms,” Larry points out. “And a number of them are not as simple as just

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Dear Governor Gregoire, Majority Leader Brown and Speaker Chopp:

We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to succeed in school and life, and that they need a stable home to have that chance. We believe that working families should not have to choose between keeping their homes and putting food on the table. We believe that working together we can end homelessness, ensure that every family has an affordable home and protect homeowners from losing their homes to the mortgage-lending crisis.

You have committed to making housing, homelessness and mortgage lending key priorities this session. Housing advocates, providers, funders, local governments and housing authorities applaud your leadership and are here to support you in your efforts.

The challenge we face is tremendous. By the State’s own estimates it could take more than a century to meet our housing needs at our current pace. Right now more than 250,000 families do not have the safe, stable and affordable home they need to thrive. In order to be successful, we will need long-term and short-term strategies. We will need to work aggressively in the 2008 session, and continue that work in 2009 and beyond. We will need to foster policy innovation and reach beyond traditional housing goals and underscore the relationship between affordable housing and transportation, conservation, education and jobs.

Enclosed you will find a simple chart outlining the top priorities of our broad and diverse coalition for the 2008 session, divided between those that have a budget impact and no-cost policy fixes. We recognize the breadth of this agenda; however, we believe that the complexity of the housing crisis demands a broad agenda.

While coalition members will continue to advocate for additional housing initiatives this session, these key items remain our top shared priorities for 2008. Although not every endorsing organization is involved with each component of this Joint Agenda, all are committed to promoting a range of long- and short-term solutions.

We hope that you will embrace these priorities for what they are: the will of the community that seeks positive and lasting change in the lives of hundreds of thousands of families throughout Washington State.

Thank you again for your leadership.

Ben Gitenstein
WA Low Income Housing Alliance

BEN GITENSTEIN, Executive Director of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA)
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### Joint Agenda on Housing and Homelessness

#### 2008 Legislative Session Priorities

**Budgetary Recommendations for 2008 Legislative Session**

1. Increase the Housing Trust Fund — $100 million in new one-time funding  
   Lead organization: Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA)

2. Renew the Washington Families Fund — $8 million in new one-time funding  
   Lead organization: WLIHA & Washington State Coalition for the Homeless

3. Expand THOR (Transitional Housing, Operating, and Rent) Program Funding and Eligibility (House Bill 1921 by Rep. Springer in House Appropriations) — $10 million biennial funding increase (ongoing), expand eligibility to homeless families without children, single adults, and those at-risk of homelessness  
   Lead organization: Washington State Coalition for the Homeless

4. State Sales Tax Exemption on Materials and Labor of Low-Income Housing Construction — Max $30 million — $50 million biennial fiscal impact (ongoing)  
   Lead organization: WLIHA & Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County

5. Tax Incentives for Preservation of Manufactured Housing Communities (House Bill 1621 by Rep. Brian Sullivan in House Finance) — $1.5 million biennial fiscal impact (ongoing)  
   Lead organization: WLIHA & Assoc of Manufactured Home Owners, Columbia Legal Services

6. Financial Counseling for Homeownership and Foreclosure Prevention (proposal under development)  
   Lead organization: WLIHA & Washington State Housing Finance Commission

**Revenue-Neutral Policy Recommendations for 2008 Legislative Session:**

7. Prioritize Affordable Housing Development, Transit-Oriented Development, and Increased Residential Density in Existing State Infrastructure Fund Scoring (proposal under development)  
   Lead organization: WLIHA & HomeSight

   Lead organization: WLIHA & Tenants Union of Washington

   Lead organization: WLIHA & Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust

10. Ending Predatory and Deceptive Mortgage Lending Practices (proposal under development)  
    Lead organization: Statewide Poverty Action Network

11. Increase the Debt Limit for the Washington State Housing Finance Commission  
    Lead organization: Washington State Housing Finance Commission

    Lead organization: City of Seattle & other advocates

**Partial List of Endorsing Organizations**

- Washington Low Income Housing Alliance
- Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust
- Habitat for Humanity of Washington State
- Catholic Community Services of Washington
- Tenants Union of Washington
- Committee to End Homelessness of King County
- Housing Resources Board, A Community Land Trust
- Northwest Community Land Trust Coalition
- Opportunity Council, Bellingham
- United Way of King County
- Inland Empire Residential Resources
- Common Ground
- Beacon Development Group
- Kulshan Community Land Trust
- Intercommunity Mercy Housing
- Dale Miller, Community Action Center
- Sue Taoka, SCIPDDA

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My View FROM KIM HERMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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changing regulations. Some of them would give tax exemptions or a tax preference. Those do have a financial impact on the state. They're not free, and somebody is going to pay for that." He pointed to the listed reform that impacts the Commission's work, a suggested increase in the Commission's debt limit. "This does not have a fiscal impact, so it's one I think we're going to look at very seriously as a way of extending downpayment assistance and the other work of the Commission in a way that doesn't cost the state any additional money."

Affordable housing vs. housing affordability

Larry says he's had several conversations with Ben about how to incentivize communities to support smart development and create their fair share of affordable housing. He is careful to distinguish, though, between what he calls affordable housing—and housing affordability.

"In housing policy, I've tried to make a distinction between needing to provide more affordable housing. Most of us know what that means. It's housing for low-income people, for the homeless—it's all those things that we've come to understand are necessary for the least fortunate among us."

For Larry, the other part of the equation is the need to increase housing affordability across the board. "Right now what we are facing is a housing affordability crisis that is hitting the middle class. And until we address that issue, we're not getting ahead of the problem. What I've tried to do is look at policies and legislation that might help increase housing affordability." One of the ways you do that, he describes, is increasing housing supply. But that, he admits, runs up against all kinds of regulatory and political webs, including the Growth Management Act.

For Larry, the bottom line in increasing housing supply is the need for densification in urban centers. "We are not going to increase housing affordability in any way by continuing to build single-family houses. You're tinkering at the edge and kidding yourself if you think you're going to get there," he says. "The problem of course, if you go to a city like mine, and you say to the City and its residents: 'we need to increase affordability so your kids can have a house to live in, so we're going to make that condo complex next to you six stories instead of four.' And they go ballistic. So that's the political problem."

One of the approaches Larry and his House colleagues have discussed is revising the way a city's fair share of housing is calculated. "It should track job growth more closely than it does—because housing follows jobs. So to the degree to which cities meet those goals, they should go to the front of the class for the goodie bag. Which could be the Public Works Trust Fund, or infrastructure financing—it could be any number of carrots out there. Those that don't ... we don't want to beat them up and make them go to the dunce corner, but they go to bottom of the list."

Balancing interests

"Our job as the Housing Committee," Larry emphasizes, "is to vet these bills, listen to the stakeholders giving us the yea and nay on both sides, and make a decision as to whether or not we think a bill is worthy of going to the floor for a vote." In a short session like the one ahead, which is not a budget year, fewer bills will make it because there simply isn't enough time. "One of the big struggles that we always have, even within the committee itself, will be the struggle between doing something for one sector of the housing market, and trying to ensure that it doesn't come at the expense of another."

A classic example, Larry points out, is the current debate over condo conversions. A request for increased relocation assistance for tenants displaced by these conversions is included in the 2008 Joint Agenda. The difficulty, as Larry sees it, is balancing competing interests: between people who may be losing their only chance at an affordable rental home, and people who might be missing out on an opportunity to buy an affordable first home through a rental converted to a condo. "That particular issue I think is going to be back in spades this session. I'm hoping the advocates on both sides will be willing to find compromise ground there."

Most everyone would agree, Larry affirms, that we don't want a person of limited means to be out on the street. "It's often said our problem in Olympia is not the problem, it's the solution. The question is—how do we do that in the fairest way possible? And in a way that's sustainable, so that we won't be fighting that battle again next year?"

The 2008 Joint Agenda's objective, in working to create a consensus, has been to highlight the critical challenges facing affordable housing in Washington State, and set out a far-seeing, long-term approach to solving them—to win the "war" by staying focused on the big picture. An agenda this ambitious will need the support and leadership not only of our elected representatives, but of people from all walks of life—our state's citizens. We need to continue to foster this dialogue among all our stakeholders.

Ben puts it this way: "We see this as a multi-year effort, as the first year of a new way to approach housing and homelessness. Business as usual is simply not enough. Much more is required. The 2008 Joint Agenda is the centerpiece, the handle for that conversation."