Closing Remarks of Michelle Krocker
2020 Regional Housing Leaders Awards Ceremony and 15th Anniversary Celebration
Sept 17, 2020

Thank you for being with us this evening to celebrate our 2020 Regional Housing Leaders, and NVAHA’s 15th Anniversary.

Building regional commitment through partnerships – this is the theme of our awards ceremony and anniversary celebration tonight. For 15 years this concept has shaped how our small organization has leveraged our housing work for maximum impact.

As an organization that works in multiple jurisdictions, we understand that the challenge of housing affordability is greater than any single locality can solve, and the importance of this issue to the well-being of our metropolitan area, and the people who call this place home, calls us to action.

PARTNERSHIPS

We have learned that the collective power of partnerships is a force multiplier in our efforts to tackle systems, policies and practices that stand in the way of our desire for diverse, multi-cultural, multi-racial communities that provide equal access to opportunities for all who live here. We operate in an amazing housing ecosystem of professionals and advocates – affordable housing developers, organizations who work to prevent homelessness, assist victims of domestic violence, provide housing for low-income senior citizens, undocumented families, youth aging out of foster care, and persons with disabilities. There are faith communities, financial institutions, human service organizations, policy analysts and citizen advocates – all working in concert with our elected officials who today, are more united than ever in their commitment to advancing regional housing goals. OUR AWARDEES tonight represent the best of our partners who lead and inspire all of us in the work that we do each day.

NVAHA’S WORK OVER 15 YEARS

15 years ago, CRA officers from the Metro Washington Bankers Group convened a number of nonprofit developers and housing advocates to address the shortage of housing and community development proposals coming to them from Northern Virginia. We discussed the need for a clear, coordinated message to promote the shared benefits of housing affordability, and support for the allocation of sufficient funding to develop that housing in our communities. From that meeting, NVAHA was created.
We built community coalitions in each jurisdiction to advocate for housing investments in annual budgets, and the adoption of land use and zoning policies for the preservation and production of affordable housing. In 2007 we developed Regional Housing Principles for Northern Virginia, a framework of policies that each jurisdiction could use in developing their housing master plans. These principles still hold true today.

We understood that elected leaders wanted data specific to their locality when making policy decisions, so NVAHA sponsored research on housing challenges in Northern Virginia, developing policy papers on topics such as public land for affordable housing, the use of commercial linkage fees, and housing supply and affordability. Knowing that newly elected officials would be voting on budget and policy considerations for housing, we created the Housing Toolkit to assist local policymakers, members of planning commissions, and representatives of advisory boards in understanding the fundamental tools and programs that support affordable housing. In addition, members of our Leadership Council are actively engaged with housing boards and committees in jurisdictions across Northern Virginia to evaluate existing policies and examine new strategies in our work to address our region’s unmet housing needs.

As a convener, NVAHA has hosted large forums highlighting regional concerns such as “Where Will Our Jobs Sleep at Night?” as well as more targeted community gatherings, like last year’s meeting with the Gum Springs/Hybla Valley neighborhood, a historic Black community along the Richmond Highway corridor. We accomplished all of these things, in consultation and collaboration with partners.

2020 has been a year like no other, and has tested us in ways we never could have imagined. After participating in successful campaigns for significant new investments in housing trust funds at both the local and state levels, the pandemic wiped those accomplishments away. In March, NVAHA pivoted from a focus on policy and programs to advocacy for resources for COVID-impacted residents and the community-based organizations that serve them. We created a Regional COVID Response page, and we worked with public and private sector stakeholders to develop an Eviction Prevention and Housing Stability Toolkit. This resource focuses on rental assistance, preventive measures and best practices to assist residents, landlords and local governments responding to the eviction crisis.

COVID has had a disproportionate impact on black and brown residents; exposing disparities that we knew already existed. The pandemic struck at the same time that we as a nation are confronting the legacy of racist policies and practices embedded in the fabric of the daily lives of low income, minority residents. We’ve read Richard Rothstein’s “The Color of Law”, and Andre Perry’s recent book “Know your Price,” detailing the deliberate devaluation of black assets in majority black communities across the country. We understand that the redline maps created in the 1930s, to maintain class and racial segregation, are reflected today in the large
percentage of exclusive single-family detached zoning in our communities. However, a majority of suburban residents either do not understand or acknowledge this reality. Our analysis of unmet housing needs must identify current racial disparities, and as housing and community development professionals, we must lean into the conversation about the impacts of systemic racism that the African American community has carried alone for decades. We believe that the argument for zoning reform is more compelling today than ever before.

Call to Action

In the next 15 years, NVAHA will continue our advocacy for strong housing policies, financial resources, and meaningful community outreach. But more intentionality is needed. This summer, our Board of Directors and Leadership Council revised our mission to acknowledge systemic racism, and the work needed to dismantle policies and practices that perpetuate discrimination in our communities today.

In an industry that supports low and moderate income households, a majority of whom are people of color, how do we ensure that our work reflects their needs and aspirations? As we build the framework for future development, our public planning processes should begin, not end, with outreach to those who are not at the table, understanding their vision for the future, and the value they place on physical assets and spaces that make communities uniquely their own. We must balance our propensity to redevelop with the imperative to invest in their vision for community.

Let’s cultivate relationships with planners, transportation analysts, architects, and landscape designers who bring diverse perspectives to our work, reflective of the lived experiences of people of color.

We like to say that a safe, affordable home is the platform that provides stability for families, allowing them to grow and thrive. But all families should enjoy communities with good schools, digital access, recreational facilities and transit, the security of healthcare that is accessible and affordable, and the assurance of equal participation in an economy that is inclusive in its outreach, and committed to advancing opportunities for all.

This is the work that all of us are called to do. In this moment of pandemic, discrimination and economic disparities, thousands of our neighbors need help. What happens to them if we don’t respond? And what are the consequences for our region if we don’t rise to the occasion?

As we move forward, let’s commit as a region, to work in partnership to meet the challenges of our time. Thank you for spending this hour with us to celebrate our 2020 Regional Housing Leaders and NVAHA’s 15 Anniversary! Let’s offer a final toast to our honorees! Good night everyone!