

## **A conversation with Alan Durning, August 18, 2015**

### **Participants**

- Alan Durning – Founder and Executive Director, Sightline Institute
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, US Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Durning.

### **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Durning of Sightline Institute as part of its investigation into land use reform to increase housing affordability. Conversation topics included funding opportunities around increasing the supply and affordability of housing, approaches to local and national outreach on these issues, and Sightline's priority areas for funding.

### **Opportunities to support increased affordable housing**

Mr. Durning suggests two major opportunities for a funder to contribute to progress on this issue in the Seattle region: support for the coalition that has come out of the Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda (HALA) Advisory Committee in Seattle, and support for the Sightline Institute's work in this area.

### **HALA Advisory Committee report and coalition**

In July, the HALA Advisory Committee published a report offering recommendations on how to increase the availability and affordability of housing in Seattle. The report proposes a policy that links upzoning to requirements for the provision of affordable multi-family housing. This represents a new policy approach for a high-cost, progressive city like Seattle, and appears to lay the groundwork for an unusual coalition of support. However, significant work will still be required to get the committee's recommendations enacted by the City Council in the next two years.

### **Coalition of support**

Many neighborhood groups in Seattle responded negatively to the HALA report when it was initially leaked, and that dominated early press coverage. However, in the months since then, a coalition supportive of the committee's recommendations has begun to form.

Participating organizations include the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce; the Downtown Seattle Association; SEIU 775, one of Washington State's most influential unions; environmental and social justice groups; and the Housing Development Consortium (HDC), which represents affordable housing providers in Seattle. HDC, led by Executive Director Marty Kooistra, has assumed a leadership role in coordinating the coalition. Sightline Institute is also a participant in the coalition, though not a leader.

## **Goals of the coalition**

The coalition intends to establish itself as a multi-year political force to promote an approach that combines greater housing availability and greater affordability. The participants aim to serve as a counterweight to the neighborhood groups that oppose further growth. One of their priorities is coordinating people to attend city council meetings and tell their stories, as a response to similar efforts by opposition neighborhood groups.

The coalition also expects to seek changes in state law that are necessary for implementing the HALA recommendations. No changes are needed to implement the core HALA recommendation of combining mandatory inclusionary housing with upzoning. Among the recommendations that do require changes to the law is a proposal for Washington State to allow Seattle to impose an extra real estate excise tax. Another request concerns a program by which Washington State can grant large cities authority to give a certain tax exemption to multi-family buildings that reserve some units for low-income tenants. The HALA report asked for three adjustments to strengthen that tool.

## **Sightline Institute**

There are two types of activities that Sightline would like to use additional funding for housing work to pursue:

- **Continued local engagement** – Sightline could use funding to continue engagement in Seattle to conduct rapid-response research, messaging, and communications related to the HALA report. This would include debunking myths, explaining and elaborating on the proposal's basic features, and using a series of op-eds, white papers, and public appearances to engage with the public on these issues. Sightline did this type of work leading up to the release of the HALA report, and some of it is reflected in the report. Sightline stretched its budget to do this work because Mr. Durning felt the HALA report was a very important project, but the organization does not currently have dedicated funding to continue this work.
- **Expansion outside the Northwest** – A second important function is to tell the story of HALA outside of the Pacific Northwest. Sightline could do this on its own, or it could contact national media sources and commission leading writers on urbanism. The resulting communications would attempt to publicize how the HALA approach would work and how it could be adopted in other places. The political coalition mobilized by the "grand bargain" is very unusual in Mr. Durning's experience, and may be able to be modeled elsewhere.

## **Approaches to local engagement**

Sightline has just begun to think about how it would like to be more engaged in supporting the enactment of the HALA recommendations. One way could be to incorporate more images into Sightline's storytelling, which could help allay some of

the fears people have about neighborhood growth. Rather than talking about growth numbers or zoning provisions, Sightline has found it useful to show pictures of the kinds of low-impact multi-family housing that can fit well into single-family zones, such as duplexes and backyard cottages.

Another approach is to emphasize stories of people who are currently priced out of living in Seattle by identifying representative subjects and producing short videos and articles about them. This would encourage a perception of the issue as something relevant to sympathetic people looking for an opportunity to live in the city, not just about for-profit developers building tall buildings. Mr. Durning believes this is more likely to win support for the HALA model than a framing that depicts a group of urbanists armed with statistics.

### **Measure of success**

Mr. Durning believes that a successful outcome of the above work would be for the HALA approach to be adopted in other cities. Housing is generally becoming less affordable in the US, a phenomenon driven largely by an environment of political stasis. The HALA report and the political forces that assembled in its wake present a unique opportunity to introduce a model that can break that gridlock, but the momentum must continue in the next year if any progress is to be made in Seattle.

At the same time, Sightline and its allies must publicize this issue throughout the country so that the coalition and policy model can be emulated elsewhere. Sightline has already been contacted by people working on these issues in Vancouver, BC, and Portland, Oregon, who want to learn more about the HALA approach and get advice on how to build similar coalitions. Success depends on doing the majority of the work in Seattle, then telling the story in such a way as to encourage national uptake. Mr. Durning believes that the former is more important to focus on in the first year, but that more time could gradually be allocated to national storytelling. If the HALA approach and coalition do not succeed in Seattle, national storytelling would become much less relevant.

### **Resource allocation**

Work related to housing and the HALA recommendations, including local engagement and national outreach, already occupies a substantial share of Mr. Durning's time. Some time from other senior staff, such as Deputy Director Clark Williams-Derry, is also allocated to these functions. However, to continue doing this work and do more of it, Sightline must expand its research and communications capacity through a mix of hiring new staff and reallocating some existing staff's time.

#### *Research staff*

To conduct the additional activities described above, Sightline would need to hire an additional senior researcher. Given more funding, Sightline could also allocate some existing research assistants' time to this area of work.

Mr. Durning could envision two types of candidates for the researcher role:

- A researcher with a journalistic background, whose skills are concentrated in information gathering and storytelling.
- A researcher with a background in quantitative analysis. This type of hire could help by consulting academic research and conducting new analysis, which is often lacking in housing debates.

### *Communications staff*

Mr. Durning would also like to more deeply engage two other components of Sightline's operations:

- The communications strategy team, which develops best practices for messaging and framing issues, commissions opinion research, and applies existing opinion research to Sightline's current work and to guide communications for its allies.
- The communications and outreach team, which publicizes Sightline's work among local and national media as well as on social media.

Given additional funding for work on housing, Sightline would reallocate a share of time from existing communications strategy and outreach staff towards housing work.

## **Funding**

### *Funding needs*

To both expand outreach nationally and continue local outreach on the level achieved leading up to the HALA report, Sightline would require additional funding on the order of \$100,000 per year, preferably for three years. This would allow Sightline to hire a skilled researcher. A three-year timeline would make it easier to recruit talented staff, though it would be possible to do so under a shorter timeline.

### *Current funding sources and allocation*

A large portion of Sightline's budget is either general operating funds or funds loosely restricted to climate and clean energy work, which makes up well over 50% of Sightline's activities. In the last few years, 50–60% of Sightline's funding has come from major donors, and almost none of it has been restricted to specific programs. About 25–50% of its foundation funding is restricted, but loosely enough so as not to significantly constrain Sightline's decisions about its activities.

The organization's overall supply of funds is a larger concern. Sightline's budget has grown slightly recently, but not enough to allow for the additional hiring it wants to do. Mr. Durning has come close to hiring another research assistant, but is not certain of having enough funding to sustain that position.

### *Potential new funding sources*

Few national funders are interested in supporting the issues that Sightline and the coalition are working on. Mr. Durning is working on identifying more sources of

funding and believes that Sightline may be able to raise more funds from individual donors and potentially from foundations to support this work.

### **Current national outreach involvement**

Most of Sightline's media strength lies in the Pacific Northwest, where it has longstanding relationships with many members of the media. However, it also conducts national outreach on certain issues.

Sightline's approach to getting national media coverage depends on the overall strategy around a particular project. When it needs help with strategy outside of the Northwest, Sightline enlists a communications firm. For example, when Sightline released the book *Unlocking Home: Three Keys to Affordable Communities*, it was able to get a front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* and coverage in Slate, as well as coverage in urbanist websites like Planetizen and CityLab.

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