

Community Land Trusts Work In the Best and Worst of Times

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Recently I gave a speech at the National Community Land Trust Network's annual meeting in Boston to talk about the important role that community land trusts have in our neighborhoods by promoting stability through affordable housing and economic development opportunities. Those efforts are always welcomed and needed under normal conditions, and they are appreciated and needed even more so as we cope with unprecedented economic challenges not seen since the Great Depression.

Well before the reality of the nation's economic woes became daily front-page news, the administration of Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick had already been hard at work implementing new initiatives and enacting policies to get ahead of the looming crisis to stem the tide of foreclosures and build more housing that is truly affordable to those across a broad range of incomes.

Obviously the complexity of nationwide and worldwide issues still reverberates today, but with the help of the economic stimulus package recently passed by Congress and signed by President Obama, we are continuing to move forward and invest in our communities by working hard to improve our overall quality of life and attract new jobs and businesses to Massachusetts.

To chart our future, we have taken a number of multipronged, comprehensive actions. We recently completed a housing marketing assessment of the Commonwealth to determine what our policies and actions should be to meet our housing needs through 2012. This is the first assessment we have done in Massachusetts in more than 20 years. That, along with a regional economic development strategy already rolled out by the Patrick administration, will help us target growth in ways that will make Massachusetts economically strong and competitive for many years to come.

Because housing is a critical part of our infrastructure for economic growth, we have partnered with employers in Massachusetts to set up pilot programs to obtain more affordable housing for our workforce so that businesses can expand and thrive.

We have tackled the issue of homelessness head on and are now working to overhaul our emergency shelter system into one that emphasizes a housing-first strategy, rather than one of shelter first.

To help those who need a boost toward self-sufficiency, we have convened an asset development commission to find the best ways to lead folks out of poverty into solid working-class status.

We have enacted our own neighborhood stabilization fund program to make sure that foreclosed properties in hard-hit neighborhoods get sold and reoccupied as quickly as possible. That program, along with the \$54.4 million that Massachusetts received from the federal government under the Housing and Economic Recovery Act, will strengthen our mission to make sure foreclosed properties are fixed up and reoccupied.

With the number of foreclosures and the rate of unemployment increasing and with the stock market so volatile, it is impossible to predict what the economy will look like in a year, so it is more important than ever to continue investing in our neighborhoods to make them vibrant and economically diverse and offer opportunities for all residents.

Organizations like the NCLT Network help us in our overall mission by providing training and educating the folks who run community land trusts to make sure that the idea and practice of “community” is always embedded in an affordable housing development.

There are 15 community land trusts in Massachusetts serving cities as large as Boston and as small and rural as Great Barrington in western Berkshire County. Clearly there is room in every community for a land trust.

How do community land trusts fit into our actions in Massachusetts? When the housing market is heated, they offer affordability. In troubled times, they offer stability as well. Through their investments and supportive actions, land trusts are models of civic engagement. In these difficult economic times, they offer an extra buffer for homeowners who in other situations might face foreclosure. Land trusts let people know that they are buying more than just a house—they are buying into a community.

Community land trusts help buyers with their home purchases and supply support services that will step in before a homeowner gets into financial difficulty. And because a land trust has the right of first refusal, the home and its affordability can be preserved. Statistics show that of 3,100 community land trust homeowners completed in 2007, only two had been foreclosed upon—that’s an annual rate of 0.06 percent. The overall rate of foreclosure is 33 times higher.

State and community land trusts can work together by identifying opportunities to secure land; for example, land held by a corporation, institution, or local housing authority that can be turned over to a land trust for development or rehabilitation. This spirit of cooperation will help to enhance the success of our employer-assisted housing program.

We are exploring the possibility of establishing a land trust within municipal government. By funding the acquisition of foreclosed or vacant property by a land bank, which would also be within a city’s purview, the state could ensure that the property could be held for up to ten years and transferred to a land trust for final development when the trust had the capacity to develop it. The land trust could then build affordable housing and ensure its long-term affordability.

The word “partnership,” often overused, is particularly relevant in this case. It will take many partners and various resources within the public and private sectors for us to ensure the economic vitality of our cities and towns.

We are proud of our association with community land trusts, especially in times like these, and we look forward to expanding that relationship to make our communities as vibrant and healthy as they can be.

Tina Brooks serves as the Commonwealth's housing policy chief within the Patrick administration's Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development. With more than 18 years of experience in affordable housing finance and development, Brooks is a key architect in expanding affordable housing opportunities in Massachusetts. A Jamaica Plain resident, Brooks most recently served as the director of the Boston office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a program that provides loans, grants and technical assistance to spur the development of affordable housing, new businesses, recreational facilities, schools, safety programs and other neighborhood institutions.