



Affordable housing leaders share challenges, successes during CDAC meeting in Omaha

by: Rachael Surmick

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At its October meeting, the Kansas City Fed Community Development Advisory Council heard from a panel of local housing experts and toured a new Habitat for Humanity of Omaha development in northwest Omaha.

Affordable housing serves as the bedrock for vibrant, inclusive communities, unlocking pathways to economic opportunity, fostering family stability, and cultivating neighborhoods that are accessible and welcoming to all. Affordable housing was also the theme at October's Community Development Advisory Council (CDAC) meeting. Held in Omaha, members of the council connected with local leaders and toured a new Habitat for Humanity of Omaha development in northwest Omaha.



Local experts shared their strategies with CDAC members

The CDAC hosted a panel of local housing leaders to discuss ways their respective organizations are investing in previously redlined communities, specifically north Omaha. Panelists included (from left to right):

- Rachael Surmick, moderator;
- Jody Holston, executive director, Front Porch Investments;

- Buey Ray Tut, executive director, Spark;
- Sharon Rodgers, president and chief executive officer, Seventy Five North; and
- Amanda Brewer, chief executive officer, Habitat for Humanity Omaha.

Panelists engaged in topics about how their work leverages community assets to support affordable housing, the importance of resident engagement in their work, and the many ways they are working to address the affordable housing challenge in Omaha.

Tackling the critical issue of affordable housing demands a comprehensive strategy, drawing upon a variety of interventions and collaborations to meaningfully expand access and opportunity for people of all income levels within the community.

Panelists spoke to the many ways they approach affordable housing, from multi-family affordable rental to single family homeownership; to supporting community-based developers; and providing the financing needed to bring these projects to life.



Nate Kauffman, senior vice president and Omaha branch executive, listens to Robert Bray, Habitat Omaha's construction equipment supervisor, explain elements of the new Bluestem Prairie Development.

CDAC members toured a new mixed-income housing development

Following the panel discussion, Habitat for Humanity of Omaha hosted a tour of its new Bluestem Prairie Development, located on a 19-acre site at 51st Street and Sorenson Parkway. The first phase of this mixed-income development will create 85 new homes featuring diverse layouts to meet the needs of various households such as individuals, multi-generational families, and empty-nesters. The project also includes the redevelopment of Myott Park, which borders the neighborhood.

Members of the CDAC learned about the long-term goals of the project – which will create 164 new homeowners by 2027 – and how Habitat for Humanity Omaha works to create mortgage-ready households through its comprehensive housing counseling program.

Throughout the tour, the group discussed the prevalence of vacant land in north Omaha, and the many barriers that community organizations still face in land acquisition and site development. The group also discussed different ways to evaluate the creditworthiness of lower income buyers. Recognizing that current credit scoring methods evaluate lower income families in a way that creates barriers to mortgage access, Habitat Omaha instead evaluates behaviors and payments that are traditionally excluded from a FICO scoring model. The Habitat Omaha model has resulted in a low default and delinquency rate.

Many thanks to Amanda Brewer and the Habitat for Humanity Omaha team for creating a meaningful engagement for the Kansas City Fed's Community Development Advisory Council.



Rachael Surmick

Community Development Advisor

Rachael Surmick is a community development advisor for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in the Omaha Branch Office. A new member of the community development team, Surmick is focused on getting to know key stakeholders and learning more about the needs of and opportunities for low- to moderate-income communities across Nebraska. Surmick began her career as an AmeriCorps VISTA member working to alleviate poverty through financial well-being programs in southwestern Pennsylvania. She has worked in the nonprofit community development sector for more than a decade, primarily focused on affordable housing. Most recently she was working to engage communities across the state on broadband equity and access. A Pennsylvania native, Surmick studied history and anthropology as an undergraduate student at Gettysburg College and earned a Master of Public Management degree from Carnegie Mellon University. Outside of work, Surmick is passionate about music and plays the clarinet with a local community concert band.

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