

The Oregonian

Uniting community forces for change

by Doug Stamm, Bob Walsh and Ann Lininger, guest opinion

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A team of community members assembled by Gov. Ted Kulongoski will soon begin work identifying projects in Oregon for financing with money from the federal stimulus package. The decisions this team will make can create jobs and new industry in Oregon and lead the way to our state's economic recovery. To make the most of this opportunity, Oregon will need tremendous cooperation among all those with a stake in the future, including public, private and philanthropic sectors.

Fortunately, we have a strong precedent from the affordable-housing sector to use as a model as we approach this task.

In an unprecedented partnership over the past two years, Meyer Memorial Trust, Walsh Construction Co., Oregon Housing and Community Services and other partners have united to create the Housing Acquisition Fund to safeguard 7,000 rent-subsidized apartments that were at risk of converting to market rates. This risk arises when federal contracts that require landlords to keep rents low in exchange for favorable financing expire.

In a watershed first step, Portland's Schnitzer family sold the 235-unit Clay Tower building to a nonprofit. The nonprofit, which strives to provide low-cost housing, will maintain modest rents instead of transforming the building to high-end, market-rate housing.

The Housing Acquisition Fund, administered by Network for Oregon Affordable Housing, similarly will help other nonprofits buy and upgrade aging, subsidized apartments and keep operating them at low rents. Meyer Memorial Trust has invested \$5.2 million in the fund, and the owners of Walsh Construction Co. have contributed almost \$1 million. Oregon Housing and Community Services awarded more than \$2 million to the fund, and the governor's proposed budget includes an additional \$16 million to help preserve these 7,000 apartments.

Last week, one of the 10 largest private foundations in the country -- the MacArthur Foundation -- announced a \$5 million investment in Oregon's affordable-housing preservation work. This is MacArthur's largest-ever investment in Oregon. Leaders at MacArthur credit the close teamwork of Oregon's foundations, private businesses and government as influential in their decision to invest in the project.

With help from a diverse team of partners, including the Collins Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, the city of Portland and others, the Network for

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Oregon Affordable Housing has raised \$27 million to help nonprofits buy and safeguard aging subsidized apartments from willing sellers.

This teamwork has also served as catalyst for other breakthroughs. Last week, the Oregon Senate joined the House in passing a bill modestly increasing document-recording fees on real estate transactions to generate \$15 million for affordable housing over the next two years.

This team of public, private, foundation and nonprofit partners is on track to safeguard affordable housing for 7,000 Oregonians between now and 2013. Imagine what Oregon could accomplish if more of its public, private, philanthropic and nonprofit entities joined forces behind the federal stimulus money. That's the opportunity that awaits as the governor assembles the Oregon Way Advisory Group to identify projects for financing with stimulus package funds.

If this group includes leaders from all segments of Oregon's communities -- including public, private, philanthropic and nonprofit -- who can rise above partisanship, Oregon will not only recover from the recession, it will emerge stronger than ever.

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