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How to Shred GNAR(ly) Problems: An Innovative Webinar Series Addressing Housing Affordability Issues in Utah and Across the West

Elizabeth Sodja

Abstract

Housing affordability is a critical issue in many Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) communities. The extreme increase in home prices during the COVID-19 pandemic have made it an even bigger challenge for residents. In response, the GNAR Initiative created a six-part interactive webinar series providing tools to address housing affordability and short-term rental management.

Introduction

With their small size, quaint feel, and outdoor recreation opportunities, many gateway and natural amenity region (GNAR) communities (i.e., rural communities near national parks, monuments, resorts, and public lands) have become increasingly popular places to visit, own homes, live, and work remotely (Stevens & Rodgers, 2021; Stoker et al., 2020). As a result, housing affordability has become a critical issue in many Utah GNAR communities in recent years. The popularity of GNAR communities spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to the increased demand for homes which further inflated prices (Cox, 2021; Sullivan, 2021) Furthermore, a rise in the popularity of short-term rentals, such as Airbnb and VRBO, placed additional pressures on limited housing inventories in GNAR communities.

One challenge for many GNAR communities is limited resources to find and implement solutions to these problems. It is somewhat common for local officials to wear multiple hats (e.g., the City Manager is also the Fire Chief, or the mayor also manages the sewer system), and some communities have only a small local elected body to tackle difficult community development and social issues. After gathering feedback from community officials during two (2) peer-to-peer GNAR networking events in April and May of 2020, we recognized that city officials have often been overwhelmed by the rapid increase in challenges facing their community over the past year. With limited time and resources, finding ways to get valuable information and tools into the hands of local decision-makers is critical to the wellbeing of GNAR communities.

Response and Target Audience

To help provide information and tools to GNAR communities during an unprecedented time of change, the Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) Initiative of USU Extension and the Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning (LAEP) department created a six-part interactive webinar series, entitled “*How to Shred GNAR(ly) Problems: Tools, Techniques & Resources to address Epic Housing Challenges.*” More information on the series are available at <https://www.usu.edu/gnar/gnarlyproblems>

The webinar series occurred over a three-month period from April to July in 2021. Each session focused on housing affordability and short-term rental management practices. Community experts and practitioners from both the public and private sector were featured in the first five sessions. Three sessions also had peer-to-peer learning opportunities for participants to break away from the standard impersonal webinar format and meet virtually with other communities across the West.

The GNAR Initiative’s primary audience is GNAR communities in the Western U.S. As noted, these are small rural communities that fall within specific research-identified parameters that make them likely candidates for participants in natural amenity-based economic activity (Stoker et al., 2020).

Participants of the webinar series were diverse and included community members, academics, researchers, federal agencies, state agencies, international, non-GNAR communities, and private companies. Across the six sessions, there were 312 registrants representing 21 states and provinces, and 66 communities and regions.

Outcomes and Impact

Each of the five sessions highlighted a different tool to address housing affordability or short-term rental challenges. We gathered feedback from participants via the chat function during each webinar, and at the end of the series sent out a Qualtrics survey to all registrants to assess their perceptions towards the usefulness of the content, intentions to implement best practices and recommendations in their own communities, and willingness to recommend future GNAR Initiative webinars to their colleagues. The following is a summary of the feedback received during three of the six webinars.

- Session 1 – Housing Assessments 101: The What, Why and How: When participants were asked what they learned from the session, responses include: *“Using rigorous data to tell the housing story (rather than hearing one powerful group’s interpretation) and targeting actions to meet the need,”* and *“We need deliberate community input and forums.”*

- Session 2 – Short Term Rental Trends in the Intermountain West and How to Craft an Ordinance to Handle Them: One participant’s response to this webinar was *“We didn’t even know where to begin (regarding short-term rentals), so thank you for giving us a way to start wrapping our head around the issue!”*
- Session 4 – Tools to Increase Housing Affordability: Lessons Learned from Park City and Beyond: One participant said, *“Lots of great ideas I never thought off,”* Another participant said, *“How do we regulate/maintain affordable housing in non-incorporated areas and on the regional planning scale?”*

Since the completion of the webinar series in July, session recordings have been watched more than 300 times on YouTube and this number continues to grow. Survey results post-webinars showed that 100% of respondents found the webinars valuable and 85% have already recommended the webinars to a peer or coworker. While not quantified, it was reported by each webinar speaker that participants followed up with them after the sessions. Specifically, community members asked for more information and advice on how to implement similar programs in their communities. It was reported that at least two communities who attended the webinar series are now pursuing deed-restriction programs to preserve local housing inventory, and several have started the process of inventorying short-term rentals in their community in order to see how they can both benefit from potential tax revenue.

Public Value and Next steps

While our webinar series was well received by participants, there are limitations to what a webinar can provide to participants and decision-makers in GNAR communities. As one participant stated in the post-survey, *“I wish I had more time to watch (the webinars), and more time to study and work on the issues. I feel like we are short-staffed.”* There is a critical void in planning and development resources specifically designed for GNAR communities, and the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the need for effective community planning with respect to housing affordability. Based on participant feedback and additional requests from communities for more in-depth data on GNAR specific challenges, the GNAR Initiative is pivoting its limited resources from hosting webinar series to in-depth research projects aiming to provide empirical data, models, case studies, and resources for communities across the natural-amenity economic development spectrum.

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