

We can't ignore rising home costs  
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BY CINDY RICHARDS

I couldn't afford to live where I live if I wanted to move in now. We bought our house eight years ago. That was before anyone had heard of a real estate bubble. Back then, buying a house on a nice block within walking distance of a high-quality public school was simply the next step in raising a family. Since we're in the midst of a refinance (isn't everyone?), we had to have the house appraised and were shocked to find the value has more than tripled. Granted, that new price reflects a whole lot of rehabbing and renovating of our formerly ramshackle 110-year-old Victorian. But triple? I vacillate between feeling elated and embarrassed. How are we to preserve the economic diversity of our town if housing values can triple in eight short years?

That's the question housing advocates are asking all over Chicago. The Chicago Rehab Network, a coalition of more than 40 housing organizations, believes the answer lies in a massive increase in city spending on affordable housing issues--from \$15 million to \$95 million a year. The group has two ideas for funding the increase: using a portion of the real estate transfer tax or the city's hotel tax (an obvious choice since poorly paid hotel workers are among those who can't afford to live in many parts of the city).

It's a pretty big request in a pretty tight economy. But what could possibly be more important than ensuring everyone has a home?

Historically, affordable housing has struggled to find a place on the political agenda. Too often, it has been defined as public housing. But that is no longer the case.

"Clearly, affordability is inching up the economic ladder in terms of its impact on people," said Kevin Jackson, executive director of the Chicago Rehab Network. A growing segment of the population spends more than 50 percent of income on housing, he said.

Political leaders increasingly see housing as a cornerstone policy issue that affects many aspects of our lives.

Take education. The quality of education is directly related to the quality of local housing: If families can find an affordable apartment and stay there, they create a community that supports the local school. Families that can't find housing are forced to move every year--or more often--pulling their kids in and out of schools regularly. And research shows that the more mobile kids are, the less they learn.

Stable, affordable housing also may be a secret weapon in the fight against urban crime, according to researcher John M. Hagedorn of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Although the homicide rate is dropping--because of new police policies, the city says--Hagedorn is researching whether the lack of affordable housing may be a root cause of the city's still-high homicide rate. Affordable housing also is key to helping the city's hard-working low- and moderate-income families. Those are the people who bus the tables and hail the cabs, even the people who teach our kids and the cops who protect our streets. As real estate prices soar, they find it increasingly difficult to afford housing.

When last I wrote about preserving affordable housing in Chicago, I had a visit from a long-time community organizer who took me to task. There is affordable housing, he said. Plenty of it. It just happens to be in Plainfield.

True, you can buy a pretty nice starter home in that far-flung suburb--assuming you have enough for the down payment. But then what? Your commuting costs rise as you buy gas for the commute back to your job in the city. You never see the kids because you work eight hours a day and commute four more. You send your

kids to new schools that already are overcrowded because school construction can't keep up with housing construction. And then you wait for your property taxes to rise when the bill for all that construction comes due. Sending people to the far reaches of the metropolitan area in search of housing is not the answer. A city can remain vibrant only with a wide array of residents. The Chicago Rehab Network is asking for a lot. But not coughing up the cash could have a long-term negative impact on the city.

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