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From the Los Angeles Times

Dust-Up

Magic housing solutions

If you had a regulatory magic wand and \$20 billion, what would you do to alleviate the housing crunch? All week, Joseph Mailander and Peter Dreier debate Los Angeles housing policy and solutions.

April 12, 2007

Today, Dreier and Mailander propose big-picture solutions to city's housing problems. Previously they debated whether rent control helps or hurts, discussed City Hall efforts to rein in property rights, and sketched out the contours of what they think this housing crisis is. Tomorrow, they'll clear up myths about the Los Angeles housing market.

The battle over Skid Row

By Peter Dreier

I'm sure you'll agree, Joseph, that the most tragic victims of the housing crisis are the 90,000 people in Los Angeles County who are homeless on any given night. We are the nation's homeless capital—a dubious distinction. Some are alcoholic, drug addicts, and/or mentally ill, but most, including the working poor, are simply victims of bad luck and a tight housing market.

A year ago, a blue-ribbon task force, [Bring LA Home](#), unveiled a comprehensive multibillion dollar plan—a mix of housing and social services—to eliminate homelessness in L.A. County in ten years. A new report reveals that this goal is ambitious but feasible. It will require collaboration of business, housing and service providers, and government at the federal, state, county, and local levels.

But the plan is collecting dust. The County Board of Supervisors has dropped the ball. Led by Mike Antonovich, they've failed to establish a regional network of homeless service centers, a centerpiece of the plan.

Rather than acknowledge that homelessness is a regional responsibility, the Supervisors and many local officials want to foist the problem on Los Angeles.

To his credit, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has committed more than \$100 million for "supportive housing"—apartments and social services. This is the lynchpin of any solution. But, in reality, one city, on its own, can't eliminate homelessness.

According to a [recent report](#), in L.A. it costs \$1,474 a night to treat a homeless individual in the hospital and \$607 in a mental hospital; \$84 a night to house a homeless person in prison and \$63 a night in jail; \$37 a night to house a homeless person in shelter, and \$30 a night in permanent supportive housing.

So, Joseph, perhaps here's where a progressive (me) and a libertarian (you) can agree. If I had a magic wand and an extra \$20 billion—and L.A. County residents have already spent over [\\$13 billion on the war in Iraq](#)—I'd put half into subsidies for mixed-income apartments (mostly along transit corridors) and half into supportive housing (throughout the county, not just Skid Row).

Molly Rysman of [Skid Row Housing Trust](#) points out that cities that have invested in supportive housing have seen dramatic reductions in homelessness. San Francisco has seen a 37% decline in homelessness.

New York's investment was found to be cost-neutral to taxpayers because of large reductions in formerly homeless individuals' reliance on expensive emergency services. It costs the same to leave homeless individuals on the streets as it does to end their homelessness through permanent supportive housing.

We can reduce our housing crunch by redirecting resources to efficient housing strategies like permanent supportive housing, rather than spending more to send homeless individuals to jail and prison. Our courts are inundated with drug and quality of life crimes. This is neither effective nor cost-efficient. Let's focus instead on the violent criminals and predators who really belong in prison.

About 13,000 very poor residents live in Skid Row—in residential hotels, shelters or on the street. According to Becky Dennison, who works on Skid Row with [LA Community Action Network](#), L.A.'s rent stabilization law has prevented thousands of long-term residential hotel tenants from becoming homeless. But landlords often use illegal tactics to evict them, and then raise the rents. So even these bottom-rung units—typically a small room with a shared bathroom—can cost \$800 a month.

Meanwhile, however, the battle over Skid Row has pitted the homeless and their advocates against developers and their political allies. It is a microcosm of larger dilemmas facing LA city officials.

It began as a battle between the LAPD and the American Civil Liberties Union over whether homeless people have a "right" to sleep on the streets—during the day or at night. The ACLU argued that the homeless have a "right" to squat on sidewalks and alleys so long as there's not enough

low-cost housing for them. But securing the right for homeless people to sleep on the street doesn't really address the misery of homelessness.

LAPD framed the issue primarily as one of public safety. Police Chief William Bratton views Skid Row primarily as a haven for drug dealers and other criminals, including those who prey on the homeless, shoppers and residents. There is more the LAPD could be doing about reducing violent crime on Skid Row, but pushing sleeping homeless people off the streets is not an effective crime fighting strategy

This controversy, however, diverts attention from the more fundamental issue. Will our shiny new downtown have a place for the people who live and work here now, or will it be yet another playground for the rich, full of luxury housing, galleries, museums and concert halls, upscale restaurants, boutiques and tourist attractions?

At one point, it appeared that Mayor Villaraigosa had brokered a compromise between the ACLU and Bratton. But after intense lobbying by Carol Schatz and the Central City Association (CCA)—the lobby group for downtown developers and businesses—Councilwoman Jan Perry persuaded most of her Council colleagues to reject the deal.

Let's be frank: The CCA doesn't want homeless people on Skid Row during the day or night. They don't want homeless folks on the streets, in downtown shelters, in residential hotels, or low-income housing, or soup kitchens or rehab programs. Despite giving lip service to compassion for the destitute, the CCA would simply like to have homeless people out of sight, out of mind, and out of downtown. Whether the conditions are better or worse for homeless people is of little concern to the CCA on its march to turning the area into an oasis for the affluent.

We need to reframe the short-sighted debate over Skid Row into a broader public conversation about what kind of downtown—and city—we want five, ten and 50 years from now.

Our goal should be to provide all residents—middle-class families, the working poor, seniors, young couples, and the troubled homeless—with the housing they need. All new housing in LA should be mixed-income, well-designed, and built in neighborhoods throughout the city, including downtown.

Peter Dreier is E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College. He is coauthor of three books: Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century; The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle For A Livable City; and Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together; and co-editor of Up Against the Sprawl.

Let 'em have yurts

By Joseph Mailander

Peter, one of the things I've *not* seen on my walks as a humble pedestrian here is the 90,000 homeless you mention. That figure comes straight from the office of the Mayor, whose aides have bought into the ersatz research provided them by the city's homeless industrial complex. Whenever I walk in the most homeless-intensive sector of town, LA's Skid Row—and I walk those streets quite often—I can only count about 1,000 people sleeping on the street, tops, on any given night. I can only guess that there might be as many as 50,000 homeless elsewhere in the County, but that's a guess—and all the homeless numbers, as you know, are pure guesswork.

Homelessness is the great shame of the City of Los Angeles, on that we can indeed agree—but we will never take true steps toward solving this problem until we stop using the homeless as props for our various contractor slush funds, and start welcoming them into more supportive institutions than missions and jails.

In my dream city, Peter, we'd stop handing taxpayer money over to developers and contractors for affordable housing projects and jails. We'd simply house whoever needed lodging, for a year or for a night, in New Yurt City, along the banks of the river south of downtown, in yurts—at under \$7,000 a unit, a scant \$175 million buys an astonishing 25,000 of these, and the city and County have the land. And we'd give them access to 2,000 Echo Park Lake-level secure necessary rooms that can be built for \$17,000 a unit, not the \$200,000 boondoggle outhouses they've incongruently plunked down on Skid Row. That would add another \$34 million to the bill.

I'm tight. I've only spent \$209 million to fix the homeless crisis, and that's all I'm going to spend. Done.

That's right. For an amount that equals roughly double what the Mayor wants us to contribute to the so-called Affordable Housing Trust (where does that \$100 million a year go, anyway, and why aren't we seeing benefits?), we could put a roof over every homeless head in the County. You may not think that yurts lend dignity to the homeless—I don't either—but I would further counter that a real room lends a soul more dignity than a cardboard box or a freeway overpass, the kind of "housing" where the mayor's billion-dollar Affordable Housing Bond leaves 95% of the homeless.

Wait. We'd offer a light-rail tram along existing tracks from New Yurt City straight up to Transformation Town ("T-Town"), a bazaar of service organizations organized not in a containment zone (as is the current Skid Row) but along the perimeter of a well-policed plaza on a parcel kindly donated to the city by Richard Meruelo (in exchange for an easement his friend the mayor would grant him elsewhere), where all service organizations would constantly compete for the sacred right of servicing the neediest among us. Do the job efficiently, and you get a slot. Fail, and someone takes your place.

You want workforce housing? So do I. We'd work with every service organization and union in the city and help them generate workforce housing. We'd ask them simply to pony up the land for such housing. If they can bring land to the table, we'll grant them every easement in the book to house their various workforces. Cost to the city: nada.

But we wouldn't need much workforce housing after we rolled back rent controls and incentivized condo conversions. We'd glut the market with homes rather than apartments. We'd put back in place all the missing rungs in the city's housing ladder, and enable anyone with six months' salary saved in the bank and good credit to buy a starter home—and we'd have cheap enough rents and cheap enough housing that prudent people would be able to put together six months' salary for a down payment in three to five years' time.

After everything was made well again, and people could actually afford to live here with neither government props nor inheritance, I guess I'd also have to find something for the 600 employees of the City's Department of Housing to do. Or maybe not: Though I asked them five times last year, they could never even tell me how many rentals there are in the city! I suppose they could just keep doing whatever they're doing now.

Joseph Mailander is a writer and lecturer on architecture and urbanism who often nags the city of Los Angeles about housing issues. He edits the blog MartiniRepublic.com, which features a special category on architecture and urbanist issues, martinirepublic.com/la+u.

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