M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Rosie Truelove, Director, Housing and Planning Department

DATE: March 24, 2022

SUBJECT: Staff Response to Council Resolution No. 20180628-080 regarding connecting low-income households in need of housing with available income-restricted units

The purpose of this memo is to provide a final report related to Resolution No. 20180628-080 regarding connecting low-income households in need of housing with available income-restricted units. The Housing and Planning Department (HPD) staff have responded to the resolution through the development and deployment of the Affordable Housing Online Search Tool (AHOST), which is a collaboration by multiple partners and described in detail in this memo.

Resolution No. 20180628-080 directed the City Manager to propose a program to connect low-income households in need of housing with available income-restricted units, with priority given to units in buildings that do not have waitlist programs, such as incentivized affordable units, before including units that do have a waitlist program. Priority consideration should also include buildings with multiple affordable units before including buildings with fewer affordable units. The resolution directs the City Manager to develop a program that requires or incentivizes landlords of affordable units to provide notice to the City when an affordable unit becomes available for rent and lease affordable units to tenants participating in the program, eventually expanding the program to include unsubsidized affordable housing units in high opportunity areas, while assisting those experiencing emergency situations. The resolution also called for the City Manager to make this data available on the City of Austin Open Austin Data Portal.

DETERMINED PLATFORM SOLUTION: AHOST
In response to Council's resolution, staff from HPD and Communications and Technology Management Department developed a platform—the **Affordable Housing Online Search Tool (AHOST)** located at www.atxaffordablehousing.net. The web-based, dual-language, easy-to-use mapping application allows prospective low-income households renters to search for all income-restricted rental housing units within the city of Austin, not just those subsidized or incentivized by the City of Austin. By specifying the renter's household income, household size, and whether they are in possession of a Housing Choice voucher, the user can geospatially navigate through the city, identify housing units that match the input criteria, and access select information on that housing unit. Housing information obtained on the online system includes contact information, unit composition, affordability thresholds, specific communities served, district schools, and on-site amenities.

Information included on the site is input through a web-based portal administered by HPD, with access provided to selected partners including the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA), and an HPD selected contractor. HPD will begin contracting with an external party responsible for sourcing public data and for contacting property managers to update contact information, unit composition, available amenities, affordability levels, and supported communities.

AHOST PILOT SCOPE
While the mapping platform has the capability to include information on whether a property has a waitlist and vacancies, HPD is still exploring feasibility to capture real-time data to be able to populate this information, recognizing the tool will offer opportunities for refinement. In investigating potential strategies to respond to the resolution, staff found that property owners and managers utilize their own systems for managing wait lists or interests lists. This, coupled with the frequency by which households move in and out of housing, makes obtaining vacancy data very challenging.

FEASIBILITY OF WAIT LIST, REAL TIME DATA
The City currently has no mechanism to require or incentivize property managers of income-restricted housing not subsidized or incentivized by the City to contribute their data on available units. The AHOST system serves as an online resource to assist locating income-restricted units. Cost burdened households can search for affordable housing resources using specific unit attributes. The online tool is not designed to deliver a wait list feature or real-time data on availability of units across hundreds of private and nonprofit housing providers. Real-time data collection of this magnitude and complexity would either require the addition of full-time staff or contractors dedicated to reaching out to property managers of income-restricted units on an ongoing basis and requesting voluntary compliance with these data requests.

Rental: Maintaining a list of market-rate affordable units would require additional resources to research privately-owned and managed databases containing rental rates to identify those market-rate affordable properties, which would require access fees. While these steps could be taken, this endeavor will take additional time and resources. The Housing and Planning Department at minimum would require an additional full-time equivalent (FTE) position, for a dedicated, full-time focus to work with partners – both private and nonprofit – for rigorous, ongoing data mining and data entry. In addition, the department would seek additional funding for systems modifications. This amount is estimated at $150,000 total, based on the cost of an FTE (~$100,000), and licenses for access to market-rate property information (~$50,000).

Ownership: HPD staff is working to expand affordable homeownership opportunities through the Community Land Trust (CLT) program. Austin Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) recently purchased a portfolio of 20 single-family homes that will effectively double the size of the existing CLT. Upon rehabilitation, the homes will provide affordable homeownership in neighborhoods across the city for 20 first-time homebuyers. AHFC is in the process of implementing the city's Preference Policy and developing a targeted communications and outreach strategy to reach low- and moderate-income households who are at risk of displacement or who have been displaced. With a new Program Manager overseeing the CLT and Long-Term Affordability programs, a targeted communications and outreach strategy, HPD will be well-positioned to connect low- and moderate-income homebuyers with city-subsidized or incentivized opportunities.

AHOST EVOLUTION & PARTNERSHIPS
With the launch of AHOST, user feedback and metrics obtained based on usage of the site will allow staff to gauge the size and type of audience that utilizes the platform, improve the user experience, and add features that can enhance the effectiveness of the tool. In addition, staff and its contractors will be working with property managers and owners to maintain timely data related to contact information,

unit composition, and populations served, while familiarizing these groups with the tool. As property managers and owners become aware of the existence and usability of this tool, staff can assess the interest of these groups in partnering to provide information that might be closer to real-time (provided by the property manager) on vacancy data as well as other relevant data that prospective tenants may require. Technical solutions that automate these tasks will be further explored during fiscal year 22 and incorporated where appropriate. The HPD website includes a link for users to provide updated information on properties through a crowd-sourcing form and feedback on the usability of the search tool. Once this information has been collected, staff will adjust the search tool if needed or engage in a wholesale redesign of the platform if major changes are needed.

AHOST COMMUNICATIONS
The search tool, while a standalone website, can be accessed through HPD's website, with a dedicated page containing information on the tool, as well as the user feedback and crowdsourcing forms that allow visitors to the site to alert staff of needed changes to the data contained within the AHOST. HPD's Communications and Public Information Division will work with contractors, media partners, and interested members of the public to promote the website. All those requesting information on affordable housing opportunities will be directed to the site in addition to any specific information located on the HPD's website.

Data included within the AHOST is currently available on the City of Austin Open Austin Datal Portal under the name "Comprehensive Affordable Housing Directory."

Should you have questions, please contact Rosie Truelove at rosie.truelove@austintexas.gov; 512.974.3064.

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