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Affordable housing the key to growth, task force says

■ Without lower rents, businesses will have difficulty finding low-wage workers, and Washington County's economic growth will be hampered, a study counsels

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HILLSBORO — If Washington County wants continued economic growth, it needs more affordable housing, a community task force reports.

Entry-level and other low-income workers can't afford most rents in the county now, forcing them to live outside the county, the task force said.

If commuting costs rise, they won't be able to get to their jobs.

That's one of the issues that public, private and nonprofit groups should examine to expand the types of housing developed in the county, according to a report from the Washington County Community Action Organization.

The private, nonprofit organization, which provides a range of social services under contracts with public agencies, began an affordable-housing study two years ago.

Last year, it assembled a task force headed by Gary Conkling, partner in a public relations com-

pany, former congressional aide and former Beaverton Chamber of Commerce president.

The 20-member task force also includes state, county and city officials; lenders, builders and real estate specialists; representatives of social service organizations; and minority groups.

The goals of the task force included creating strategies that would lead to more housing for lower-paid workers.

Conkling said these efforts would complement the work of a county panel that is developing an affordable housing policy to meet federal funding requirements.

The task force, which met from February to May, will begin meeting again in November, probably to act as a catalyst for many groups concerned about the county's housing problem.

"To me," Conkling said, "there's a need for a countywide group of some sort, perhaps a community development organization, to help gain better leverage for existing resources."

Conkling said the various agencies, developers,

lenders, community groups and others with housing interests could share knowledge and skills.

In the meantime, the task force report suggested other actions that could increase housing for low-wage earners.

One calls for changes in regulations that act as barriers to affordable housing. These include zoning rules that don't permit a mix of houses and apartments in a single development.

The report also suggested creating or attracting for-profit or nonprofit developers of affordable housing to work in the county.

A third suggestion was to emphasize the value of affordable housing near major transportation corridors, such as the planned westside light-rail line and feeder bus lines.

Washington County's relative affluence may be contributing to its housing shortage for lower-income households, Conkling said.

As the population grew by 26 percent, from 246,000 to 312,000 between 1980 and 1990, pressure intensified to develop land designated for housing.

That pressure helped drive up prices, he said.

That's one reason the 9,700 county households with yearly incomes of \$10,000 or less are in tight competition for housing.

Federal agencies figure that one-third of gross income should cover housing and utilities.

Paying more than a third indicates a household doesn't have affordable housing.

With an income of about \$10,000, a household should pay no more than \$264 in monthly rent. However, the 1990 Census shows Washington County had only 2,700 units renting for less than \$300 a month. That indicates most of those 9,700 households are stretched financially.

In fact, data compiled by the Washington County Community Action Organization's housing and energy department show some renters pay as much as 75 percent of their monthly income for rent and utilities.

In addition, the organization reported that requests for housing assistance have skyrocketed 350 percent over the past five years.