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Tracy Corley [00:00:08] Welcome back to Gateway's, a podcast about the people, places and possibilities of our regional cities. I'm Dr. Tracy Corley, transit oriented development fellow at MassINC. This week marks the end of a statewide eviction and foreclosure moratorium that began in April. Although conversation continues on how best to provide safe and affordable housing for all during this current crisis, we're going to talk today about the availability of accessible housing that lasts far beyond the next year to come. The city of Lynn has a history of under delivering on affordable housing for its residents. A 2016 study commissioned by the city showed just one subsidized unit for every four point for low and moderate income households in the city. Today, I'm joined by three people working on this very issue. Jeff Weeden is the planning and development manager at Lynn Housing and Neighborhood Development. Aaron Clausen is the principal planner for the city of Lynn and Isaac Hodes is the director of Lynn United for Change. Welcome to all of you.

Guests [00:01:07] Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Tracy Corley [00:01:09] Yes. Great to see all of you to get started. Let's just kind of talk a little bit about the history of housing in Lynn. Last year, we did a regional forum for transforming a transit oriented development inland. And we actually had a huge protest at our at that because of some concerns around development that was happening in downtown around the TOD area.

Tracy Corley [00:01:31] I'm happy to hear that there's been a tremendous change and now all the partners are working together on a housing development plan. But before we can talk about that in more detail, I want to learn a little bit more just about the history of housing in and kind of what some of the conflict and controversy might have been kind of leading up to this point.

Jeff Weeden [00:01:51] Sure, I can I can start I think it would like a lot of gateway cities in the early 2000s. There was a lot of push for market rate development. A lot of business districts and gateway cities needed market rate to support to support the local economy. And that move was a big push until the recession hit. And I think the recession halted a lot of that. And not only did it halt market rate, but it also showed a need and a problem that affordable housing needed to keep up with that market rate push as well. And I think that's where a lot of a lot of our push came out of was that, yes, we need that market rate. But once we started getting market rate investment, we need to make sure that our residents are taken care of. So I think historically, if you look, you know, prior to the recession and then after the recession, I think it tells a little bit different story. And I think that's kind of where we evolved as a city.

Tracy Corley [00:03:00] Thanks for that, Jeff. Isaac, would you like to weigh in on this kind of coming from someone who's outside of the city?

Isaac Hodes [00:03:06] Sure. I think that the heart of the question is really what's the point of housing and development and what are the different groups involved pushing for? So, you know, for me and for our organization, we should be prioritizing, meeting the housing needs of the people in Lynn who are the heart of our community. I think, you know, of course, we're operating within capitalist real estate system and there are developers and there are investors whose sole and primary goal is to make money. That's fine. That's the way it works right now.

Isaac Hodes [00:03:49] But our concern is that the institutions that are supposed to be serving the public should be prioritizing, meeting the housing needs, the development needs of the people of Lynn.

Isaac Hodes [00:04:03] So, you know, I think this isn't just a Lynn issue all over the country. There's been an issue where there's been this headlong rush to bring in expensive luxury housing. You know, often the euphemism market rate is used.

Isaac Hodes [00:04:17] But, you know, that's what it is, is luxury housing that has horrendous impacts on current residents, has real implications for economic inequality, for racial injustice. And we want to challenge that. We want to say we need to prioritize the needs of our people in our city. And I think and hope that, you know, going into the future, there can be more collaboration with some other segments of the city and some of our public institutions.

Tracy Corley [00:04:47] And that, you know, you make a really great point. I mean, I actually both of you make really great points because there's this need to kind of balance kind of, you know, maintain maintaining the city and have. You know, diverse housing style, diverse uses in a city to generate the kinds of tax revenues and just economic flows so that the city itself can provide services. But at the same time, making sure that the needs of existing residents get met and so you know, of course, a good economic development strategy balances, bringing in new activities and residents supporting existing activities. And residents like, you know, all of that requires a planner. And so that's why you're here, Aaron. And we know that now the city of Lynn, you know, has roughly a hundred thousand inhabitants. But up until you came on board, it had didn't have a city planner. Can you talk a little bit more about, you know, when you came on board? And I would love also to hear from Jeff and Isaac about the impact of now having a planner on what kind of help facilitate this process.

Aaron Clausen [00:05:57] Sure. Thank you. Yeah, I think I understand it's been something like twenty five years since the city has had a principal plan or a planning department. I think when I came out here, there was a lot of need for me to get acclimated to community. Every city is a little bit unique, a little bit different in how it plans, how it situates planning departments within the different organizations, institutions that that operate in the community. For me, it was really important to get a strong understanding of how the city has been planning, because although there hasn't been a planning department, planning functions have been taking place for many years. There's a lot of different organizations like LHAND who has really put a focus on housing planning, housing development, community development planning. EDIC uses the Lynn Economic Development Industrial Corporation really with a focus on economic development has a key role in planning over the years. And then, of course, Lynn Community Development. So there's there's a lot of a lot of activities taking place. So, as I said, you know, my first role really was to understand how those organizations interoperate, interact with each other. Then also thinking how they interact with policymakers, particularly in this case the city council, the mayor's office, and then also the boards and commissions, making sure that all of these different institutions and organizations are collaborating in a way that is effective and strategic and then also comprehensive. Right. So, you know, a planner needs to be thinking about housing, economic development, transportation, land use, environment, open space planning. Now we're getting into things like climate resilience and cultural planning. How are we as a community thinking about all of these things in a broader context? I'm still figuring out how I can be, you know, a contributor and be the one that can kind of facilitate that collaborative collaboration among the institutions. And then

there's also, I think, a deep need to ratchet up the amount of transparency in policy development and engagement. I think there's you know, there's been effort, a lot of really good efforts to engage the public in the planning processes. But I think, you know, planners are always looking for ways to improve upon our work in engaging the public and making sure it's equitably, equitably implemented. But I think also in Lynn, that's really important is the back. So when a plan gets developed and there's implementation, we're carrying out those actions in the community that there's communication to those people who participate in the process or may not have and who want to know what's going on.

Tracy Corley [00:08:36] Excellent. You know, I was actually in Lynn, one of the very first conversations I had, it was with you, Jeff, where you showed like some of the work that had been done by the former Transformative Development Initiative fellow who was there thanks to Mass Development. Can you talk a little bit more about kind of some of, you know, the coordination that was happening before Aaron came on board and the and the value that the TDI fellow brought to the city of Lynn?

Jeff Weeden [00:09:03] Sure, sure. Like Aaron said, the strategy for planning in the city fell on Community Development, EDIC and the housing authority. And we each had our own silo. We had-- obviously anything that touched housing is something that we would approach and we would we would look at strategically. Our plan would be to have a market study that would show recommendations and we would take that and we would approach it neighborhood by neighborhood. So without a city planner, we we just took it piece by piece and it was really no cohesive look at it citywide. And it was hard to make things fit. There was a lot of times where whether you development or housing authority, you do a plan, we would do a grant. And whatever the results of that plan was, sometimes it was shelved because it was hard to make it fit with the city vision, with other things going on. A lot of times, you know, some of those plans didn't get implemented. I think now having some cohesion and having more of a citywide approach, I think we'll take a lot of those efforts and really move the ball into a place where where we want to go. So I think that's certainly important. And then in terms of the TDI fellow, we, the housing authority especially prides ourself-- anything gateway cities we want to be on the forefront for. So we, you know, any any grants, any research. You know, we love working with MassINC and Mass Development. So anything of that nature we're all in. And I think the TDI, we were the first one of the first three groups and one first three to have a fellow named Joe Mulligan was great. He brought a lot of focus in the downtown. I think when you were in the downtown, Tracy, we looked at the murals that Beyond Walls did, and I thought that brought a lot of attention to the downtown is something that that we needed another asset, another another cultural piece.

Tracy Corley [00:11:05] I want to come back to a point that Aaron had talked about a little bit earlier about being more transparent and engaging the community a little bit more, because, as you know, we recently published a report around how to improve equity in transit oriented development, focusing and on what we call joint local planning that is more community centric, if not community led. I would like to hear from Isaac just a little bit more about some of this, what the specific needs have been and currently are for Lynn residents. And then I think from there we can actually broaden the conversation a little bit more to talk a little bit about the municipal engagement initiative that CHAPA is leading currently in the city of Lynn. Isaac, do you mind kind of talking a little bit more about some of the specific needs for housing in Lynn?

Isaac Hodes [00:11:53] Sure. Actually, before that, if it's OK, just to add to the context a little bit, because I think, you know, it's it's really important. Like I said before, we're, you

know, we're very open to working with the different public institutions and we hope that can happen.

Isaac Hodes [00:12:10] But I do think listeners need to know the context and why there's so much skepticism from a lot of people in the community. So if you look at what the development efforts have brought to Lynn so far, when we look around our city and see where the cranes are and where the construction is, you know, there are three big projects that kind of exemplify what's going on. So there's one that's in the middle of downtown. It's a 10 story luxury tower. You know, I sometimes call it Lynn's Trump Tower. I mean, it's got enormously expensive apartments in the middle of the low and moderate income area. It's got space for an indoor golf simulator, whatever that is, but not space for even one single affordable apartment. It's, you know, being built with a really problematic contractor where a worker was almost killed by unsafe working conditions. It's built on top of what used to be a community garden where a youth program had a space, and it's blocking off one of these beautiful murals that got put in. And the developer who is putting this thing up, you know, talks with absolute disdain about working class communities like Lynn. If you read between the lines of what he says and there's a lot of fear that beyond the immediate impacts, the indirect impact of that project is going to boost rents in the area dramatically and displace people who already live there. That's one of the projects. One of the other ones on the Lynnway is literally a gated community, again, with zero affordable housing. There's going to be retail inside. And only people who live in this expensive area will be able to even access those stores. And then the third project's also on the waterfront includes, once again, no affordable housing at all. The developers at all of these are openly talking about targeting this housing only at people who are from outside the city and really using coded language, which, you know, some players within the city have as well about attracting people with disposable income. And that being the target demographic, you know, that's really problematic and has seriously racist undertones. So that's what we're looking at. When we see what developments brought so far. So that's why there's so much concern and skepticism among a lot of people in the community in real desire to see a really sharp change in how development proceeds. If you contrast all that with the current situation in Lynn, we have an enormous gap between the housing needs of people in Lynn and what's out there in you know, if you look at the numbers, I think a majority of Lynn residents are burdened by unaffordable housing costs, including a majority of renters and a really large number of homeowners as well. You know, we've got tremendous issues with overcrowding because people just can't afford rent on their own. We've got major issues with substandard conditions and health issues. So there's there's a huge need. And, you know, the people who are really struggling are the people who are the heart of Lynn, who are, you know, have really, you know, bring this city its life, its economic and cultural activity. The frontline workers who have kept us going through this pandemic. Those are the groups who are struggling with completely unaffordable rents in terrible conditions. And we we really need to prioritize them. And we're hopeful that we can see a change. But, you know, the current picture is pretty bleak and it really has excluded a lot of people.

Tracy Corley [00:16:09] So let's let's back up and let's talk about that a little bit more. The conditions of the housing, I mean, we've been trying to find very specific data here at MassINC around these issues, but there is no standardized way of kind of tracking housing quality in Massachusetts, which is a huge concern. All we know about the overcrowding problems and we've actually talked about that as well as other research institutions have talked about issues around crowding, not density, it's actually crowding, uh, not cities themselves that are kind of causing some of the spread that we're seeing right now with COVID 19. But that then also brings us back to core kind of quality of life

issues that I know people who have been living in a one bedroom apartment with two small children. How do you deal with all of these concerns, plus the fears of gentrification, the fears that for, you know, working class families, for seniors, for families with children-- what happens when their housing costs go up because of all of this new development that's coming in? Well, Aaron or Jeff would one of you like to kind of comment on that and some of the ways in which you're thinking about addressing this?

Aaron Clausen [00:17:19] Yeah, I think I mean, one thing I would just mention before I left, one of the ways to address it. And I think the city in partnership with the LHAND has started this housing Lynn planning process, creating housing production plan to help address many of the issues that both Isaac and Tracy both mentioned. But I think that one thing I just would point out, as you pointed this out, is that, you know, the city of Lynn is very much in the region, that the housing market is a regional issue. Housing cost is a regional issue. And that one particular project, the project, isn't necessarily the only contributor to housing. Housing costs, you know, whether it's rental or home ownership. And, you know, being in a regional market that it's so hot as it is, we could we could be in an unfortunate situation where we're not seeing that private investment. We're not seeing the production of new housing, but we're still seeing rents rising because we're in the Boston metro region. So I think it's important to keep that in mind as we think about housing policy and making sure that, you know, we're part of the solution with our regional partners, creating more housing, increasing supply, but then also thinking of how can we do that in a balanced manner so that we're not just bringing in market housing, but also proactively and aggressively bringing in affordable housing, affordable housing that's across a range of income levels from very low income to medium income to workforce housing. And then also the different housing typologies to address some issues that you talked about Dr. Corley, whereby you're providing housing for different household types, you know, families, families with children, you know, single individual households. So it's important to really think again comprehensively about how we address those issues that we've been talking about. And, you know, I think that the housing Lynn process just coming in about halfway through, maybe two thirds way through the process, I think it's made a real effort, trying to rebuild that trust that I think maybe broken or there's challenges around in the community and the city and its institutions. I think there's a real effort here to engage, give a voice to that plan. And then, as I said earlier, you know, that really once we're on the back end of this, implementing that plan so that we are addressing all the housing needs as best we can as a single community. The fact of the matter is it's going to take the city, it's going to take the state, and it's going to take the federal government, frankly, to address our housing issues. It's not just the city of Lynn. It's the region. It's the state. And it's the country.

Isaac Hodes [00:20:01] Can I just agree with Aaron on one piece of what he just said and maybe respectfully offer a different perspective on another?

Isaac Hodes [00:20:09] But I absolutely agree. You know, this is not just an issue for Lynn. This is a nationwide--this is a worldwide issue, really. And we do need intervention at all those levels. And I also agree, you know, rent is absolutely insane everywhere. And it's not a question of, you know, just one individual projects creating the entire problem. However, I would say that, you know, we all know that housing and real estate is a very segmented market. It's really a series of different markets.

Isaac Hodes [00:20:40] So the concern specifically about some of these luxury projects is, you know, number one, that they should really be including, you know, something affordable so they don't perpetuate segregation within these buildings. This little sort of

enclaves. But number two, I really do think based on the experience of, you know, lots of other cities in neighborhoods, that there is a dynamic where when you start to get certain types of luxury housing coming into a neighborhood that's lower income, it can shift, you know, what the market is for that neighborhood and lead to sort of rapid gentrification and displacement. So, you know, yes, there absolutely is a bigger issue. But I do think that, you know, if you look at anywhere from East Boston to some parts of, you know, the Bay Area, when you get these these luxury developments coming in, along with accompanying often cultural efforts, they sort of serve as a signal and a way to bring a different set of people into the neighborhood at the expense of people who are there. So, you know, when we hear talk about bringing more foot traffic and safety and, you know, cultural events, I mean, these are often sort of coded ways of talking about making an area seem more appealing to a market for people who have higher incomes and generally to a wider set of potential clients. That's just the reality. And I think that's potentially a big impact of that luxury tower in downtown Lynn, is that it goes from a neighborhood that's not appealing, where real estate agents are trying to bring people in who who tend to be white, who tend to be higher income to one where they are. And that's going to really push rents from, you know, from awful to just astronomical. And I think we really need to be careful about that and we really need to worry about that, that kind of secondary effect as well.

Tracy Corley [00:22:38] You know, there are a lot of really great points and kind of, you know, this entire conversation. I mean, I wish we had like a couple of hours to really hash through all these points. But, you know, one of the ones that kind of brought up was around kind of these enclaves and segregation. As people who are interested in promoting and advancing equitable development, how do we make sure that from a city perspective, from an agency perspective, from a community perspective, we are promoting mixed use, mixed income, mixed class developments that do not perpetuate or introduce segregation into our cities?

Aaron Clausen [00:23:18] Go ahead, Jeff.

Aaron Clausen [00:23:19] I'll follow up on you.

Jeff Weeden [00:23:22] Thanks, Aaron. I was just gonna say, I think that's why the city responded with a lot of these new developments coming. The city responded with going forward, with the housing production plan, with MAPC called Housing Lynn. So I think the efforts of bringing the public input and bringing all that together. The city was also the ones that applied and brought in the CHAPA Municipal Engagement Initiative as well. We thought it was a good complement to go along with our production plan. And the goal was to bring everyone under the same tent and to do coalition building and try to hear from everybody. So I think with CHAPA and the housing production plan, I think the city's making a concerted effort to respond to the concerns that Isaac brought up. They are real concerns. And for a long time, the city was stagnant with development and those weren't on the city's priority list in now with development coming. I think there's a lot of a lot of concern.

Aaron Clausen [00:24:31] And if I could just follow up on that, I think the one instance you mentioned Dr. Corley, about different levels of amenities afforded to different incomes in a single project is very problematic. That that goes against all fair housing requirements. I think in an instance like that, it's just a matter it's a matter of enforcing and overseeing our projects to ensure that doesn't happen. It should not happen.

Aaron Clausen [00:24:58] I think, you know, Jeff is right. You know, to address these issues about segregation and gentrification,

Aaron Clausen [00:25:07] We need a housing policy that that really goes at it in many different levels. And the housing plan really tries to achieve that. I think in in the form of a voice to the community to help developing the policies and priorities. You know, there's things like inclusionary housing which I think we're essentially talking around for market housing, requiring certain number of units as part of these projects be made affordable. You know, at least at a moderate income level. But I think it's not enough. You know, I think you recognize that there's a deeper need in the city of Lynn. We need to go beyond inclusionary housing. We need to think about, how do we create truly affordable housing at the low and very low levels in making sure that we're we're placing that throughout the city, not just in concentrating in one area of town. And then we're looking at, what other kind of programs that we can bring into this mix to help build equity in low income households. So first time homebuyer programs, which I know LHAND facilitates a way to do that and help people get equity and property. So there's a number of tools that we can put together. The question is, how can we do that most effectively in the context of Lynn? And I think that's the effort that we're trying to carry out in the housing plan process and identify what are the priorities that the community can help carry out together. You know, the issues we're all talking about.

Isaac Hodes [00:26:44] I mean, I, I think in terms of what we need to do, you know, we need inclusionary zoning yesterday as one step.

Isaac Hodes [00:26:52] That's not sufficient on its own, but could help.

Isaac Hodes [00:26:56] You know, we're looking for a standard of something like 20 percent of units and large new developments should be affordable to people in Lynn based on income levels in Lynn. I think we need an equity and racial justice standard for development roughly along the lines of what's being discussed in Boston now. And that may be a step. But like Aaron said, I absolutely agree. Neither of those things alone are going to do it. We need a really holistic approach.

Isaac Hodes [00:27:26] And, you know, and I think we've seen how this movie kind of ends in general, this this wave of development. If you look at East Boston nearby, if you look at lots of places across the country, the typical development priorities and path of development will lead to, you know, lots of profits for a small number developers and will lead to a lot of problems and suffering and displacement for people who make our city what it what it is. And, you know, my hope is that we can sort of pivot and say we're going to try to find a different path in Lynn. We're going to envision something better and we're going to actually prioritize the needs of people.

Isaac Hodes [00:28:10] And I think there's an underlying question of political power and economic interests, right, and our question is, will public officials and public institutions be willing to really side with the people of the city and our needs over the needs of the real estate industry? And there are times when those two things will coincide and we can find a common ground. But there are times when there really is going to be a choice about what to prioritize. Is it people's need for housing? Is it equity? Is it racial justice? Or is it developer profits? There's gonna be a real battle around that. And we hope that we can partner with our public institutions to put people first. And there really are better paths we can find than the way we've seen development play out in lots of other cities. And we need to be a little bit, I think, visionary. I mean, look at even a place like Vienna, right. It's far

away. But that doesn't mean its economy is totally different. And, you know, last century, there was a real political decision to make a serious investment in quality housing for working class and lower income people there. And they have these amazing cooperatives that to this day have an enormous impact on the ability of working people to have high quality housing that stable and affordable. So can we replicate that exactly? No, but there are alternative paths, and it would be great to be able to partner with people like Aaron and with Jeff and LHAND on trying to find that kind of path forward for Lynn.

Tracy Corley [00:29:50] Let me let me confirm this. Is it currently, Lynn's mandate to have 10 percent affordable housing? And is that enough? And I also want to ask, you know, just about the definition of affordable housing.

Aaron Clausen [00:30:06] I think as far as far as you question about the mandated 10 percent housing is affordable, under 40 B is absolutely yes. And I think to your second part of the question, that's not enough. I mean, I think it has to do with the definition of affordability. So, you know, basically what that means under 40B and this is oftentimes that the driving metric of housing production is just kind of the nature of where the plan comes from. And the driving metric is, affordable means that it's it's a housing unit that is affordably restricted for a time period at 80 percent the area median income minus the Boston metro region, which the city of Lynn is a part of. And because, you know, throughout the region are a variety of household incomes in different unities. That applies differ greatly. And maybe not so effectively in certain communities like Lynn and Lynn is in a very similar situation that you just described in Boston.

Tracy Corley [00:31:12] And let me just interject that the median household income in land is a little over fifty four thousand dollars a year.

Aaron Clausen [00:31:19] That's right. Right. And it's far lower than what the Boston median income is, which is closer to, as you said, a hundred thousand dollars plus. So that affects what, you know, who can be eligible for affordable units, what it's considered affordable under 40 B. So I think that's why, you know, when I said it, you know, it's not enough to be providing, you know, 10 percent affordable density community because it's probably not meeting. It's not necessarily reaching all the households need it. Or is it enough in terms of quantity? And I think that's again, why the impact to the housing lin plan, it's really trying to frame the need around that 54,000 area median income for the city. It's not looking at the region. And I think that's why a lot of the recommendations that are kind of falling out of that list of goals and objectives and conditions as we have them now are thinking more comprehensively, and thinking about how they are applied to this.

Tracy Corley [00:32:18] And I'm going to push on Isaac's 20 percent metric and say, you know, if we're using Boston area incomes to determine what is affordable, but Lynn median household incomes are half that of what they are in Boston. Then at least half of all housing that's created and land should be affordable, subsidized affordable. So that's not including naturally affordable. So which is the housing that is not subsidized but actually matches up with where people's income levels are?

Isaac Hodes [00:32:53] Absolutely agree.

Isaac Hodes [00:32:54] Just just to be clear that, well, what we were sort of proposing is that as one piece of the puzzle would be an inclusionary zoning policy that would require 20 percent of new projects of the units within a given new project would be affordable to Lynn residents at, you know, Lynn area incomes, not the broader incomes, but absolutely

agree that, you know, it's the solution has to be way beyond that for the city as a whole. And I really appreciate, Aaron, breaking down the disconnect between the measures that we often hear reference for affordability with the economic realities. And it's really important. And I'm glad you brought that forward.

Tracy Corley [00:33:42] And I also want to thank LHAND and Jeff for kind of sparking the creation of a number of affordable housing developments in Lynn.

Tracy Corley [00:33:51] It's just that the city can't create them fast enough. And we also know that there are things that we need to do to stabilize our existing neighborhoods, to improve the quality and condition of the existing housing stock that's out there. So there's so much more to talk about here. But unfortunately, we are out of time. We hope that you can all join us again. I want to say thank you to Jeff Weeden, Aaron Clausen and Isaac Hodes. I really appreciate the conversation today. And we look forward to hearing more about the success of the housing Lynn program and what you guys come up with to address some of the issues we talked about here today. Thank you so much. That's it for this week's episode of Gateways. I'm Dr. Tracy Corley.

[00:34:34] And I'm Ben Forman. Gateways is produced by Libby Gormley. Music by Worcester's own The Curtis Mayflower. Thanks to our sponsors, BlueCross BlueShield of Massachusetts, Eastern Bank, Enterprise Bank and the Barr Foundation. Thank you all for listening. We'll see you next time.