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3-1-2023

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### Recommended Citation

Bunker, Leila, "2023-03-01 Social Housing Bill I-135 Promises Affordable Housing For Seattleites" (2023).  
*The Spectator Online*. 915.  
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/915>

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The Spectator • March 1, 2023 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2023/03/01/social-housing-bill-i-135-promises-affordable-housing-for-seattleites/>

# Social Housing Bill I-135 Promises Affordable Housing For Seattleites

Leila Bunker, News Editor

As Seattle University students know, Seattle's cost of living is more expensive than other cities. At about 50 percent higher than the average of 265 cities surveyed in the 2022 annual report, it was ranked the eighth most expensive city to live in the U.S.. Given that Seattle is a massive tech hub, many high-paying jobs are generated through Microsoft and Amazon, which are both based in the area. With so much money circulating in the city and hundreds of thousands of people to accommodate, housing costs are unrealistically high for low income and middle class families.



Natalie Schorr

Initiative 135 ( I-135) appeared on the Feb. 14. ballot and the local voters pamphlet. The bill is concerned with developing and maintaining social housing in Seattle to tackle the ongoing housing and affordability crisis. Publicly funded housing projects have had a level of stigma attached to them in the U.S., though social housing has proved to be effective in other cities such as Vienna, Austria where 60% percent of citizens live in subsidized housing.

Bill Loewen, an associate teaching professor of macro social work at Seattle U, is in support of I-135 and hopes for Seattleites to have a new perspective on housing.

“I think 135 has opened a door to a new paradigm that invites society to look at housing as a right, not a privilege,” Loewen said. “We need to have a housing authority that keeps housing stock and expands housing stock while providing housing for lots and lots of people. That won't happen under the single-family dwelling and private ownership model.”

Social housing is a model that is publicly financed and available to everyone including those with low incomes and those with moderate-to-high incomes. Rather than aiming to extract profit, its aim is to house cross-class communities. Rent is determined by an individual's monthly income instead of the housing market, and I-135 outlines that no more than 30% of a renter's monthly income would be their allotted housing payment. Initial grant funding will be secured by issuing bonds that will eventually be paid off by residents. This program will allow funds to go towards buying and building more housing as the project develops.

To reduce growing economic gaps between the tech industry and Seattleites, a payroll tax called JumpStart poses a solution. Passed in 2020, JumpStart is a progressive income tax paid for by the employer rather than the employee to bring in revenue from high-earning companies. Suresh Chanmug, a volunteer for Tech4Housing, expressed his support for JumpStart and the possibility of putting this money towards future social housing projects.

"Amazon and the tech industry have spent a lot of money in each election cycle trying to preserve the regressive tax system, but one of the biggest things that we can do now that the city council has found a solution is JumpStart. It is an excellent opportunity to say to the tech industry that 'it's time to pay your share of the taxes,'" Chanmug said. "I don't think anyone in the tech industry sets out to cause displacement and gentrification, but when we have wage inequality and artificial constraints on building houses this results in rapidly increasing housing costs. Everyone understands that we have a role in solving this problem."

The tech industry is uniquely positioned to help the housing crisis, but for a long time has remained quiet about the issue. Tech4Housing wishes to change that by playing a constructive role and proposing solutions that will benefit Seattle residents. Though the city can benefit immensely from the wealth generated by the tech industry, advocates note policy reform is necessary first.

One such advocate is Camilla Walter, the executive director for Real Change, is passionate about having affordable housing and emphasized how essential it is for everyone to work together.

"I think we need to take a step back and recognize that we are all humans. We're all neighbors. We all share this one city of Seattle. When we are able to thrive, we pull each other up and the whole city flourishes," Walter said. "One of the exciting things about 135 is seeing that 14-point win. We know that we need to house each other. We need to think creatively and think outside of the box because we can't let this problem get any worse."

The next step for I-135 is the formation of a board that would begin working towards securing funding. Although the housing crisis won't be solved overnight, Seattle is potentially making big steps towards making housing more affordable for the general population. Those in support of the initiative feel as though their voices are being heard and are excited about how impactful this bill could be for the city's future.