

# Partnering to Envision Federal Workforce Housing

## The Ask

AIA Colorado architect volunteers and staff would like to offer members of the Colorado Congressional delegation a housing symposium. Learning from precedents already established, joining with recently passed state initiatives, and inviting organizations working in this arena, we could **convene and co-promote a visioning session with federal agencies experiencing workforce shortfalls.** The focus of efforts would center on properties within the control and purview of the federal government and not hypothetical sites. The Federal Workforce Housing Charrette would be the first of a series of steps that could lead to a reimagined federal property inventory which other government entities or large private property holders could emulate. **AIA Colorado stands ready to help coordinate this effort with your participation and support.**

## Background

The people who make our communities livable cannot afford to live in our communities. Not only do their lives become more difficult because of longer commutes, greater barriers to raising and supporting families and poorer health outcomes, public and private services suffer with inability to recruit and retain staff, maintain routine business operations and devoting an outsized share of budgets to the downstream effects of high housing cost.

Communities on the western slope of Colorado have a history of facing the challenge of adequate workforce housing. But what used to be more common for the seasonal recreation and hospitality population who serve tourists and visitors has (since the shift to remote work during and after the pandemic) become an acute crisis affecting many more employees and employers. Salaries have no hope of keeping up with housing cost for teachers, postal workers, firefighters, police officers, health care workers—the very people who provide critical services to residents.

There is no practical way for the housing industry to meet these needs. Land, labor and material prices are at historic highs. Interest rates keep all but cash buyers out of the market. Design and construction employers struggle to fill vacancies even though they have strong backorders of future projects. What work they are doing is driven by demand for luxury housing. Government regulations like zoning and growth caps ensure only a select few high-end homes are ever built. And well-meaning neighbors who want to maintain a lifestyle with access to amenities and natural features that drew them there in the first place rarely support proposals to build more housing on undeveloped land nearby.

Meeting housing needs at attainable price points takes an “all hands on deck approach.” Local governments, school districts and large community employers like hospital systems have done the best they can to fill a gap for their own workers, but housing development was never envisioned as a core function for them.

## Opportunities

The federal government has been largely absent from this discussion other than fielding complaints about reduced services. But that need not be the case. Federal agencies have a very big footprint and a great deal of expertise.

- The United States Postal Service owns 182 buildings comprising 8.35 million square feet of real estate.
- The General Services Administration owns 89 federal buildings totaling 6.79 million square feet and it leases approximately 4.08 million RSF in 157 buildings for a total of 10.877 million square feet.
- 36.2% of Colorado land is owned by the federal government (24.1 million of 66.5 million acres) Land owned by agency: Forest Service (60.1%), Bureau of Land Management (34.7%), National Park Service (2.8%), Department of Defense (1.7%), Fish and Wildlife Service (0.7%)

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## Precedents

The Roaring Fork Fire Rescue Authority had a 1960s-era fire station in Snowmass Village that was ill-suited to modern fire-fighting requirements. With the average salary for a Colorado Firefighter under \$30 per hour, recruiting in a wildfire zone with some of the highest housing costs in the country is a tough sell. With 94% of buildable land already developed, there were few options to put a new station on a new site. They reused the existing parcel and created 8 apartment units for employees.

The City of Chicago faced two needs: obsolete or absent community centers in neighborhoods experiencing population growth through greater density of market-rate housing developments and the displacement of longtime residents who were being forced from their homes through high costs of housing (through lack of ability to maintain older housing stock or rents, taxes, price points exceeding available income). Rather than try to tackle these two seemingly unrelated issues separately, they connected them through the development process to provide community services at street level through local library branches and affordable housing on the upper levels. One parcel, a single designer and construction team, a coordinated procurement and two project types desperately needed.

The Office of Colorado State Architect developed an inventory of nondeveloped state-owned land at the direction of legislation passed in 2019. That was followed in 2021 by legislation which called for a database of unused state-owned buildings. In 2023, a third bill passed urging public private collaboration on affordable housing development with seed money to get projects underway.

Just this week, grants from Ballot Proposition 123 were announced to organizations pledging to build affordable housing. The first round of funds targeted acquiring and preserving land for development. Letters of intent came from 113 projects totaling \$255 million. But even with a statewide funding source, only 10% of the requests were fulfilled.

## More Information

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