



## Steph Sorensen: If housing is a right, City Council should act like it

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On Oct. 5, Pittsburgh City Council unanimously approved a resolution declaring housing a human right in our city.

However, three related bills that purportedly address Pittsburgh's housing crisis were also recently debated but ultimately delayed. Two of these are toothless: One would require developers to document the impact their projects might have on affordable housing, and the other calls for recommendations on strategies to meet the city's affordable housing needs by 2041.

Documentation does not house the houseless, and a 20-year timeframe to meet a need so vital that our representatives have declared it a human right sounds more like a cynical joke than change-making policy. And even that couldn't pass.

The third bill, also tabled, would afford council the ability to designate certain projects as being “of community concern.” But rather than empowering the community to weigh in on development proposals, the bill instead fast-tracks the approval process and reduces time for public input and oversight by the planning commission.

This seems rife for abuse, especially because council members consistently accept campaign donations from the same landlords, developers and real estate interests whose unchecked and unelected influence over our city has contributed to the housing crisis we face today. How can we expect our representatives to stand up to these wealthy and powerful interests when they are the same figures writing their campaign checks? We can’t, and we shouldn’t.

Human rights are inherent, undeniable and universal. If housing is, indeed, a human right — and we know that it is certainly a necessity for humans to live — then this right is currently being violated for thousands in our city. Every new development that is not free and guaranteed housing for those currently without, or truly affordable housing for those with the ability to pay, is infringing on human rights.

A City Council that sincerely upholds the value of housing as a right could make an incredible difference in the lives of the unhoused, those living in unsuitable or unsafe housing, and the many thousands at risk of losing their homes. Council members armed with the courage of their convictions and unbound by the financial shackles of real estate interests should intervene in all new development projects in their districts that do not directly address (and therefore actively violate) the right to housing for all. Sadly, we have no such council member at present. But the next election is less than a week away.

The only member of City Council facing a challenger in the Nov. 2 election is Anthony Coghill, for District 4, and his campaign website does not mention affordable housing at all. Meanwhile, from the recent reports about the shameful condition of city public housing properties, we know that at least 42 of these crumbling so-called homes are located within District 4, which is in South Pittsburgh.

In contrast, Councilman Coghill’s opponent, Connor Mulvaney, has

pledged to make housing a priority and to refuse donations from developers or real estate interests. Mr. Mulvaney supports expanding emergency rent relief programs, rent control, eliminating tax incentives for for-profit developers, legislation to require proof of “just cause” for evictions, massively investing in repairing and creating new public housing, and expanding tenants’ rights. Each of these initiatives will empower working-class people to defend and demand our human right to safe, decent, guaranteed housing.

Although empty in practice, Pittsburgh’s declaration of housing as a human right is still heartening as a marker of progress toward our broadly held goals of equality, respect and dignity for all people. Recognizing the basic needs and humanity of others is never wrong. But without urgent action to address and meet these human needs, such a declaration serves only as a condemnation of the status quo, where real estate development decisions are made according to profitability for the moneyed few, rather than the human rights of all. The working class may not have the connections or wealth to donate and gain influence. But we have our voices, and we have our votes.

Our City Council has declared housing a human right. Let’s hold them to it.

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