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Washington Realtors raise \$2 million to make housing opportunities a priority for Legislature, governor

OLYMPIA – The Washington Realtors have raised \$2 million to fund the organization's outreach and advocacy efforts. The Washington Realtors, the state's largest public policy advocacy group, voted last fall to assess members \$100 each.

"We'll use these funds to enhance the economic vitality and quality of life in Washington communities," said Steve Francks, Chief Executive Officer of the Washington Realtors. "We're putting our money where our priorities are — on policies that support home ownership in Washington."

Francks added that a good example of how the funds could be used is to advocate for legislative passage of a "Housing Opportunities Agenda" in the 2007 legislative session. On May 8, the Washington Realtors formally requested that the Speaker of the House Frank Chopp, Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, and Governor Chris Gregoire appoint a bi-partisan work group that would create such an agenda. The agenda would include legislative strategies that help middle-wage workers afford a home near their workplace, reduce pressure on transportation and water systems, and ensure cities and counties are prepared for the population growth state demographers predict for the next decade, about 1 percent per year.

"There are just too few homes to meet demand, and that's pushing prices to unbelievable levels. People drive further and further from communities where they work to find an affordable home, and that creates problems for the quality of our roads, our air, and our quality of life in general," said Francks. "Policy-makers' inaction has allowed home prices to skyrocket out of the reach of middle-wage families."

Across the state, home prices increased by an average of 19 percent last year. Many counties, however, experienced even more dramatic increases in home prices last year: Clark County, 26.8 percent; King County, 17.8 percent; Pierce County, 21.4 percent; Spokane County, 21.5 percent; and Thurston County, 29.2 percent.

Francks said cities and counties have dramatically under-estimated the demand for residential homes required by the state's Growth Management Act, and the Legislature has not stepped forward to enforce the law. "Ignoring growth doesn't prevent it, anymore than ignoring traffic will make it go away," said Francks. "By not addressing the challenges that population growth brings, legislators are consigning Washington residents to sprawl, leap-frog development, more traffic congestion, and higher property taxes. As the home crunch worsens, it will be more and more difficult for policymakers to ignore the state's home ownership crisis."

Francks said the Washington Realtors hope to work with the governor and legislative leaders to pass several bills that will boost the supply of homes that middle class families can afford. Some home-supply policies may include:

- Requiring Growth Management Plans result in no net loss of housing opportunities.
- Requiring that Growth Management plans balance projected job growth with housing supply, to ensure employees can live in communities where they work.
- Ensuring communities increase affordable housing opportunities through strategies that could include lot-size averaging and attached/detached accessory dwelling units.
- Establishing performance measures for Growth Management plans, to measure whether the plans actually accommodate growth and to verify that municipalities are adjusting plans to accommodate growth.
- Making the funding of critical infrastructure projects a priority in state and local budgeting.

"I'm very proud of the way Realtors have stepped forward to provide this kind of support for Washington home owners," said Francks. "Now that we've hit this milestone, we're ready to redouble our efforts to boost the supply of homes in our state. That will help create housing that middle-income families can afford."

Last fall, Washington Realtors funded a media and public-policy campaign to stop the proposed tax on homes, which home owners would have paid when they sell their homes. The proposed tax increase on homes, overwhelmingly opposed by home owners, would have increased the local tax by 130 percent, even though the tax is already among the highest of its kind in the nation.

The Washington Realtors' political action committee, RPAC, has \$1 million on hand now. RPAC supports Democrats and Republicans who advocate for policies that help build strong communities in our state and improve residents' quality of life.

The Washington Realtors represents about 170,000 homebuyers each year and the interests of more than 2 million homeowners throughout the state. The largest professional organization in the state, the membership of the Washington Realtors' numbers about 24,000 statewide.

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