

# New approach to affordable housing in Missoula could be a model for the rest of the state

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*Peyton Butler/UM School Of Journalism*

A house on Wolf Avenue in Missoula, MT. The property is part of a community land trust aimed at preserving affordable housing.

On the north side of Missoula, there are three buildings not far from the railyard on Wolf Avenue. They're rental properties on the radar of several organizations in town.

"We call the folks who live here the Wolfies, and this is the Wolf Avenue property," said Kaia Peterson, director of NeighborWorks Montana. NeighborWorks Montana is the state branch of a national nonprofit that helps people find creative ways to afford homes.

Peterson has been working with the Wolf Avenue residents for more than a year now. She got involved after a friend of hers who lives in the neighborhood contacted her.

"We found out from the neighbor that the property was going for sale, and she freaked out and said 'Oh my gosh, my neighbors are all going to get displaced' because it is the type of property that you could really envision an investor coming in and buying and turning into condos or turning into high-end rental units," Peterson said.

The property is made up of three buildings and eight rental units.

“These apartments are really serving folks with lower incomes – a lot of working people in the community, a lot of single folks – and their rents are below \$600 a month in most cases, which is really rare for Missoula at this point,” Peterson said.

NeighborWorks Montana partnered with the North Missoula Community Development Corporation (NMCDC) to try something brand new in the state to preserve the housing for renters: they’re establishing the property as a community land trust.

“The thing that community land trusts do is we retain ownership of the land and the homeowners just purchase the home on top of the land,” said NMCDC land stewardship manager Brittany Palmer. “The value of the land is separated from the value of the home, and that’s what keeps them permanently affordable.”

The plan combines a community land trust with a housing cooperative. The land is held in a trust secured by NMCDC, while the housing cooperative establishes a path for the renters to pool money and collectively buy their buildings. Co-ops are pretty common in big cities, but not in Montana. If the plan were to succeed, “it would be the first of its kind in the state and it allows tenants to kind of be their own landlord,” Palmer said.

Bob Oaks, NMCDC’s executive director, knows the history of this neighborhood. He’s lived on Missoula’s Northside for almost 25 years. He says one of the buildings on Wolf Avenue, a two-story stucco, has a unique past. “Originally this building was a taxidermy studio,” Oaks said. It’s also on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Wolf Avenue building is one of the oldest in Missoula and was built in the late 19th century, Oaks said. It was another plus for his group to get involved on Wolf Avenue, as he hopes this new housing model can help preserve more historic homes in the area.

“They’re not the houses of the rich and famous, but they’re the homes of the people that built Missoula,” Oaks said.

Josh Watling is a cook at Brasserie Porte Rouge, a popular, new restaurant in downtown Missoula. He’s one of the tenants on Wolf Avenue and has been living there for eight years now. He lived in Los Angeles before moving here, and says he enjoys living in a smaller city.

“It’s nice,” Watling said. “It’s a lot less busy and, I don’t know, has a bit more of a sense of community.”

Watling said it was clear that he and the other tenants were at risk of being kicked out if a real estate developer bought the property. From 2010 to 2020, the median rental cost in Missoula increased by about 9%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Watling said that if the Wolf Avenue building had been purchased by real estate developers, “rents would have gone up” and he “probably would’ve been asked to move out.” A co-op wasn’t an option Watling and his neighbors would have come up with on their own.

“Hopefully it'll spark more of these kinds of things around Missoula, and more people will get interested in the process and hopefully start more cooperatives,” Watling said.

The residents and the nonprofits working with them believe that this property is just the beginning of what affordable housing could look like in Missoula, along with potentially other cities and towns in Montana.

“We'd really love to move this forward because we want to see how this works,” Peterson said. “We see a lot of potential for it to be used in other properties, so if we can figure out how to do it here and we can figure that out relatively quickly, I think there's an opportunity to replicate that.” Final funding for the project is expected in July of this year.

*This story comes from a reporting partnership between the [University of Montana School of Journalism](#) and Montana Public Radio.*