



Unedited Transcript

Mpact Podcast Episode 67 Building Statewide Wins for Housing and Climate With Alex Brennan

Executive Director, Futurewise

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Tamar Shapiro (0s): Welcome to the Mpact Podcast. This is Tamar Shapiro, CEO of Mpact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. We are excited to have recently announced both our new name and tagline, Mpact: Mobility Community, Possibility. We're a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how to leverage transit to make communities better for people.

Jeff Wood (44s): Hey there. I'm Jeff Wood, principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. Today on the Mpact Podcast, we're chatting with Alex Brennan, Executive Director of Futurewise in Washington State. We chat about the most recent legislative session and bills on missing middle housing, climate change, and TOD. Stay with us. Awesome. Well, Alex Brennan, welcome to the podcast.

Alex Brennan (1m 15s): Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Jeff Wood (1m 17s): Well, we're glad you're here. Before we get started, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Alex Brennan (1m 21s): So, I'm the Executive Director at Futurewise. We're a statewide advocacy group in Washington state that is focused on land use and planning policy. And in particular, we work at the intersection between the issues of housing, transportation, food systems, and habitat conservation. We were founded in 1990 with a passage of a statewide growth management act framework for how growth should happen in the state. So that's sort of our, the organizational background.

And then I, my personal background, I'm a planner by training, born and raised in Seattle, and I've been in this role for three years and some change. So just before the pandemic started.

Jeff Wood (2m 3s): Oh, what a, what an auspicious time to start.

Alex Brennan (2m 7s): Yes. Never a dull moment.

Jeff Wood (2m 9s): What, what gave you an inkling early on that this subject matter was of interest to you? Cities, transportation, urban planning, those types of things. Was it when you're much younger or, or was it, did it come to you at a later stage?

Alex Brennan (2m 20s): Yeah, I, I've definitely been interested in these issues since I was a kid. I was really interested in kind of the neighborhood that I grew up in, in Seattle in the eighties, and how different it was from other places that I visited. I, I was lucky to live in a place where I could walk on fairly safe streets on my own as a kid to corner store and a restaurant, and my elementary school was nearby. I really loved taking the bus and, you know, I'd visit my relatives in more suburban places and see how much more they had to get everywhere in the car.

And I was also really interested in the kind of transformations that Seattle experienced, and between the eighties and then into the nineties and even more. So now we're going from kind of a place that was shrinking and dealing with a lot of economic challenges to a place that was really booming economically and struggling to accommodate growth and what the policy strategies around that were. So, I've always been kind of a policy nerd and that's always been a particular kind of area of interest and passion for me.

Jeff Wood (3m 23s): That's interesting. Thinking about Seattle then and now, and, you know, you think about Seattle and pop culture and, and how you see it from the outside, but it's interesting to hear your story about thinking about how it changed from somebody who's lived there for a long time. I mean, obviously we, we have movies like Singles and, and we have all the grunge stuff from the music industry and all that stuff, but there's, there's something different that from, from that kind of popular imagination of, of the movies and, and television and those types of things.

Alex Brennan (3m 47s): Yeah, yeah, for sure. In the seventies and the eighties, you know, people thought of Seattle as part of the Rust Belt, right? I mean, we had massive layoffs at Boeing and it's just a really different conception and kind of the, sort of the tech hub that people think of today when they think of Seattle or even, you know, even things like Starbucks and those other kind of popular conceptions of the city.

Jeff Wood (4m 10s): Which brings me kind of to today. **So what are some of the challenges that the state and the city of Seattle are dealing with today?** And I imagine that, you know, kind of goes into some of the bills that you were focused on in the session of the legislature, but what are some of the issues that are vexing the state?

Alex Brennan (4m 26s): Yeah, so, you know, this is not unique to Washington state, but I think it's particularly acute here. **You know, affordability and homelessness are sort of interrelated**

major challenges that the state has been confronting that have been getting progressively worse for quite some years now. You know, we've had some of the, the steepest increases in home values and rents and in the number of people living on our streets that don't have a roof over their head that we've seen anywhere in the country that has its kind of biggest challenges near our major job centers that have been growing really quickly.

So near downtown Seattle, near some of the major tech hubs in the eastern suburbs of Seattle. But, but now is really true across the whole state. And I think that even more so the last couple years during the pandemic, as a lot of people have been able to do remote work and, and move to smaller cities and towns who've really seen those affordability challenges be present pretty much everywhere.

And I think, you know, **related to that, obviously there, there's also an increasing sense of urgency around climate change and the need to, you know, create communities where people don't have to drive as much, where they have other access to other ways to not contribute as much to greenhouse gas emissions** and, you know, so I think those two things have really shaped a lot of the, the advocacy that we and a lot of our partners have been doing.

Jeff Wood (5m 46s): It's been an interesting time at for state level legislation on these issues, specifically housing, you know, more and more states are hoping to implement solutions at the state level, and we've seen, you know, places like Oregon and California do things. New York and Colorado have been talking about it, although recently it looks like they might have some trouble with it this session. Maybe in the future they'll get to it. **But where do you think Washington as a state lands in terms of the state level looking for solutions to the problems that that, that we're facing in, in terms of housing and homelessness and transportation?**

Alex Brennan (6m 13s): I think, you know, that's been a, a progression for us over the last couple of years where initially there was more focus on working on those issues at the local level as the challenges grew bigger and **I think more cities realized that they couldn't address the problems that they're facing on their own, that we needed more regional and statewide solutions, that that has pushed more of the work up to the state level.** I think we're, we're maybe a little bit behind where our west coast, the other west coast states are in that progression.

I was on a, a panel about a year ago with folks from Oregon and California talking about the missing middle bills that they had passed and, you know, and we were just starting to gear up for the preparations for this legislative session that we just completed. **So, you know, I think there, there's both been that progression from the local to the state level. And then I think there's also been a progression in the approach of the state level.** So you, we started, gosh, I guess five years ago now with an incentive based approach at the state level where the state was providing certain types of funding incentives or environmental review exemptions for local governments to take action on creating more housing options, providing more affordable housing.

And then we've kind of moved from that to a model of integrating housing and affordability into our comprehensive plan process, having stronger requirements for housing elements, but still leaving a lot of leeway to local governments and how they want to implement that new framework and those requirements at the local level. And then I think particularly this last year, but, but kind of growing throughout that time has been a sense that we need to have some, some more fixed baselines or floors for what those local requirements are going to be that the state sets.

And then we still hope that, you know, a lot of local governments are going to go up a above and beyond that.

Jeff Wood (8m 7s): Let's talk about the session that just ended in Washington state. **Let's, let's talk about TOD bill** first, and then we'll talk about the, the positive news Okay. For what's going on. But, you know, basically there was a TOD bill 5466 that some would say it would've been, would've been one of the strongest statewide policies in in North America. I was wondering what was in it, what was in the bill and then where did it go wrong or what, what was the pushback to the bill in the, in the legislature?

Alex Brennan (8m 34s): Yeah, so you know, the bill evolved over the course of the legislative session, but **as it was first introduced, it would've set minimum density requirements near three types of transit.** So near our fixed rail transit, our light rail, our commuter rail stations, near bus, rapid transit stations, and then near frequent transit stops. And there were different sets of requirements for those different transit types. At the high end, for the fixed rail stations, there would've been a requirement of at least a floor area ratio of six oh floor area ratio for, for folks who aren't super familiar with it, that's basically saying if it's six, you can have the square footage of your building can be six times what the square footage of the lot is.

So that's where the number comes from. And so usually there's some setbacks or areas that can't be built on for different reasons. So we're talking maybe an eight story building with a, a floor area of six. And then that would step down to a floor air ratio of four around things like just the, the frequent bus service. On top of that, there would've been a a 50% floor area ratio bonus or affordable housing project. So if you were a, if you were doing an a hundred percent affordable project, you could actually go up to a floor ratio of nine near the, the rail or of six near the, the other transit stops.

There were also then the elimination of parking minimums in those areas. And, and there were different distances from the different types of transit. So at the, at the high end, there was a three quarters of a mile radius from those stations, and then that step down to a half mile on a quarter mile.

Jeff Wood (10m 14s): How'd they come up with all these kind of machinations of, of what goes where and how much floor area ratio goes next to which stations and which types of transit and all those things. Like I, I'm always fascinated by this, I mean, we had in California a number of bills, s p 50 and others where, you know, you said, oh, the housing can go in these employment

centers and it has to be within half mile of this and then, you know, quarter mile of this and it gets real complicated. I'm wondering how like that was developed for, for this specific bill, or is it a black box? Yeah,

Alex Brennan (10m 40s): I mean, I mean, it's not a black box, but I don't think there's like a super clean answer to that. You know, I think there's different ideas about what, what a walk shed from a transit stop is, right? I mean, some people think about that as like five minutes at a minimum, which is sort of like a quarter mile or 10 minutes or 15 minutes and, you know, and so I think that that's kind of how the, those different distances were thought of. And I think there was an idea, well, we can go for the, the bigger distances at the, at the transit stations that are really providing by our capacity more frequent service.

We know they're going to be there forever. There was a lot of negotiation that kind of went into the, the details and I think negotiation and also trying to figure out the right balance between, you know, what do we want and what could we actually get passed, you know, and frankly I think we entered the session with, with a bill that everybody sort of knew was probably going to, you know, if there were going to be changes, it was going to be shrinking those heights, shrinking those distances. So the, the bill started out from a pretty ambitious place.

Jeff Wood (11m 46s): Do you find that the, that the, you know, just kind of laying it out and kinda having the bigger discussion about it lays the groundwork for future discussions? I mean, that's kind of what happened in California. There's been a number of bills that didn't make it, but it feels like every year they built on each other to, you know, come out successful in the end.

Alex Brennan (12m 4s): Yeah, for sure. You know, I mean, this is the first time in a long time that we've had a TOD bill, at least with this high of a profile in the state legislature. And it's really unusual to pass a bill the first time it gets introduced when we get to talking about the things that did pass and the, you know, you know, you can see that those were bills that bill on being introduced in, in other recent legislative sessions. We did actually run a somewhat similar TOD bill back in 2009.

So it, it's also been kind of an interesting experience to, you know, have tried to do that. We were not successful back then. A lot has changed since then and kind of, you know, coming back into those same conversations and really restarting them, starting them this year. I

Jeff Wood (12m 48s): Have one more question for you on this, and then we'll get to the, the good stuff. But, you know, **I'm wondering what the pushback was.** I'm wondering what the fear is, especially at the state level, because I feel like at a local level might be easier to pass some of these types of bills where you focus on density and, and transit and the connections between the two, but the state level, it might be a little bit harder, I imagine, because the constituencies are different and you have kind of a pushback from that perspective.

Alex Brennan (13m 11s): Yeah, I think there are, you know, there are things that are harder and easier about it, you know, on the harder side, right? You're covering a lot of different places.

And so **there's a lot of different constituencies that need to be involved in, in getting support. I think that the benefit is that it can be really hard when you are especially a smaller city or, or say you're just a, a neighborhood that's considering an up zone around your station. You know, the, the impacts of just one station making a big change in zoning capacity is really different than if everybody's doing it.**

And I think there's a, there's a lot more kind of real estate pressure that then suddenly gets kind of pointed right at you if you're going alone. So there is both a political, and I also think a policy benefit to trying to take a, a broader approach. You know, **I think that the, the biggest hurdle and the, the biggest challenge on this though was, was around how to incorporate a, incorporate affordability into the change, the zoning changes that were being made.** And both, I think disagreements from kind of the different advocacy groups that are at the table disagreements, different philosophies on that from different legislators.

And then also just kind of the, the complication of really different real estate markets in different parts of the state. And how do you design a program that's going to, you know, both create affordability but not overburden the, the finances of a development project to prevent it from happening at all in really different real estate markets.

Jeff Wood (14m 36s): Well, let's talk about 1110 and 1181. There's two bills that you supported that actually made it through, which is very exciting. You know, one is bringing climate planning to the Growth Management Act, and the other is missing middle housing, which is a very popular topic around the country specifically. Can you give us a really kind of a quick overview of, of these two bills that were passed?

Alex Brennan (14m 55s): Yeah, for sure. I'll take **HB 1181, which is adding climate change to the State Growth Management Act** first. This is a, a bill that we have been working on for a couple years now. This is the third session that, that it's been introduced. We are about to enter a period when all of our cities and counties are going to be updating their comprehensive plans. And so there's a sense of urgency in updating kind of what needs to be done as part of those updates. And H B 1181 does two key things.

The first is, it requires that those comprehensive plan updates take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in particular as part of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, that they also reduce vehicle miles traveled. So while there's a broad range of climate strategies that are included, **there's a real focus on how do we design our communities through our land use policies, through our street design, our transit infrastructure to reduce the amount that we need to drive.** That's kind of one big component of the bill.

And then the other big component is around climate adaptation. So we know that sea levels are rising, we know that areas at risk of forest fires, droughts, floods are changing. And we need to be not just planning for what those risks are now, or you know, unfortunately in some cases we're even planning based on documents that are two or three decades old. But we actually

need to be looking to the future, looking at what the science is telling us about where those impacts are going to be in the future.

That's 1181. It's really, we're really excited that that passed the legislature. It's on its way to the governor's desk and it's been a priority of the governor's, you know, that Bill is really complimentary. It would've been really complimentary to the TOD bill. It is also really complimentary to the **missing middle housing bill**.

So this is the, the second year that a bill like this has been introduced. It's the first year that we've really been, we've been supportive of it in the past, but we got to be really deeply engaged in it in the lead up to, and during this session, kind of similar to what you were saying about the TOD bill, it has different requirements for different places.

So there's, there's some layers here, but the, the baseline is that **all but the smallest cities in Washington state will be required to allow duplexes in what are now single family neighborhoods in larger cities. So cities over 75,000, they'll be required to allow four-plexes, and then that goes up to six-plexes if you are near frequent transit or if you're providing affordability as part of part of that development. There's also an elimination of parking requirements near transit as part of that bill.**

And I think one other kind of key thing that is exciting and an important difference from some of the other missing middle housing bills in other states is that **it allows for lot splitting** as part of this. So you can, if you build a fourplex for example, you can essentially build that as four town homes, sell each of those town homes as a fee simple building to a homeowner rather than having to condo wise, you know, create a homeowner's association for this, you know, small four unit project, which has been a barrier in some other places.

So, so those are kind of the key features of the, the bill. And that will start going into effect as cities update their comprehensive plans over the next couple of years.

Jeff Wood (18m 23s): And that, that was 1110, which as opposed to 1181, which was the, the, the climate bill. The climate bill, yes, the climate bill. Do you, do you find it hard to keep up with the numbers? I find it ridiculously hard to keep up with the numbers here in California we have so many, you know, SBS and ABS and all that stuff, and then they change every year is a different one, right. So, you know, if it happened or if it, if it gets repeated a lot like SB 35, it, it gets in your brain and you know exactly what it is. But if it's like one that lasted one year, but then it got changed to something else the next year, then you're like, is it this one or this one?

I said earlier in the show s P 50, but I'm not quite sure if that's the one I was talking about. So how do you feel about the, the bill numbers and I mean, I guess it's a, I guess it's necessary, right? But it is still kind of a funny way to talk about in jargon about some policy

Alex Brennan (19m 8s): For sure. You know, I mean for the bills that we've been working on, you know, every day for the last, you know, however many months now at this point, I don't have

trouble remembering the bill numbers. I try to make sure I'm not just saying the bill numbers and I'm also in, in that sentence always saying, you know, what the bill is about so that people who aren't tracking it as closely, you know, aren't just lost in the jargon. If, if we have a, a chance to talk about, there is a suite of kind of other legislation in that past this session that's complimentary to kind of those two key bills.

And I do, you know, have, have trouble keeping track of all of the different bill numbers for for those. And yeah, and it's a, it's a messaging challenge. You know, a lot of, a lot of what we do is try and get, you know, grassroots supporters from across the state involved in these advocacy pushes at the state level. So making sure that they both know the bill number so that they can sign into the right thing to express their support, but also making sure that it's accessible and doesn't feel too jargony is, is a, is a big part of the challenge.

Jeff Wood (20m 14s): That begs another question, which is like, how do you kind of keep, because there's probably different constituencies for each of these bills, right? I imagine some, there's a lot of overlap, but then there's also individuals that might support one but don't support the other. How do you keep that straight from the, from the messaging standpoint, but also **how do you build the coalitions** that put these bills, put them on their back and then push them through the legislature, and then how do you keep kind of from some infighting as well? I mean, it feels like there's probably some that like, you know, they, they want to focus on their build and so they think yours is your other one is the distraction.

There's a whole lot of stuff going on when you're putting together a campaign for a legislative session, I imagine.

Alex Brennan (20m 51s): You know, and I think that that is, those strategies are different, like you said, for the different bills. And they've evolved for us over time a bit, you know, for the last couple years we've really been focused on these updates to our comprehensive plan requirements. So I mentioned that HB 1181 and a previous with a different bill number in previous years, we, we had been bringing that to previous legislative sessions. We also did a, a big overhaul of the housing element requirements for comprehensive plans that passed in in the 2021 session.

Those two bills were part of a **coordinated campaign that we had had for several years that was really trying to bring together housing and environmental advocates along with a whole host of other folks from labor business community to unite around the shared platform**. This year we knew that the supporters for the different bills were going to be a little different. So we, we had to kind of restructure the way that we were doing the advocacy where we had a sort of unified, you know, our top three bill priorities were the TOD bill, the missing middle bill, and the climate planning bill.

But we had some folks, you know, that were with us on one and not on the other. And, you know, so I think that just required us to message in, in a, in a kind of different way. And we had a lot of different tables, you know, and there were some tables where we were coordinating them

and there were some tables where there was someone else that was the coordinator. And I think the, the other big thing that has been really crucial to success is really trying to get those coalitions together early on. So, you know, we, we started meeting with partners and with legislators on the missing middle housing bill pretty much as soon as the legislative session ended last year.

And so by September we had a really clear sense of what the policy was going to be, who was on board, how we were going to coordinate our work together, whereas the TOD bill kind of came along a little bit later as an idea and we weren't actually even really sure until right before session if it was going to happen. And so a lot of that initial legwork didn't happen as much. And I think that that's, you know, was then kind of reflective of some of the challenges that we experienced during the session

Jeff Wood (23m 11s): With the missing middle bill. I'm curious also what kind of, some of the pushback was for that bill. You know, obviously there's a lot of discussion around the country about single family zoning, zoning reform, trying to figure out how to get more housing units on a parcel. But what was some of the pushback to that that you saw, you know, obviously the bill passed, but there was probably a discussion that happened along with that bill as well.

Alex Brennan (23m 34s): You know, I mean, I think people are concerned about their neighborhoods changing. There's a concern about having a one size fits all approach. There were concerns about just sort of what this meant for local control over policy in general. You know, the main organized opposition to the missing middle bill was coming from the Association of Washington Cities, which represents the cities throughout the state. And that was their primary concern, right? This is the state taking away a, a power that cities have traditionally had, you know, and then you also saw organizing at the local level of people concerned about, concerned about changes in their neighborhood.

You know, I think that, you know, the sort of not in my backyard phenomenon and the, there are certainly like undercurrents of classism and racism around fears of different types of people moving into a neighborhood. I think there's also, you know, for a lot of people it's just a, it's a big adjustment to think about what housing types might be in their neighborhood and, and what that's going to mean. And if you've never lived in anything but a single family neighborhood that just sort of uncertainty can be scary.

So ultimately the, the biggest thing and, and kind of the, the thing that was really upsetting for us, but we, we wanted to, we felt like was better than, than not having anything passed was we ultimately needed to allow the smaller cities in the Seattle metro to have lower requirements.

I mentioned before they're just doing duplexes. Originally everybody, if you were, you know, part of the sort of contiguous urban area with Seattle, everybody was going to have the same requirements as the big cities. And that was really important to us because part of the, you know, goal for us is around addressing the segregation that comes from, you know, more exclusionary zoning practices in, you know, wealthier, more expensive suburbs. And so yeah, we,

we were able to chip away at that a little bit with the ultimate bill, but not as much as we had hoped.

Jeff Wood (25m 34s): I want to ask a question about something that's been eating at me kind of for the last 24 hours and, and, and I recently posted an article in my newsletter from Professor Dana Cuff at UCLA who said, basically suburbs are a climate disaster. And I got, I got one response from somebody I won't name who said, it's time to chill out a bit with respect to the anti suburban bias and strive for more balanced planning solutions. I'm wondering like, how can we get bills through states when we have this kind of opposition and I'm, I'm, I'm wondering what you do about all these folks who think that like balance means not touching single family neighborhoods, which is what I think I'm interpreting that to mean is let's balance the, let's balance.

I heard yesterday in Culver City, they, they, they got rid of a, a bike lane, right? And the, the, I think it was either the mayor or one of the council members, like, we need more balanced transportation or we need to compromise more. And it's like, but 99% of the transportation policy is cars. So how is it a compromise to take out a bike lane?

Alex Brennan (26m 30s): I mean, you know, I mean I think it's, it's a similar issue to any kind of major change, right? People, people think of the status quo as sort of the the natural thing or the, the reasonable compromise. And so when you're pushing for something different, you really have to change the way that people think about things and, and you're going to get pushback sometimes when people say something like that about suburban cities. You know, one other way that I interpret it is, you know, there's nothing helpful about like, insulting suburbs and people that live in suburbs, right?

And I, I, I very whole heartedly agree with that. I think if we get into a sort of holier than thou, like people who live in central cities are, are better or you know, because they don't have to drive as much or, or whatever. I think that really hurts the, the cause for the land news changes that we're trying to make. And it's kind of ignorant of the real estate dynamics around like how much it costs to, to be able to live in these cases in many of those central cities. Now we don't, yeah, we don't have enough of those kind of walkable transit oriented, denser places where everybody be able to have that.

So that's the piece that I really do try and, and hold onto. And also, you know, think about, I think one of the good things about like missing middle, you know, from our perspective is like it's not a big change for most single family neighborhoods. You know, you have a fourplex next door, like you may not even know that it's a fourplex unless you look really closely and that's really different than, you know, having an eight story building next door to your single family home. And, and so I think being aware of the degree of change you're asking for, and I I think like I would agree, like an eight story building probably isn't appropriate everywhere.

Jeff Wood (28m 17s): **What kind of staffing or funding do you need for this all to happen?** Like for you to let, to go to the state level and help figure out coalitions to help, you know, the, the

legislators figure out what's needed. What kind of backing do you need to have to, to make this work?

Alex Brennan (28m 32s): Great question. I mean, first I want to say, you know, this for all of these bills, right? This is not just Futurewise. You know, we're, we're really proud to have played a, a big role in, in the successes and the, the shortcomings in this last legislative session. But **part of what's made it successful is that there's a lot of different partners at the table that each bring different capacities.** You know, that being said, for us, being able to invest more in our state legislative advocacy has been really critical to an increase in success over the last couple years.

We have for a a long time had a **dedicated lobbyist in Olympia Capital who is really focused on sort of the inside game of building relationships with legislators, with the other lobbyists, understanding the committees and you know, all the different steps that the bill needs to go through, knowing how to make line edits to bills quickly,** all of that stuff. And, you know, I think, and not a lot of groups are able to have that kind of presence. And so we try and kind of provide that, that resource to smaller local partners.

We also, one of the big things that we do is **we are the legal accountability mechanism for state land use law. So we also have in-house legal staff that both do legal appeals, but also advise on the kind of design of, of legislation.** So having that additional capacity is really important.

Jeff Wood (29m 58s): I tried to read some of those bills and it's, I mean I've, I've been trying to do it for the last 20 years and I still can't figure out some of them. I'm like, what does this bill actually say? There's all these hash marks and numbers at the top and whereas is, and whatever else, it's like ridiculous. Can you put it in plain English? I didn't understand why you have to have legalese, but you link to a PDF of the bill and you see like all this madness and you're like, I, I'm trying to figure out what this says, but I I just can't.

Alex Brennan (30m 23s): Yeah, no, it is, it is really complicated and yeah, I, I struggle with that myself. I'm really lucky to have staff that are experts in these things that can make sure that we know what the bill's really doing and, and be able to do that in real time. The other thing that I think has run really big for us is in 2020 in the lead up to the 20 21, 20 21 legislative session, **we were able to hire an organizer to be kind of the outside game to go with the inside game that we'd had for a long time.**

And that has just made a huge difference in being able to mobilize, you know, individual people that wanted to get involved in advocacy but didn't really have an avenue to do that. And also to build different kinds of partnerships with other advocacy groups so that we're not just kind of partnering with the other lobbyists. The last couple years it's been on Zoom, but you know, that are in the, in the rooms in, in the capital, but we're also partnering with other kind of more membership based organizations that really helping them reach their members.

So, you know, being able to invest in that and continue to invest in that capacity has been really huge for us. **We also, last year were able to bring on a, a dedicated communications position,** which we had never had before. And so, you know, that's an another piece of like actually being able to, you know, have more resources to communicate about what's happening. Our organizer have been doing a lot of those communications for the state legislative work, so that's also freeing up more organizing time and putting those pieces together I think has just been, you know, in the big picture, this is a tiny investment, right?

It's a couple hundred thousand dollars of additional capacity that I think has really made a huge difference. And I would really advocate for other organizations around the country to think about making those investments and for funders to really think about how they can contribute to making that happen.

Jeff Wood (32m 20s): Are you all membership driven or funder driven or a mix of the two or organizations kind of come together and and fund your work? How does that, how does that kind of work out?

Alex Brennan (32m 31s): We, we have a mix of, of funding. I, you know, foundations are the, the largest funding source for us. And then individual donors, we have a membership program that's sort of part of individual donations, but we also have, you know, a few places where we're, we have kind of earned revenue through contracts where we're providing technical expertise on something. So we have kind of a diversified funding mix, but that's, that those are kind of the key components to it.

Jeff Wood (32m 59s): Another question, do you sleep

Alex Brennan (33m 5s): Well? You, I, it's, it's definitely been a busy last couple months and, and a busy last couple years. You probably interviewed a lot of executive directors of small nonprofits over the years. Sleep is definitely not the first thing that happens, but you know, actually we, we try really hard to have kind of a good work-life balance and good office culture and make sure that, you know, when people are working really hard, working long hours, then they're getting a break afterwards.

So, you know, it's always, always a struggle to be able to maintain that. But I think it's really important.

Jeff Wood (33m 42s): I, I would agree, I, I appreciate the work and I, I understand definitely from talking with folks, but also being at, at a nonprofit myself, there's some times where you just have to ramp up and do it and then the other times you can kind of hopefully have a little bit more relax relaxation before any, anytime before you release a report or anything like that. It's going to be madness, but it's crazy. So with all that said, you know, what's the progress in, in Washington state and do you think that we're at a tipping point at the moment? Do you think that you've gotten to a point where the seas will change and it will have more housing everywhere in the state?

Alex Brennan (34m 17s): I, I do think, you know, we're making a lot of progress and I think that this year has been a really important year in moving things forward, even though we didn't get everything we wanted. Maybe this is a good moment to kind of highlight some of the other things that happened in the legislative session. So in addition to the missing middle bill and the climate bill passing, there's kind of a host of related policies that passed. One that's really important is we created something and to be future wise was not the lead on a lot of these, but we've been supportive and are are really excited to see them happen.

The state created a Covenant Home ownership act through a hundred dollars document recording fee on real estate transactions. This is a new fund that will go to home ownership assistance or first time home buyers who have experienced themselves or, or their family has experienced racial discrimination in access to home ownership opportunities through racially restrictive covenants in Washington state in the past. So this is really an like a huge kind of compliment to the missing middle bill and that, you know, the same people that have been locked out of single family neighborhoods that had a lot of these restrictive covenants aren't just going to get different housing types, but are also going to get access to financing that they've been locked out of to be able to purchase more of those homes.

We also got 400 million in funding for the, our state housing trust fund, which primarily funds affordable rental housing, also some affordable home ownership housing. We passed an accessory dwelling unit bill that removes a lot of the restrictions on accessory dwelling units. We passed a reform of our condo liability laws. Washington State has a, a sort of, I think, a pretty unique issue in that we don't really build condos anymore because the legal liability for developer on a condo is so high.

And so like all of our new multifamily housing, almost all of it has been rental over the last decade. And, and so again, that's going to be really important in inter intersecting with home ownership, intersecting with new opportunities to build multi-family housing. We also passed changes to our building code to allow single stair apartment buildings. So you know, this is going to allow better design, particularly for smaller apartment buildings, larger units, more of a sense of community in those buildings, lower costs.

Jeff Wood (36m 36s): That's been a big discussion lately. I feel like, I feel like in the news anyways, that I see there's been a lot of discussion about single stare and design. I also saw Charlie Munger's name today too, which made me mad. So

Alex Brennan (36m 48s): I don't know who that is.

Jeff Wood (36m 50s): The, the guy that, that wanted to do the Santa Barbara dorm without windows for some people.

Alex Brennan (36m 55s): Oh, okay. Yeah,

Jeff Wood (36m 57s): That's a whole other issue, but somewhat

Alex Brennan (36m 60s): I love them following that,

Jeff Wood (37m 1s): But

Alex Brennan (37m 2s): Yeah.

Jeff Wood (37m 2s): But yeah. What about, I, I think I saw this so let me know if I'm wrong, but there was a bill about design review too, right?

Alex Brennan (37m 9s): Yes, yes. So there are two more bills on my list. Okay. So designer review. Now there are going to be limitations. Basically designer review has to be based on sort of concrete design criteria that is not just sort of an arbitrary individual perspective on whether your design is good, but that any design review requirements that buildings have to go through has to, has to follow kind of a clear set of guidelines, which, you know, is I think going to increase a lot of predictability and reduce timelines for projects being developed while I, if anything, probably doing a better job of, of fostering good design.

And then the last big thing is that we eliminated project-based environmental review for housing projects as long as there's an environmental impact statement for the comprehensive plan. And, and those projects are compliant with the comprehensive plan. So that's going to be a really big deal at the, the permitting level. In addition to the t od bill not passing, there were a couple other really big things that didn't happen. We had a big debate about rent stabilization, which did not pass this year and the governor proposed a 4 billion affordable housing bond, which, which did not get implemented.

So, you know, there, there's some, some shortcomings this session for sure. But on housing, you know, there's really a lot that's happened and I think it's creating a lot of momentum both for additional work at the state level and also kind of wind at the sales of advocates at the local level to be able to push for more locally.

Jeff Wood (38m 39s): So I kind of want to go back and bring this back full circle to 1181 because I think that's kind of like really important to think about the Russian nesting doll of it all and how everything that is focused on housing and creating more dense housing and those types of things creates a situation where transportation can thrive. And I think that that's really important and kind of, because one of my things about, you know, the, the work that I do is I think we need to talk about all these things because they're all interconnected and you know, if we silo off housing or transportation or environment or any of those things, we don't get the success that we might if we combine them together.

So it's really important, I think that, that all of these things are connected and then also they are, are all kind of nested under this idea that we do want to reduce V M T and we do want to have sustainable transportation that connects everything together.

Alex Brennan (39m 26s): Yeah, for sure. And we, we see them as, as super connected and that, that intersection is really core to our mission. And I think, you know, we've been really with a lot of other partners, you know, making, working hard to make the, the case that those two things can and should go together, that your housing costs and your transportation costs are related as a household, you know, we can provide more housing options in places that are going to reduce both of those costs. You know, we've been also, one of the early obstacles we had to pass to adding climate change into our comprehensive plans was this sort of fear from the real estate development community that that would be, this was going to be like additional restrictions on development essentially.

They sort of heard climate and environment and jumped to this like that's gotta be anti-development, anti housing. And so really kind of hoping everybody put the pieces together and see that like, no actually this is about making it easier to, to build in the places where we want people to build so that we can have those benefits.

Jeff Wood (40m 31s): There was a piece last week in Mother Jones from Bill McKibben who's a very famous environmentalist in the United States. And I think, you know, kind of what his main thesis was is that environmentalism has won over the years by saying no to things. And now I think, you know, his, his idea is that we need to say yes to more things and not in the ybi sense of yes, but just like we need to be open to the idea that more housing actually is a good environmental income or more of something is actually a good environmental outcome, I should say not income. Those things actually are all tied together and I think that that's kind of what you're talking about when you're dealing with the, the real estate folks or the folks that have been used to the environmental movement saying no, but now the environmental movement or at least a subset of them are saying yes and it's confusing people.

Alex Brennan (41m 16s): Yeah, I mean, you know, hopefully people are going to start getting more, more used to that idea cuz you know, I completely agree. We, you know, the status quo is not working and so we're going to need to change things pretty quickly. And so yeah, that's going to mean building a lot of housing, building a lot of transmission lines and renewable energy facilities and we are going to have to reorient our environmental regulations and laws to foster and speed that up and still have reviews that are important, but make sure that, you know, those reviews are really targeted at the right things and understanding the trade-offs that happen and kind of the timeline that's needed.

Jeff Wood (41m 57s): As you look back at the session and the, the wins and the losses and everything that goes together, was there anything that surprised you about the process or the outcomes or the future?

Alex Brennan (42m 6s): I mean, everything is kind of surprising. I mean, it's surprising and not surprising. I feel like, you know, you never really know what's going to happen. I think overall just really thrilled to be at the point that we're at going into the future. I think there's going to

be a lot of conversations post session once we've all kind of caught our breath about the TOD bill and you know, what would need to happen between now and January to address the challenges that we faced and, and come up with a path to victory for next year. And so I think it's going to be really interesting to, to talk to legislators, to talk to the other stakeholders in this process and kind of see what we might be able to do differently.

Jeff Wood (42m 43s): Awesome. Well where can folks find more information about what you all are up to it Futurewise?

Alex Brennan (42m 48s): Yeah, so you can go to our website, futurewise.org. That is the, the easiest place to find information about us. There's a legislative tab on our website where you can go into a deeper dive on all of the legislative work that we do. You can also see the other types of work that we're doing there. You can sign up for our mailing list on the website as well. There's a donate button if you want to make a financial contribution. And that, that's I think really the the best jumping off place.

Awesome.

Jeff Wood (43m 18s): Well Alex, thanks for joining us. We really appreciate your time. Yeah,

Alex Brennan (43m 21s): Thanks so much for having me Jeff.

Tamar Shapiro (43m 37s): Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website mpactmobility.org. That's M as in mobility and pact as in agreement dot org. Mpactmobility.org.