

Periodic Atlas of the Metroscope

The Geography of Publicly Subsidized Affordable Housing

by Meg Merrick

...the public dialogue around housing in Portland has reached critical mass and placed a renewed focus on the public resources available for affordable housing development.

This is how the *State of Housing in Portland* report published last fall begins. While much of the press, both locally and nationally, has focused on the cost of housing in Portland, the availability of housing that is affordable to all Oregonians is being called into question throughout the state. Over the past year, a group of people representing Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS), Metro, Catholic Charities, Network for Affordable Housing (NOAH), Transition Projects, and other housing and social service agencies met to discuss the creation of a statewide, comprehensive affordable housing database which could be used by case workers, program administrators, and policymakers.

As a result, the OHCS, with the assistance of a variety of partners, is in the process of finalizing the state's first-ever affordable housing dataset. While the statewide data are not yet ready for public use, Metro, in concert with this effort, has developed a similar database for Clackamas, Multnomah,

and Washington counties in Oregon and Clark County in Washington. In this edition of the Periodic Atlas we highlight Metro's recently published inventory of publicly subsidized affordable housing. We put the locations of this housing stock in the context of Portland's market rents; we look at the significance of the sponsor types (government, nonprofits, and for-profits) in each county; we then take a closer look at the top providers in downtown and northeast Portland where this type of housing is most concentrated; and we close by looking at where this housing is in relationship to high performing schools and public libraries.

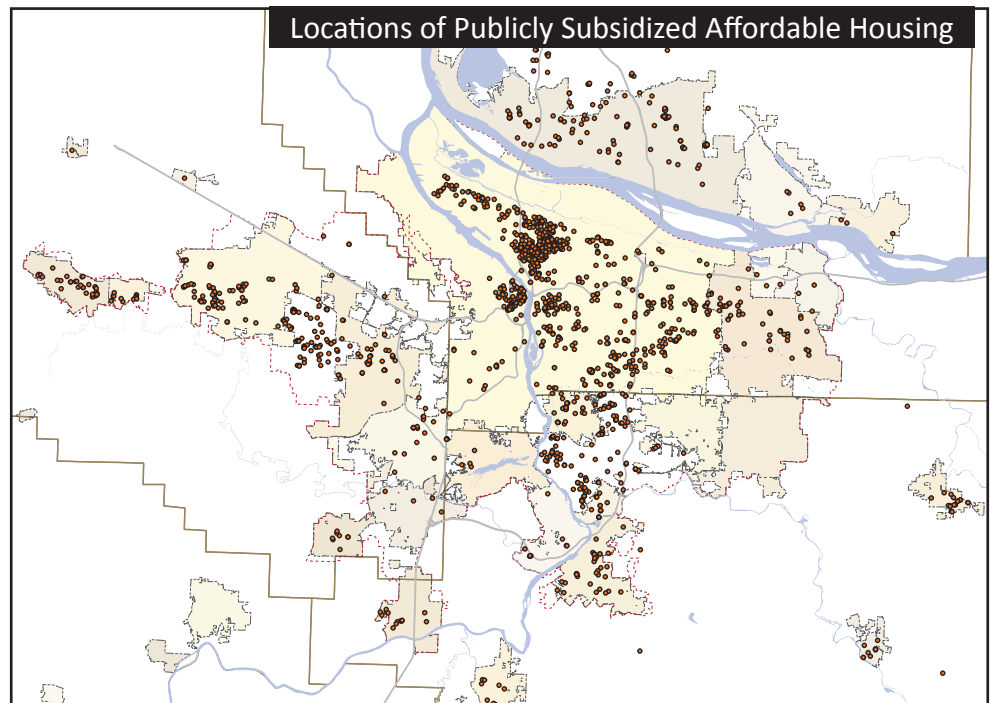


Figure 1

Source: Metro

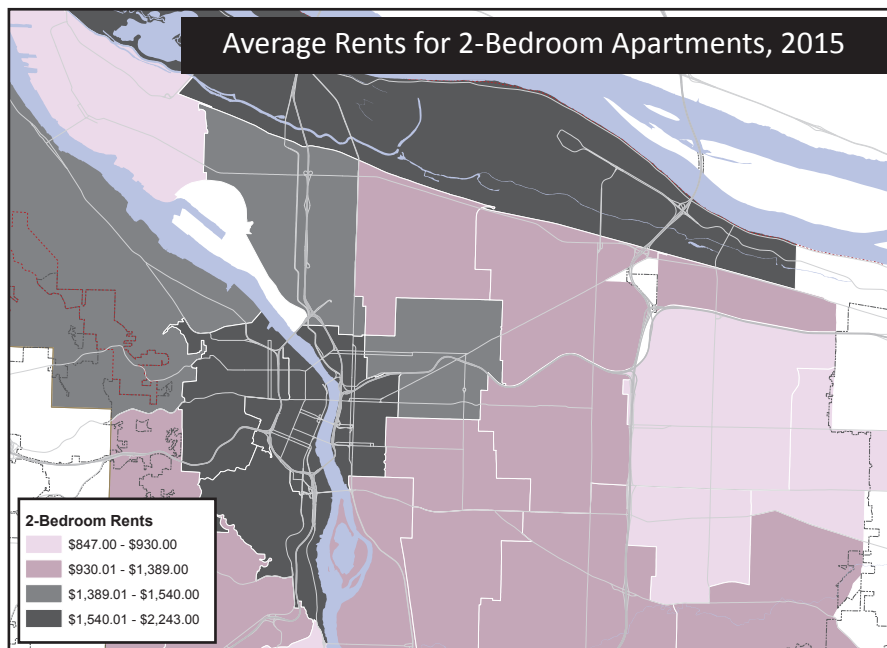


Figure 2

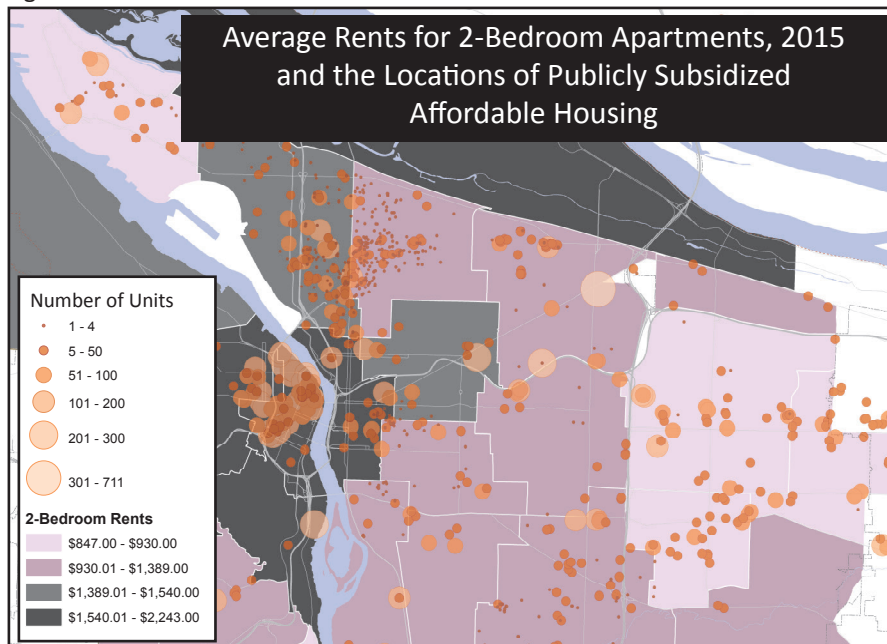


Figure 3

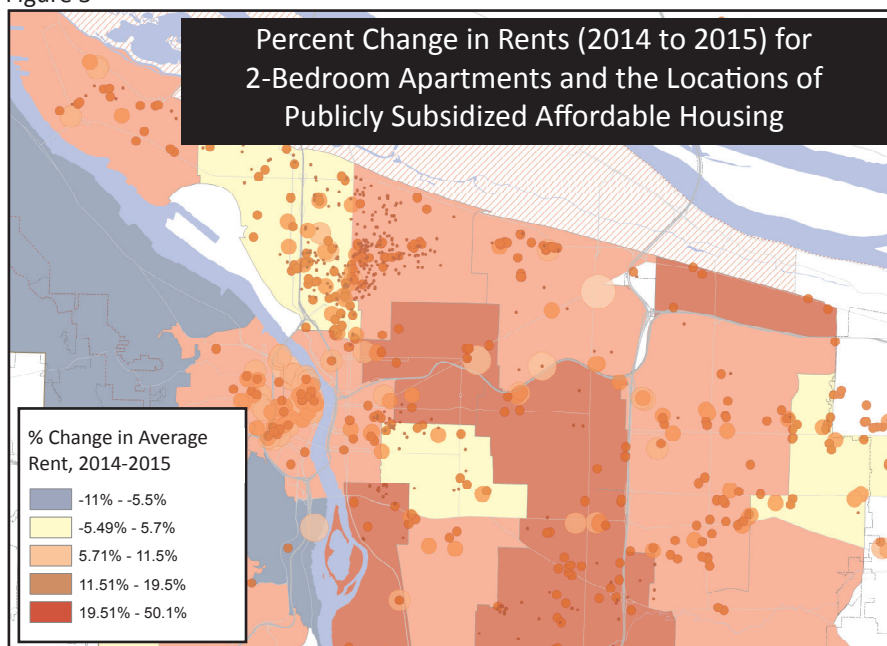


Figure 4

Sources: City of Portland; Metro

Some Context

In a tight housing market with rapidly increasing housing costs, renters are particularly vulnerable to often unpredictable rent hikes. This is especially a problem for households who are already paying rents at the maximum of what they can afford. Figure 2 uses data from Portland's *State of Housing Report* (2015) showing the average rents for a two-bedroom apartment (a preferred size for households with children) per "neighborhood" (groups of neighborhoods) in 2015. The neighborhoods in shades of gray were considered unaffordable for the average household in Portland. What is apparent from the map is that the least affordable neighborhoods are those that are centrally located while the most affordable neighborhoods tend to be located farthest from the downtown core in North Portland and East Portland.

Figure 3 overlays Metro's affordable housing data over these areas. The size of the circles indicate the number of units at each site. What is clear here is how important this housing (much of which was either developed or purchased decades ago) is in terms of its access to services, jobs, and transit. Without these publicly subsidized affordable units, given the average market rents, there would be few opportunities for low-income households to live in these neighborhoods.

According to the State of Housing Report, since the third quarter of 2014, Portland's rents increased an average of 8–9 percent or approximately \$100 per month over the prior year. But this increase has not been felt everywhere. In figure 4, the red areas experienced the largest rates of increase while the blue areas saw decreases. In the yellow areas, rents were relatively stable during this period. Again, we can see how important the existing stock of publicly subsidized affordable housing is, especially in areas where the rates of increase are highest.

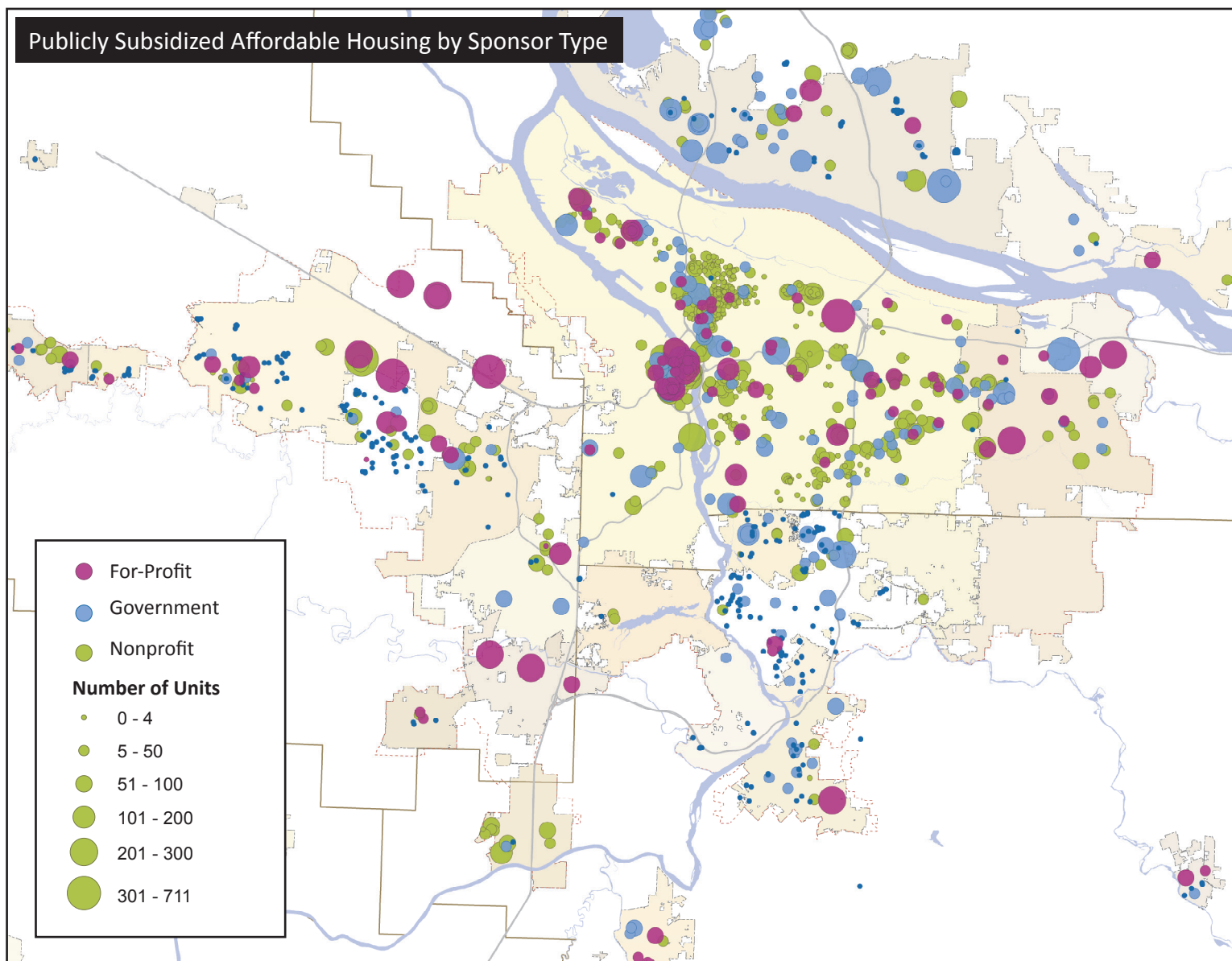


Figure 5

Source: Metro

The Geography of Sponsor Type

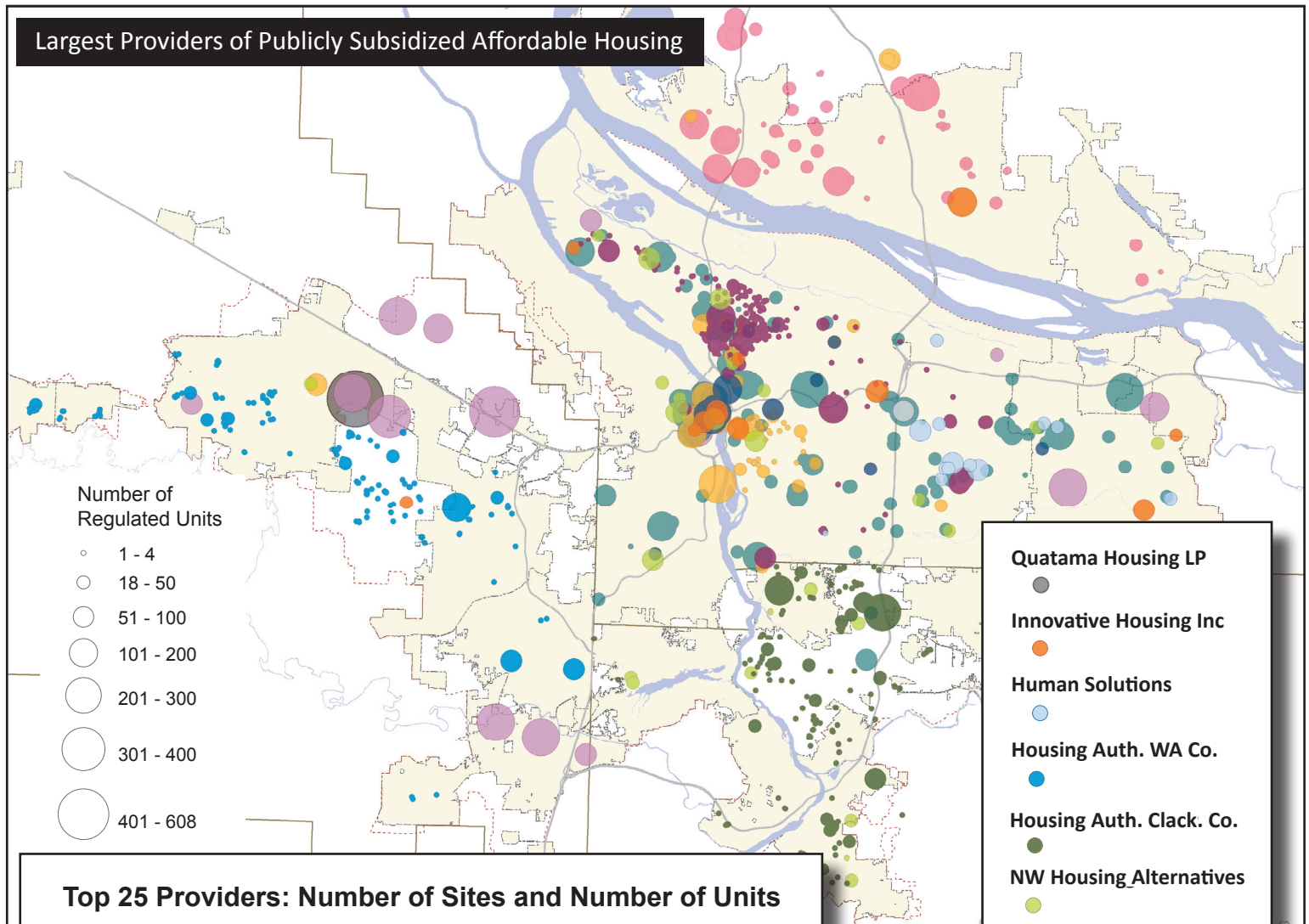
Sponsors of affordable housing can be classified into three types: government, nonprofit, and for-profit enterprises. The for-profit GSL Properties, Inc. is the second largest provider of publicly subsidized affordable housing in the region. With 3,297 units at 18 sites (according to Metro), only Portland's housing authority, Home Forward, with 5,743 units in 101 sites, offers more. GSL Properties' sites are located across the region from Troutdale and Gresham, to downtown Portland, to Hillsboro (figure 5).

Government sponsored affordable housing is present in all counties in the region and domi-

nates in Clackamas and Clark counties. The Vancouver Housing Authority ranks fourth in the region, after Home Forward, GSL Properties, Inc., and all of the unknown sponsors (see figure 6). The Housing Authority of Clackamas County is ninth in the region while the Housing Authority of Washington County places 10th. In Clackamas County, its housing authority is the single largest provider of publicly subsidized affordable housing—there, the nonprofit sector has a much smaller presence than in either Multnomah or Washington counties.

Figure 7 displays the geographic distribution of the 11 largest providers (not including the unknown providers). Quatama Housing LP's apart-

Largest Providers of Publicly Subsidized Affordable Housing



Top 25 Providers: Number of Sites and Number of Units

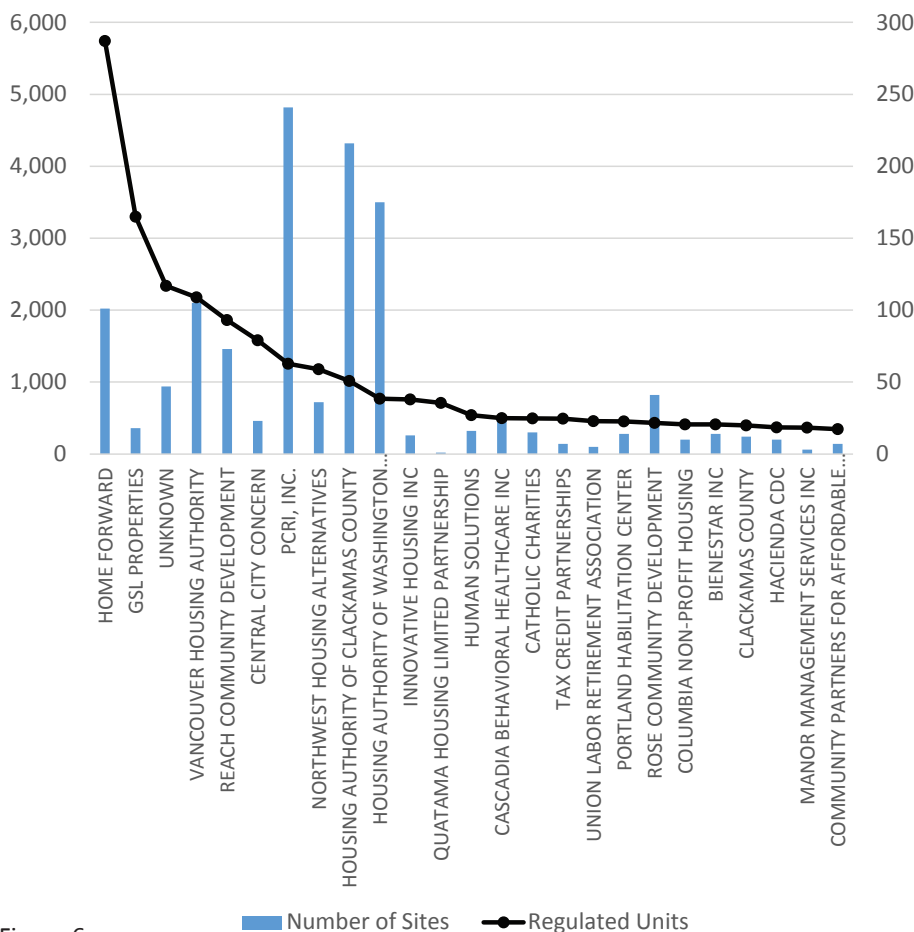


Figure 7

ment complex in Hillsboro (largest gray circle) is the outlier. This single site contains 711 units making it the 12th largest publicly subsidized affordable housing provider in the region. It is also interesting to note that some providers have crossed the Columbia to serve both Oregon and Washington. This is the case for

Source: Metro

Figure 6



Clearly, the most intense clusters of these units are in downtown (including Old Town/Chinatown) and inner northeast Portland. Figures 8 and 9 provide a closer look. While the providers in downtown serve a variety of clientele (including the aged and disabled) and housing types (including single-room occupancy buildings) what stands out in northeast Portland is the large number of widely dispersed low density units (predominantly single-family) that are principally owned and managed by PCRI (Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives). PCRI was born out of the housing crisis of the 1980s recession when unscrupulous lending practices forced many homeowners out of their homes. City and county lead-



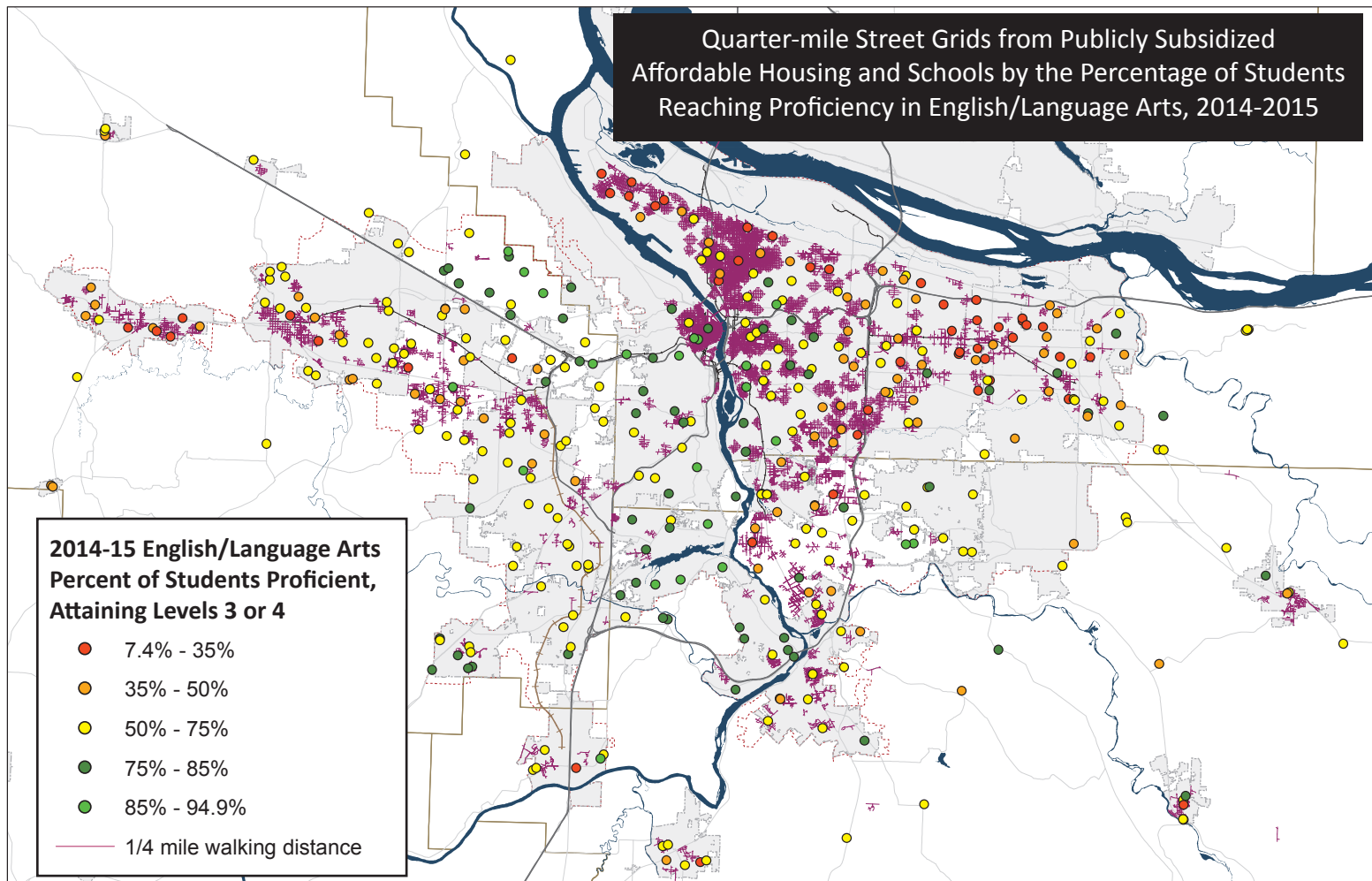


Figure 10

Sources: Metro; ODE

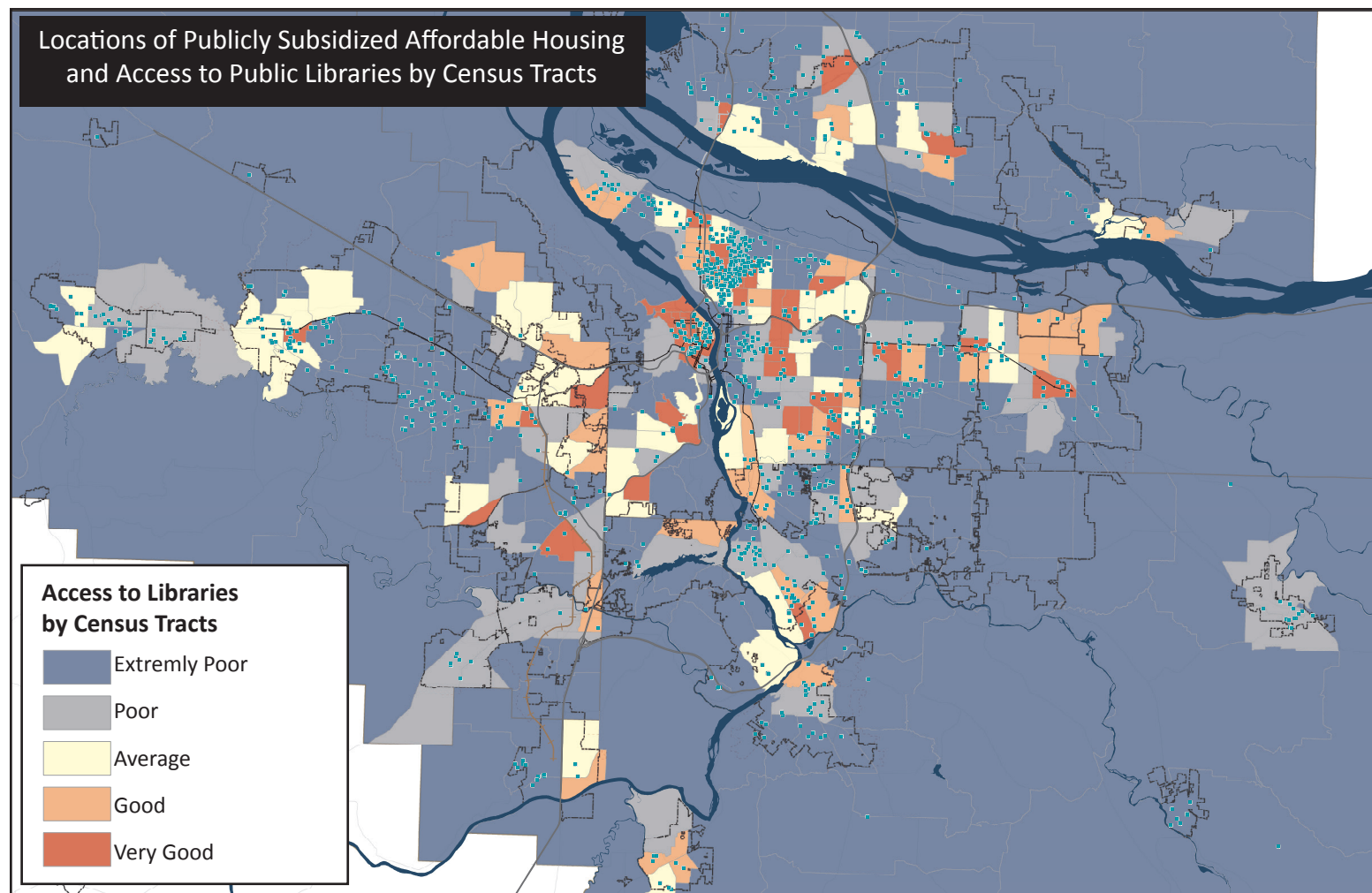


Figure 11

Sources: Metro; Regional Equity Atlas 2.0

ers and community members decided to form a nonprofit that would acquire endangered homes, help affected families secure conventional mortgages to buy back their homes, and purchase other defaulted properties for long-term affordable rentals. Many of the properties that remain in PCRI's portfolio are in some of the most rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods in Portland abutting affluent Irvington and Alameda. This housing stock has been instrumental in allowing some of the original residents to remain in these neighborhoods that have become unaffordable.

However, widely dispersed single-family houses, duplexes and four-plexes are more costly to manage and maintain than more concentrated housing options. Home Forward, over the years, has moved away from dispersed low density housing in favor of more concentrated approaches.

Access to Opportunities

One of the most important drivers, in terms of housing choice for households with school-aged children, is access to good schools. Statewide test scores, which provide a snapshot of how schools are doing relative to others in the state, are often used by parents to identify good schools.

Figure 10 shows the percentage of students in every public school in the region who have reached levels 3 or 4 (level 3 is the benchmark for proficiency) Smarter Balanced scores for English/Language Arts for the 2014/2015 academic year. Green points represent schools where 75 percent or more of the students reached proficiency. The yellow to red points, indicate schools where the percentage of students attaining proficiency in English

and Language Arts was 74.9 percent or less. The map also includes a quarter-mile street grid from each of the publicly subsidized affordable housing sites to show their proximity to schools (not the catchment areas).

While it appears that some households living in these units may be able to take advantage of high performing schools by this metric, many cannot. The number of high performing schools (green points), especially in Washington and Clackamas counties that stand alone, far from the locations of this housing is notable.

Finally, many low income households lack computers and internet access. Access to the internet has all but become a requirement for people to stay informed, remain connected, complete schoolwork, and find and apply for jobs. Public libraries offer free access to computers and the internet, but access to libraries may pose a barrier. Using data from the Regional Equity Atlas 2.0 mapping tool, figure 11 shows the relationship between the locations of publicly subsidized affordable housing sites and public libraries (census tracts identified as having very good access are those in which there is a library within a quarter mile; people living in census tracts with extremely poor access must travel a mile or more to a public library). While library access is good in many of Portland's central neighborhoods and other downtown areas in the region, access is quite poor in many areas, especially in East Portland, unincorporated areas of Washington County, and in Clark County. Many residents of these affordable housing units must travel considerable distances to get to a library.

As land becomes more costly in well-connected neighborhoods, access to important services and opportunities will become more difficult. **M**