The Leader

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Saturday, December 10, 2022

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Housing for whom? Why Port Townsend needs to get 'density'

(/stories/getaway-guide-2022,83395)

Getaway Guide 2022 (/stories/getaway-guide-2022,83395)

right | Guest Viewpoint

Posted Monday, November 28, 2022 9:48 am

Jaisri Lingappa

Jaisri Lingappa

Events this summer brought together local leaders and residents concerned about affordable housing. There was broad consensus that policy changes in Port Townsend should reflect what people working in the local economy need, and the City Council appears ready to move a number of proposals forward.

One of these proposals is to increase density in Port Townsend by "permitting duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes on single lots and/or on smaller lots" (see the Planning Commission's 2023 Workplan). Presumably, this code change is being proposed to address the housing affordability crisis, but, curiously, nowhere in that first item is affordability mentioned. This raises important questions.

If we increase the number of units built in Port Townsend without ensuring that those units are affordable to people who work in our local economy, will we move the proverbial "needle on the dial"? Will members of our local workforce be able to compete against wealthier buyers (telecommuters, retirees, buyers of second homes, etc.) arriving from out-of-area?

Understanding why these questions matter requires a definition of the housing affordability crisis. We typically think of this crisis as affecting low-wage earners — those earning 80 percent or less of our area's median income (AMI). However, increasingly it is also impacting the middle-class members of our workforce.

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City of Port Townsend to host first golf course open house (/stories/city-to-host-first-golf-course-open-house,95853)

The city of Port Townsend's first open house for envisioning the future of the Port Townsend Golf Course is set for Jan. 11. The event will be hosted

While some progress is being made on housing for low-wage earners (thanks Bayside, OlyCAP, and Habitat), we have failed to address or even fully acknowledge the housing crisis faced by middle-income earners in our community, namely individuals and families earning over 80 percent of AMI. This growing component of the housing crisis is highly detrimental to our local economy. When people who help to form the backbone of our local economy can't find housing, our businesses, hospital, schools, city and county government, utility providers, and non-profits will struggle to find employees despite the availability of jobs with reasonable salaries.

To illustrate the middle-income housing crisis, let's walk through some numbers. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines affordable housing as costing no more than 30 percent of household income. The AMI in Jefferson County is approximately $65,000 (this figure is the average of the AMI reported in the 2020 US Census and the AMI reported by HUD in 2022). A household with this average income can afford a home that costs approximately $250,000, assuming a 5 percent interest rate on a 30-year mortgage and a 5 percent down-payment. But the median sale price for a Jefferson County home was $439,300 in 2020 and increased to $660,700 in 2022, according to the Washington Center for Real Estate Research. To make matters worse, many home sales now have buyers willing to pay the entire price in cash – such all-cash offers outcompete offers from those working in the local economy who lack such financial resources and are therefore dependent on loans.

There are reasons for the rapid increase in home prices in our area and the plethora of all-cash offers. First, we live in an incredibly desirable place – a friendly community with abundant natural beauty and a vibrant cultural scene. Second, we are also less affected by the heat, fire, smoke, and flooding disasters caused by climate change in many parts of the country.

Additionally, we are in an era of increasing wealth inequality. According to the Pew Research Center, from 1983 to 2016, the share of aggregate wealth going to upper-income families increased from 60 percent to 79 percent, while the share held by middle-income families dropped by

at the Fort Worden Commons at 210 ...

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Man admits guilt for shooting neighbor's dog (/stories/man-admits-guilt-for-shooting-neighbors-dog,95856)

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Leadership Award for Jefferson Healthcare (/stories/leadership-award-for-jefferson-healthcare,95855)

Jefferson Healthcare was recognized with a 2022 Performance Leadership Award for excellence in outcomes and patient perspective as part of National Rural Health Day. The accolade was bestowed by ...

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nearly one-half, from 32 percent to 17 percent (details at pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality).

These facts help explain why retirees who have cashed out the equity on homes owned for many years, wealthy climate migrants, and people who can afford second and third homes come here and outcompete the local workforce for housing.

If market-rate duplex, triplex, and quad units are built in Port Townsend, it's reasonable to think they will be purchased by those whose resources allow them to outbid people working in the local economy – as we see with single family homes today. Why wouldn't such buyers be interested in smaller units? Retirees frequently downsize, and people seeking second homes often prefer small, newly built units without hassles like yard care. Smaller units will also allow those with more modest wealth to afford a weekend getaway or investment property. And if we envision that the new denser units will be rental units, what will keep their market-rate rents affordable to our workforce?

So when our city leaders ask if we support density, we ask, "Density for whom?" Yes, we support proposals that ensure that folks working in our local economy will receive preference for the duplexes, triplexes, and quads that we encourage to be built in Port Townsend. We further support proposals that ensure that those units will remain affordable to our workforce for many years to come.

What we do not support is increasing density in the city without putting affordability protections in place, because we won't solve the housing crisis without some simple and common-sense policies. In a global economy flush with capital, communities like ours need innovative policies to create and protect housing for people working in the local economy whose needs are unlikely to be met by either nonprofits or the free market.

As our city's leaders move forward to consider various proposals aimed to increase housing availability, we urge the following: 1) connect increased density to assurances of affordability for those who work and/or reside in this community and for whom the housing is their primary residence; 2) require evidence from developers for how that

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Wednesday, December 7, 2022 (/stories/pt-leader-2022-12-07,95889)

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affordability will be monitored and protected for a minimum number of years (preferably permanently); and 3) actively seek community input and participation as they rewrite the code.

To those who think such proposals involve too much "big government," ask yourself: When you have a heart attack or an accident, do you want to find the emergency room short-staffed because nurses and other potential employees have turned down job offers here due to lack of housing? How long are you willing to go without power because people who repair the lines cannot afford to live in your community? Are you ready to drive to Sequim, Port Angeles, or Poulsbo for most of your services – from dental and veterinary care to groceries and restaurants? Services require employees, and potential employees are turning down jobs because they cannot afford to live here.

If you are one of the many to whom local services and a strong workforce matter, then join us in advocating for a broader plan to protect affordability before we change zoning to incentivize more building. Protecting affordability isn't easy, but there are successful models for it in communities around the country. We can learn from them and take what can work in our community.

Buildable land is a finite resource – opportunities for affordable housing are lost as land gets built over. So let's get "density" right, Port Townsend!

This request is endorsed by the following members of our community:

Fred Kimball, retired local contractor and former board president for Habitat for Humanity EJC

Naushard Cader, Chartered Accountant (FCA)

Jane Lohry Armstrong, member of the Housing Solutions Network steering committee and Housing Connections Action Team

Kelsey Caudebec, Network Weaver for Housing Solutions Network

Liz Revord, Director of Housing Solutions Network, renter, and affordable home-seeker

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Steve Moore, member of the Bayside Housing & Services board and the Housing Solutions Network steering committee, former board member of Jefferson Land Trust and The Food Co-op

Willie Bence, Director of the Jefferson County Department of Emergency Management

(Jaisri Lingappa is a retired University of Washington research scientist and global health professor who lives in Port Townsend. She volunteers locally with the Housing Solutions Network and Habitat for Humanity.)

Comments

2 COMMENTS ON THIS ITEM ADD YOUR COMMENT

Wolfram Redhawk

Was waiting in line at a local retail store with a help wanted sign in the window and listened to the other two (older) customers waiting complain about how no one wants to work anymore. Thank you for raising awareness on the main cause of the labor shortage in Port Townsend . Unfortunately you have to compete against mainstream national news narratives that have less relevance to the local economy.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29 REPORT THIS (/REPORT_ITEM.HTML?SUB_ID=94974&COMMENT_ID=6485&REFERRING_URL=%2FSTORIES%2FHOUSING-FOR-WHOM-WHY-PORT-TOWNSEND-NEEDS-TO-GET-DENSITY-RIGHT-GUEST-VIEWPOINT%2C94974)

TomT

Regarding any plan by government (big or not) to "keep their market-rate rents affordable to our workforce":

RCW 35.21.830

Controls on rent for residential structures—Prohibited—Exceptions.

The imposition of controls on rent is of statewide significance and is preempted by the state. No city or town of any class may enact, maintain, or enforce ordinances or other provisions which regulate the amount of rent to be charged for single-family or multiple-unit residential rental structures or sites other than properties in public ownership, under public management, or properties providing low-income rental housing under joint public-private agreements for the financing or provision of such low-income rental housing. This section shall not be construed as prohibiting any city or town from entering into agreements with private persons which regulate or control the amount of rent to be charged for rental properties.

[1981 c 75 § 1.]

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Nonprofits for library are exploring merger | Letter to the editor (/stories/nonprofits-for-library-are-exploring-merger-letter-to-the-editor,95877)

Thank you to those who spread kindness | Letter to the editor (/stories/thank-you-to-those-who-spread-kindness-

letter-to-the-editor,95237)

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