



The Musical Whistle #2

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This week, The Whistle is tearing a page from The Sound of Music to “start at the very beginning” as we shine a spotlight on city codes. The hills (and our neighborhoods) are alive with the impacts of Leavenworth’s codes, which are basically a collection of a city’s laws, rules and regulations. While unlikely to inspire song, code is key to regulating subdivisions, zoning, environmental factors, building codes, permitting and more.

Now, we understand that many of you who viewed the properties listed in the first Whistle column left scratching your heads or cursing a little under your breath. How is the height, compacted living units, proximity to sidewalks and lack of green space possible compared to the historic homes next door? Yep, code. For the past six years, city councils, planning commissioners, consultants and mayors made a concerted effort to discuss, recommend and change Leavenworth’s codes.

The current code began taking shape in 2016 when, after ordering out for “schnitzel with noodles,” a task force was formed to create a Housing Action Plan or HAP.” With grant support from Washington’s Commerce Department and a \$46K contract with a Seattle consulting firm, the deed was accomplished. The new HAP determined Leavenworth’s housing needs and recommended ways to meet them. In April of 2021, after further discussion and modifications, the HAP was approved by the current city council with the backing of the mayor, community development director and the planning commission (PC).

Another acronym! The PC is an ongoing group appointed by the mayor and approved by council. Composed of community members, the PC’s goal is to recommend long range planning and legislative policy. According to the City, “Candidates reflecting the community’s diversity are encouraged to apply.” At present, the PC is far from diverse, being top heavy in the development camp. But that’s another column deserving of digestion with “a drink with jam and bread.”

“That will bring us back to doe, a deer...” Whoops. Code. Because of the particular way the conclusions of the HAP combine with the philosophy and motivations of the elected and non-elected folks now at city hall, the HAP is being used to accelerate density. You can observe codes at work as the character of our hometown streets slips away. Take a gander at the builds on Prospect, Cedar and Stafford streets to understand how code now supports large, multiple units destined to sell for prices far beyond the reach of folks searching for affordable housing. It’s all to code. And code is a work in progress.

As recently as August 8, 2022, city code was again altered by a vote of the council. In a section about lowest density residential neighborhoods (R6 Zone), the reference to family life “where children are members of most families” was stricken from the code. In

the same section, R6 was amended to include “duplexes and accessory dwellings.” Recent changes also decrease lot sizes for duplexes and allow dwelling heights up to 38.5 feet with administrative deviation. On the current PC docket you’ll find topics like increasing curb cuts per lot, lowering on-site parking requirements and lessening setbacks. Soon, the council will consider condos, triplexes, manufactured homes, and cottage housing for all neighborhoods. So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye to the small town, historic character of Leavenworth’s existing and future neighborhoods.

We’ve heard that getting the city to slow down and respond to your concerns feels like you have to “climb every mountain” until you’re too discouraged to take another step. As the whistle blows on our time together this week, I hope we’ve provided talking points for you to share with the elected, hired and appointed people at the city who recommend and vote for code. Please take the new poll found online in the Echo. Visit our site at LWhistle.com to learn more and send comments our way. Or just whistle. We’ll hear you.

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