

THE AFFORDABLE WHISTLE

By Rhona Baron

This week's Whistle is the first in a series about how Leavenworth, a town dependent on service workers, is constructing the future of affordable housing.

Affordable housing is a challenging and personal topic, infused with ideals like alleviating racial segregation and the value of working hard to secure the American dream. As the housing crisis smolders across America, a fifty year trend widens the gap between lower and higher income households. According to The Pew Research Center, The number of adults who live in the middle-class households has fallen from 61% in 1971 to 50% in 2021.

Unfortunately, our community has unique challenges beyond the "missing middle." Even before COVID, the supply of homes, seldom robust, plummeted while sticker prices and the cost of construction soared. Well paid folks who work from home or retirees centered in Seattle continue to gravitate to the relative affordability and outstanding beauty of the upper valley. Leavenworth's topography which limits "urban growth," combined with the public's fondness for the Bavarian village, will crank down supply and ratchet up demand for years to come.

So what's the solution when working downtown might bring in \$30-40,000 per year, if you can work full time, and an older, one thousand square foot house sells for \$500,000? The mayor, city council, appointed commissioners and staff make decisions that run against public sentiment, downplaying our comprehensive and housing plans and even contradicting their own instincts to address the consequential issue of affordability. In one correspondence, a council person wrote: "All the votes I have cast in relation to changing the codes to allow duplexes on smaller lots, and limiting the maximum height to 35 ft, were not ideal choices for me by any means. But to leave it as it was would -in my opinion- totally remove families with middle class income from ever building or living here. To do nothing would assure people and investors with the really big incomes would be the only ones building on those lots."

The council person's logic is flawed. It's part of a narrative about density creating "diversity and opportunity for housing." This narrative is being propelled at the state level by the WA State Commerce Department and is admirable in many urban settings and some small towns, but the concept doesn't work in a tiny, constrained mountain village like Leavenworth driven by market pricing.

In our Leavenworth neighborhoods, non-affordable outcomes are thriving under the new codes, providing excellent opportunities for developers, "investors and people with really big incomes." On Stafford Street, an ex-Planning Commissioner is developing what, by

any other name, would be called a four unit multiplex in an RL-6 zone with the assistance of new codes generated by the city. This property is listed at THREE MILLION DOLLARS including encouragement for the buyer(s) to use the property for a bed and breakfast.

The Whistle team has asked the city to provide data that proves the density model will or has worked in Leavenworth neighborhoods for the past three years. We've asked: where are examples of additional affordable homes being created? Have or will the large developments just completed (Leavenworth Haus), in planning (Leavenworth Meadows below Club West), or underway (Alpenglow Village off Ski Hill) be guaranteed to produce a single affordable unit for the workforce? What is the plan to update decaying infrastructure like streets and water distribution? Are you limiting the number of B and B's as you encourage ADU's? Have you assured that code maintains even one square foot of vegetation on a city lot in the midst of growing density?

The Council, Planning Commission and mayor remain strangely silent or dismissive. Mayor Florea emailed us on the topic: "...If this is not the direction the majority want to see, I will be a one-term mayor. So be it."

Whistle blown! In this time out, can we all agree we want affordable housing? The problem we face is not a lack of "correct" information, ideas or even ideals. It is faulty implementation by Development Services, the Planning Commission, the council and the mayor.

Public comment during the planning process was heavily against the kind of density we've outlined for a number of compelling reasons. Our current poll in the Echo reflects identical community sentiment. The question remains, can we get our elected officials to course correct in the midst of their laudable dedication to a cause like affordable housing? We encourage you to reach out and ask them. You'll find us at LWhistle.com. Or just whistle. We'll hear you.

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