

The #2 Affordable Housing Whistle

By Rhona Baron

The United States is in the throes of a housing crisis. Estimates indicate that we face a shortage of 6.5 million homes. As The Whistle detailed two weeks ago in part one of our three part series on housing, Leavenworth is uniquely challenged.

Like a Rubik's Cube almost too complex to tease into place, the town's desirability mixed with the influx of wealthy buyers based in the Seattle corridor, our limited geography, lower incomes from the tourism industry, infrastructure insufficiency and our second home market are daunting at best. After the August 10 meeting, we should add wildfire safety to the list of hurdles.

It's tempting to throw up hands and drop the cube altogether. But The Whistle Team is holding on, confronting the issues and laying them out for you. Our #1 housing column, published on August 16, offered context of the big picture. We outlined America's mixed economic system which attempts to balance government intervention with capitalism in hopes of creating "social aims for the public good." We summarized the law of supply and demand and how home prices are driven upward. We detailed how densifying or "upzoning" plays into Leavenworth's housing crisis.

Today we pick up where we left off. As city hall pursues the demise of single family zones, now a common practice across America, The Whistle asks: how did our community end up at this point, and how's that working?

For years, affordable housing efforts in Leavenworth were made outside of City Hall. A decade ago, I contributed to the Meadowlark affordable project, slated for the same hillside on the Chumstick that is currently being leveled by Weidner Development in preparation to house up to 600 people in market rate, multiplex units. In the past, the community pledged for Habitat For Humanity homes and more. I volunteered with my friends at MEND. The Marson's took it upon themselves to maintain a stock of affordable employee rentals. We were engaged.

No matter how much the mayor, council members and associated folks attempt to claim the moral high ground by shaming anyone who disagrees with their approach, Leavenworth's citizens should not be stereotyped as unfeeling, culturally or racially arrogant hayseeds. The "Miracle Town" is expert at embracing change. And the vast majority of citizens care about a fair shake, including housing the people who work, live and raise a family here.

It took too long, but in 2016 the city formally acknowledged the problem of affordable housing by establishing a Housing Task Force, followed by a Housing Needs Assessment, and a Council Housing Committee. By 2020, code changes supposedly intended to solve affordability were in full swing. Single family zoning language was being redlined and replaced to allow more units, tighter setbacks, loss of vegetation and less emphasis on kids. Neighbors began to complain and wave various red flags.

They were ignored. The code changes dovetailed with COVID quarantining, overshadowing and nearly eliminating the opportunity for public input. This summer ground was broken to begin construction within Leavenworth's city limits to house almost 1000 more people. Whether rented or owned, not one unit has been designated "affordable."

For some reason, even with the establishment in 2021 of a Housing Action Plan that identified and prioritized options to address Leavenworth's housing situation, the planning commission cherry picked certain points, ignoring those that could have had far greater impact. Change after change has been brought to the council and they have approved with little regard for the impact those modifications spawned, the public comments against or the lack of formal evaluation process the council failed to bake into their master plan for densification.

The marked difference in this iteration of affordable housing initiatives is the separation between the citizens and the mandates forced on the community by our elected officials. The community is led to believe we just have to be patient. Indeed, one of the most influential ideas in urbanism today posits that reforms in zoning and building codes to allow for density will pave the yellow brick road toward diverse communities and affordability in the future. The approach can be effective and help revitalize communities in cities! But magical thinking abounds if you think it's going to work here, given the Rubik's Cube of conditions Leavenworth faces. Unstoppable without intervention, local pricing for homes will continue to climb at a greater pace than neighboring towns. There is zero evidence Leavenworth can densify our way to Oz.

The Whistle blows on city hall for mistaking Leavenworth for a test tube. Our jewel of a tiny town has become an early adaptor of unproven urban theory, currently being measured in the large cities it was designed for such as New York and Chicago to mixed results. In terms of studies conducted on mountain tourist villages that by their nature are far more sensitive to code changes, none could be found.

Why do our elected officials fail to employ virtually any government tool at their disposal to mitigate pricing, enhance green space, address neighbor complaints or solve traffic and infrastructure concerns before and during the push to densify?

In the next column, we'll unlock the city's toolkit so we can all evaluate the truth about the hard choices before us. Until then, please visit our website at LWhistle.com to comment. Keep whistling, we hear you!