

The #3 Affordable Housing Whistle

By Rhona Baron

The Leavenworth community cares about affordable housing. Based on the city's recent Urban Growth Area Expansion survey, 70% of respondents view affordable housing as a priority. At the same time, an equally strong majority prefer single family neighborhoods, more parks and maintaining Leavenworth's mountain town vibe.

A mixture of cooperation and conflict is washing over America's tourist towns as people of varying backgrounds, income levels, perspectives and ages wade into the muddy waters in an effort to create more affordable and workforce housing. This column has argued that multi-perspective solutions are possible. But if we do not engage, city hall will continue to code us into a density driven shape we don't recognize or desire. Our small town feeling will be lost!

Offering the final column in our three part series, we invite you to explore the following solutions because it's going to take a village of diverse, cooperative folks to solve the challenges before us. And, although admittedly uncomfortable, there is no avoiding the need for the community to confront change...together.

If you are a business owner, how would you prefer to contribute to housing? If you are the Leavenworth Chamber or a community non-profit, when and how do you step up? Or maybe you work in town. What is your proposal for living affordably in the home you envision?

If you are a long time resident, have you grappled with the need occurring around your little patch of heaven? To our wealthiest homeowners, what's your position? Are you a second homeowner whose property sits vacant most of the year while our workforce struggles to find housing? Or do you own multiplex rentals, benefitting from their income? Where is your responsibility in our housing puzzle?

1. In a number of tourist towns, businesses (either jointly or singly) design, build and pay for housing. Or business(es) secure employee housing from existing dwelling units. Examples include Ketchum, Idaho and the Marson family here in Leavenworth.
2. In Big Sky, Montana, resort tax funding administered by government along with a non-profit (Habitat For Humanity) and the local school district formed a partnership to create housing for teachers.
3. A campaign sponsored by a large ski area in the Aspen area offers attractive, fun incentives to homeowners with rental units, ADU's, even extra bedrooms to rent to employees for the busiest seasons.
4. Examples abound of partially or fully converted tourist multiplexes or hotels. Instead of housing visitors, the structures provide workforce housing rentals, as in Whitefish, Montana.

5. In Carbondale Colorado, residents voted for funneling tax money from short term rentals or lodging taxes toward affordable housing.

6. Within a five to fifteen minute drive or bus ride from Leavenworth, the landscape flattens and offers developable land in Peshastin, Monitor, and Cashmere. Should Leavenworth workforce housing deliberately partner with and expand to these locations?

7. In 2017, a City of Leavenworth study recommended the following options: HUD PBRA (Project-Based Rental Assistance), HUD SHOP (Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program), HTF (National Housing Trust Fund) among others.

8. Leavenworth could be the first in WA to attempt affordable housing overlays where denser construction is allowed in neighborhoods if the builder is willing to commit to a percentage of those units being affordable.

9. A moratorium on allowing Leavenworth's many ADU's to be converted to B and B's could be imposed, tied to an incentive to rent ADU's to locals.

10. In Breckenridge Colorado, the city is purchasing property, putting on deed restrictions that specify that the owner must work in town and may not convert the home to a short term rental. The city then flips the dwelling for 30% less than purchase price.

As we all consider the future, we thank you for reading the Whistle in print and online at The Echo since September, 2022. We appreciate receiving almost 14,000 visits to our website. But for now, it's time for me to say farewell as editor. Running for council position #4, I'm required to bow out as a columnist. I hope to visit with you soon in person. You can always reach the incomparable Whistle Team at LWhistle.com. Keep on Whistling. We hear you!