

The Elephant Whistle

By Rhona Baron

The weight of representing our community can be challenging for City Council. When it comes to our residential zones, streets, alleys, structures and services, motions passed have been at odds with the will of the people. Why? This week The Whistle calls it. City Hall is not comfortable acknowledging elephants that roam their rooms, crushing the life out of what should be collaboration with voters. We often inform readers by presenting the details. No magnifying glass needed for what follows. Here come the elephants!

A large pachyderm invaded the last Council meeting on January 24 in a joint session with the Planning Commission. Council persons Waters, Reister and Strand spoke in favor of a temporary moratorium on B and B licensing. They are concerned about Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's) being taken from the local rental market and converted to "shadow short term rentals." The resulting bugle came from PC chair Steven Booher when he declared, "Talking about a moratorium is insane to me!" Strong language from someone whose designated role is to "recommend" to our elected officials. Oh, whoops. Search B and B online at the City's website and find that Mr. Booher's designs for ADU's pop up for sale. You'd have to be Dumbo not to question conflict of interest.

This community is polite. Maybe too polite to mention the large elephant flattening our so called Community Engagement Nights held quarterly at the Festhalle. Citizens are grumbling to the Whistle Team, wondering about the "engagement" part. Where is the open mic? Why doesn't the community get a choice in what they'd like to talk and learn about? How come there is no real gathering time where folks can exchange ideas and have questions answered? People are leaving Community Engagement Nights feeling like they've been taken on Safari, but missed the animals they wanted to see.

And did you see the large elephant that announced the plans for the Chumstick/ Leavenworth Meadows development for up to 600 people, or the Alpenglow development up Ski Hill Drive? No? Maybe that's because plans for substantial changes in population, traffic and the subsequent need for infrastructure are hidden in tiny notices in the Echo, or buried as signage under banks of snow. Lack of transparency hides some big elephants. Does Development Services hope that if we just grab the tail or the ear or whatever, we won't understand how massive these changes are going to be?

The biggest circus we've spotted consists of trick elephants riding roughshod over the community's concerns about affordable housing. The Mayor is ringmaster, ignoring the majority of citizens who have taken the time to comment and run the numbers on density and affordability in the Leavenworth market. Meanwhile, we've watched code changes enable more density on our streets. We've spoken out against tall, multiple unit "infill" in historic neighborhoods, citing valid concerns about whether density

comes remotely close to helping make Leavenworth more affordable, even if part of a “bigger strategy.”

The Whistle suggests the mayor and council employ their voter-given leadership. If City Hall is serious, stop monkeying around. All new developments should be encouraged to provide a set (or proportional) number of affordable housing units. The City should grant the increased densities allowed under the new code provisions, and any future code provisions, SOLELY as incentives for, and conditioned upon, the provision of affordable housing. Many Washington jurisdictions have adopted such an approach. Don't let the circus distract us from more powerful solutions.

While The Whistle helps you sort through a jungle of codes, changes and decisions, we never take residents for granted. Citizen actions (or inactions) set the tone for our community. To that end, you'll find our ongoing “Whistlelist” for citizen engagement at LWhistle.com.

This week, there is one new item. We'd simply like you to ask yourself: “What elephant is sitting on my chest, causing me to feel uneasy voicing my own perceptions?” This personal question can cut many ways and we wish you well. However, if you feel it's hopeless to speak up as a voice in our community, we suggest you send that particular pachyderm packing!

Visit us often at LWhistle.com to learn more, be in touch and contact us. There is a new poll on the front page of the online version of the Echo, way down at the bottom. How do you feel about the Chumstick Roundabout? Take our super simple poll. Be seen and see where others stand on community topics.

We appreciate you staying in touch with our team. Just keep whistling. We'll hear you.