

Initial Citizen Committee Recommendations

VII . Housing Variety and Affordability

Living in the Skagit Valley appeals to people of all income levels, but keeping the valley accessible to people of all income levels will require planning now and course corrections in the future as we watch how our policy decisions play out. Increases in the supply of housing available in urban areas, consistent with the recommendations in our goal statement for Compact Communities, are necessary but not sufficient to promote affordable housing in our community.

There is already a serious lack of affordable housing in Skagit County – meaning housing that is affordable to the average working individual or family, as well as assistance programs for those with special needs -- as the following figures illustrate:

- The Housing Authority of Skagit County has more than 3,000 people on the waiting list for its housing vouchers program, representing a 7-year backlog for this type of housing assistance.
- Skagit’s County’s 2009 homeless count of 2,306 (compared to 1,182 in 2005) was the highest per capita in Washington State.

1. We urge Skagit County, the cities and towns, the Housing Authority of Skagit County and other housing providers, builders and developers, social service organizations others, to work together to provide a wider variety of housing options for our urban and rural residents, as one means to address the serious lack of affordable housing in Skagit County.

Demographics are changing. Both nationally and locally, we are seeing more single person households in addition to single parent households. Boomers are retiring, and looking for new housing options. In response to these changes, we are seeing smaller houses; smaller lots; attached townhouses, condos, and apartments; and mixed use projects that combine retail space, office space, and living space. We’ve learned that all of these options can be both attractive and affordable. Affordability is partly a result of lot and home size, but proximity to work, entertainment, and necessary goods and services greatly reduces transportation costs which also contributes to affordability. An adequate supply of affordable housing is important for meeting social needs in our communities and also for housing the region’s workforce.

- We are encouraged by, and supportive of, the work being done by the Skagit Affordable Housing Advisory Committee, which includes elected officials, city and town planners, housing providers, developers, farmers, and other members and is developing a coordinated, rational affordable housing action plan. Particularly if we move toward accommodating 90 percent of new population in urban areas, the cities and towns, housing providers, and the building industry must continue to work on this issue aggressively and over the long-term. Affordable housing is another area where the Skagit Smart Growth Alliance can play an important role, drawing on local, region and national housing expertise to address this serious local issue.

2. We recommend that affordable housing should be integrated into the fabric of our communities, not isolated in low-income enclaves. We know this can be done, because we've seen it in action elsewhere.

Well designed projects can incorporate housing units for many income levels, but this may not happen by chance. More often, it happens when planners and developers are deliberate about creating mixed income projects. Citizen Committee members were able to see a well-designed project at High Point in Seattle where subsidized housing and market-rate housing were side by side and we could not discern the difference. In this

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manner, we believe farmworker housing (including for migrant workers) should and will be increasingly provided within our communities, rather than in seasonal labor camps located on farms. Affordable housing should also be safe and secure.

- Some noteworthy examples of attractive, well located, affordable housing developments in our own communities include the Villa Santa Maria apartments in Mount Vernon and the Raspberry Ridge apartments in Burlington, both of which provide housing for farmworkers; and the very nicely restored New Wilson Hotel Apartments in downtown Anacortes.

3. As discussed in greater detail in our Compact Communities and Transportation recommendations, developing more compact, mixed use, and transit-friendly urban communities and rural villages, where people have options to live and work, can increase housing opportunities for all income levels, and reduce commuting costs.

At present, people often locate in some of our rural areas because homes are more affordable than in our cities. Many of these people commute long distances to their work sites and are vulnerable to higher energy costs. Unless more affordable homes are offered in urban areas, transportation options will be essential for these rural families.

Affordability is not the only factor that draws people to rural areas. People choose rural properties so they can engage in home businesses, raise their own food, experiment with alternative energy ideas, be close to outdoor recreation, and have space for creative activities. Others simply do not want to live in urban areas. When commuting is not essential – because people live and work in their rural communities -- rural living can remain a viable option.

4. The Home Trust of Skagit and other interested partners should develop and construct a pilot project in Skagit County to demonstrate that the provision of affordable housing can be combined with quality design and green building and low impact development techniques.

Home trusts and housing partnerships in surrounding counties are developing outstanding examples of well-designed, affordable, and environmentally responsible housing. Examples include the San Juan Community Home Trust's Sun Rise and Salal neighborhoods. (See [San Juan Community Home Trust](http://www.hometrusted.org/), or <http://www.hometrusted.org/>). From the innovative housing projects members of the Citizen Committee have visited, the examples we've seen and heard about, and the housing innovators we have met, we believe the same type of project can and should be built here in Skagit County.