



BROADVIEW
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DATE: 17 October 2017
TO: Meredith Penny, Island County Planning & Community Development
FROM: Andrea Petzel, Broadview Planning
RE: Results of Stakeholder Interviews

Meredith,

As part of the public engagement process for the Island County Housing Element update, Broadview Planning conducted interviews with 14 key stakeholders representing diverse perspectives on housing in Island County. These initial interviews aimed to:

- Generate early awareness and broad buy-in for the Housing Element update.
- Gather important input and background information from select stakeholders with deep understanding of housing trends, challenges, and needs.
- Solicit input on successful communication, outreach, and engagement strategies unique to Island County residents.

The stakeholders we interviewed represent Island County school districts, senior services, lenders, low-income housing providers, the United States Navy, Island County staff, and conservation interests. Feedback was combined and analyzed in a systematized format to protect anonymity and to highlight significant, and repeated, findings. The key themes and sector-specific information presented below offer a substantive springboard for the rest of the Housing Element update.

Key Themes

- Many are eager to see a greater variety in housing types appropriate for all residents and at all income levels.
- Balancing any new housing strategies with Island County's desirable rural character is a priority.
- The current Island County housing market for both renting and purchasing a home is booming. Both appear to be in short supply and prices have escalated sharply in recent years.
- Housing opportunities for people who want to downsize, particularly seniors who want to age in place and stay in this community, are in short supply. This is also relevant for farmers looking to pass on operations (not just the land) to the next generation.
- Island County's permitting process is difficult and convoluted, and is perceived as a barrier to building new homes.

GMA 13038

- Navy personnel moving into the County is perceived to be negatively impacting housing affordability and availability.
- Many existing accessory dwelling units that were once long-term rentals have been converted to vacation rentals.
- The historic preservation constraints in Ebey's Landing National Historic Reserve make housing less affordable.
- Different housing types are largely unavailable for seniors, people who don't have children, and others don't fall on the housing spectrum between large-scale apartment complex or single-family home. There's relatively little development of townhouses, co-housing, duplexes, triplexes, etc.
- The need to upgrade septic systems is an affordability challenge. What might look promising as an affordable home probably has expensive underlying septic issues.
- Oak Harbor, Freeland, Clinton, and Langley all present opportunities for more interesting, dense housing options.
- Both Navy and non-Navy workers have a hard time finding housing in Oak Harbor.
- When looking to direct growth or adding in areas to take new growth, planners should be mindful of schools' capacity, proximity to new housing, and sidewalks.
- There is a desire to look into reducing regulations or allowing shared housing.

In addition to the key themes that emerged from these interviews, stakeholders were able to provide insights into housing issues from their individual professional perspectives. While not rising to the level of key themes, this information is captured in the statements below, grouped by category.

Seniors

- Many seniors want to stay in the area, but either can't afford (or find) a place to rent, nor can they afford to keep their current home.
- There are no viable options for seniors looking to downsize or age in place on their own home or property.
- Camano Island has a lot of retirees or older people looking for a second home. Many struggle to adjust to the lack of health, aging, and social services in a rural area, and the jump from urban to rural living can be jarring.

Camano Island

- Because high numbers of seasonal renters leave the island during certain times of the year, many residents are house sitters that jump from place to place to serve as short-term caretakers.

Permitting Issues

- The Island County permitting process is seen as inconsistent, difficult, and convoluted, and there is a perception that decisions change throughout the permitting process.
- Sidewalks are critical to getting kids from their homes to their schools safely.
- There's a minimum square footage required to be considered a dwelling unit, and this may contribute to the perception that tiny houses aren't allowed in Island County.

- An innovative opportunity in this community may be to develop cluster housing.
- Tiny houses aren't being built in part because they aren't necessarily cost-effective on a large plot of land.
- Oak Harbor waives permitting fees for affordable housing, but Island County does not.
- Community drain fields are an interesting option in places like Clinton or the Camano Gateway area as a way to address infrastructure needs.

U.S. Navy

- Naval Air Station Whidbey Island is at capacity for on-base single-family housing. However, most families would prefer to live off the base, as there's a greater sense of community in Oak Harbor. On base, there are limited activities for families.
- Navy families living on base dread commuting anywhere on Hwy 20. Having housing in reasonable proximity to the base is in everybody's best interest.
- Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) data is publicly available, and there is the perception that it's one of the things driving up the cost of housing.
- Many who chose to live off base do so because BAH allows them to invest in a house. Those who invest in single-family homes often want to stay here.
- Enlisted-3 (E3) and below must live on base.
- Millennials are coming into the Navy, and they prefer compact living/communal areas. Through thoughtful planning, housing choices can reflect this trend.
- The local commuting area extends out to Sedro-Woolley.

Low Income + Homeless Housing

- There's a shortage of transitional housing that provides stability so people can get back on their feet.
- An estimated 50% of people experiencing homelessness are not from Island County.
- Exploring public-private partnerships is a strategy that may provide more low-income housing.
- Island County should be proactive and look at national models for out-of-the-box policy frameworks that support housing choices in rural lands.
- Building without government money is more affordable. The red tape of federal funds adds to the burden of affordability.
- Only one hotel in Island County will take housing vouchers.

Schools

- Oak Harbor School District hired 100 new staff this year, and they struggled to find places to live.
- In Oak Harbor, half of the students are connected to the Navy.
- Coupeville School District struggles with high rent/few places in Coupeville, and limited options going south. For people with families or living-wage earners, there just aren't many options.
- For many years, attendance in Camano Island elementary schools was in decline. In the last year or two, there's been an uptick in enrollment with a 10% increase reported in one of the elementary schools.

Farm Housing

- The most immediate need is to provide housing for farm interns, including World Wide Opportunities for Organic Farmers (WWOOF), who need places to stay on farms as part of the experiential learning process.
- The next most pressing need is housing for second generation farm housing. When the existing generation phases out of running the farm, they want to stay on the land. The next generation, often family, needs an onsite house to live in.
- Farms require farmers to be on site at all times to deal with livestock issues, flooding, etc. You can't be a farmer and commute.
- To deal with the lack of housing, old trailers and motorhomes are brought onsite. They often aren't well-maintained or safe, and they degrade the quality of the rural landscape.
- Labor is currently limiting the operational expansion of most farms, and lack of housing is limiting labor. Most farms have the capacity and the want/need to be bigger, but they cannot provide the necessary housing.
- Farmers need housing that may be used for only 2-3 weeks a year for short-term work. Framing farm housing as "temporary" can be problematic as it leads to poor quality.
- Island County should aspire to be a national leader in innovative approaches to allowing and regulating farmworker housing.

Vision – 10 years from now

- The huge homes that are being built now can be tuned into co-housing or shared housing.
- There will be an interesting variety of housing types for people across all income levels.
- The County will maintain its rural character.
- There will be more housing units in Coupeville, Langley, and Freeland – not just one or two houses, but a true expansion of housing.
- Island County will be a national leader in providing quality, well-regulated for farmworker housing.

Suggestions for Additional Outreach

Stakeholders offered many ideas for appropriate groups and meeting times for the next phase of outreach in spring 2018. Below is a list of organizations and individuals that should be considered during that phase:

- Real estate – Randy Heagle or Steve Love
- Island Transit – help with homeless transportation needs
- Camano Chapel – Steve Redfern
- Safe Harbor Free Clinic – Jimmy Grierson
- Terry's Corner businesses – Jeff Erikson
- Librarians in each library
- Whidbey Weekly – Erik Marshall
- Habitat for Humanity family selection meetings (Spring 2018)

- Opportunity Council – 2nd Thursday of the month
- Island County Nursing – Janet McWatt
- Fire Department – Jim Reinhardt
- Law Enforcement - Chief Drusker, Mark Brown
- County Commissioners
- Camano Senior Center – Karla Jacks
- Navy Morale, Welfare, Recreation (NWR) director – Wayne Short
- Island County Farm Bureau
- Whidbey Island Growers Association (meet every 2nd Monday)
- Advertise in the Crab Cracker
- Chamber of Camano
- Oak Harbor Chamber – send a welcome aboard packet to new residents every month
- Stanwood/Camano Rotary (Wednesday lunches)
- Windermere Real Estate Agents (Wednesday morning staff meetings)
- Advertise in local newspapers
- Christianson Dairy on Camano
- PTA groups in the school districts
- Faith Communities – Jim Lindus, Joanne Hoover
- Drew’s List