



ISLAND COUNTY PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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RE: Planning Commission Findings – Affordable Housing

Summary:

The Planning Commission is recommending approval of amendments to the implementation strategies of the Housing Element of the Island County Comprehensive Plan.

Findings:

1. On January 25, 2008 Planning Commissioner William Massey submitted a Comprehensive Plan amendment request in which several modifications of the Housing Element were proposed.
2. On February 28, 2008, during a joint meeting between the Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners, the proposed amendments to the Housing Element were added to the Planning Commission's annual review docket.
3. The Planning Department introduced the amendments to the Planning Commission on May 27, 2008.
4. The Planning Commission held a public hearing on July 8, 2008 in Coupeville. Public testimony was provided during the hearing.
5. On July 10, 2008 Island County, the Cities of Oak Harbor and Langley, and the Town of Coupeville held a joint summit on affordable housing issues in Island County. In excess of 100 individuals representing all of the various interests in the County were present. Interests that were represented included local and state government, real estate, builders, lending institutions, mental health, law enforcement, non-profits and self help housing, community land trusts, and schools. It was agreed that a better strategy was needed to address long term affordability goals in Island County. It was agreed that the Island County Council of Governments was the appropriate body to initiate the strategic planning process.
6. The Planning Commission held a public hearing on July 22, 2008 on Camano Island.
7. The Island County Council of Government met on July 23, August 27 and September 24, 2008 to talk about how to advance a more significant strategic planning effort to

address affordable housing issues in Island County. The COG agreed that each of the local governmental entities needed to be involved in a strategy. The strategy would define affordable housing, establish targets within different areas, be incorporated into each municipalities comprehensive plan so as to be consistent, and assign responsibility for carrying out the various initiatives established within the strategy.

8. The State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development provided comments on the amendments to the implementation strategies in the Affordable Housing Element of the Comprehensive Plan.
9. Some of the amendments reference potential future modifications to the density provisions within individual zoning designations. It is not the Planning Commission's intent to encourage the adoption of amendments that are inconsistent with the State's Growth Management Act. The GMA requires that urban densities be placed in urban growth areas while the rural areas must maintain a low rural density. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to consider whether the density bonus provisions contained within the plan and the code could be modified in a manner that encourages affordable housing. Modifications to density standards are not limited to simply looking at ways to increase density over what is currently allowed.
10. It is important to define low income and affordable housing. These terms are often confused and used interchangeably. Low income housing generally applies to people who are earning well below the median income (e.g. less than 50% of median income). Affordable housing generally applies to people who are earning slightly less than the median income (e.g. 80% of median income). The County should define what is meant by low income housing and affordable housing in order to establish goals that are targeted to each segment.
11. Island County should consider the use of surplus lands to achieve affordable housing goals. Many county owned properties are very restricted in their use due to the method in which they were acquired or how they are currently designated. By ordinance, park properties cannot be used for uses that are inconsistent with park objectives. Housing would be inconsistent with the ordinance governing parks. Likewise, properties that were deeded to the county by private citizens may contain restrictions on how they may be used. Nonetheless, the County should research the terms of each property and determine whether any of those properties can be utilized for affordable housing.
12. Affordable housing units can come in many forms. Some are more appropriately placed in urban areas (e.g. high density apartment housing) while others may be more compatible in rural areas (e.g. manufactured homes on rural lots). Some of the affordable housing stock is appropriately provided in rental units while other portions may be through ownership. Whatever affordable housing looks like it is important that it be spatially distributed so that those who are most at need are not simply placed in one part of the county or in one area of a city. A healthy and diverse social environment requires this kind of spatial distribution. With that said, it is also important to ensure that the population in which these goals and amendments are targeted has access to basic services such as transit, day care, social services, medical, etc.

13. Accessory dwelling units are one potential form of providing affordable housing. Currently, the county code places a cap on the total number of accessory dwelling units that may be permitted in each year. The county should reconsider how this cap is applied. There are extreme positions on this issue. Some would argue that the absence of a yearly limit will have the effect of doubling the minimum density within each of the applicable zoning designations because two houses would be allowed on each parcel. Others will argue that a cap on the total number of ADU's allowed will reduce the potential number of affordable units. In reality, when ADU's are permitted some are never rented or lived in on a permanent basis which means that the density is not doubled and that there is simply one more structure on the property that is rarely used. Other landowners seek approval of an ADU for the clearly stated purpose of renting the structure out for extra revenue. If density is the issue there may be ways to separate ADUs that are permitted with the stated intent of rental from ADUs that are built with the intent of being used for infrequent occupancy.
14. The Planning Commission deliberated on September 9, 2008 and concluded that the proposed implementation strategies were an appropriate first step towards addressing the affordable housing dilemma facing Island County. The Planning Commission encourages the Board of County Commissioners to more vigorously address affordability in Island County. The Planning Commission is supportive of a more targeted affordable housing program in Island County.

Conclusions:

The Island County Planning Commission recommends that the Board of Island County Commissioners adopt the proposed amendments and findings of fact.

Respectfully submitted through the Island County Planning Department to the Board of Island County Commissioners, pursuant to RCW 36.70.040 and ICC 16.26, this
28th day of October 2008 by,



Alan Schell
Island County Planning Commission, Chairperson