

News Release

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Editorial

Time to End the Rhetoric that Guest Houses "Double Density"

I was fortunate to come from a large family with nine brothers and sisters. We lived on an apple farm – as rural as any place in San Juan County. My parents used a small school bus to take us around when we were young. Compared to today's housing demography in this County (average household: size 2.16 persons), our family, alone, would be six times the average household size! And, that doesn't count the friends and visitors we had!

Next time you hear that a guest house will "double density," ask the speaker "density of what?" Buildings? People? Families? Homes? Then, consider all of the steps taken by the legislature and the county commissioners to allow guest houses as a flexible living arrangement, to assure comfortable, affordable housing for you, and others, throughout your life.

A guest house may begin as a small cabin or garage – a place to call home while the main house is being built. Later, the building may be rented to a young person who needs a place while making a change in life, such as a teacher moving to the islands or a single parent with a child. Later, the guest house may become a caretaker's cabin and still later, a caregiver's home. The nature of the housing is what makes it affordable and flexible.

In 1993, the state legislature said that the county must allow an accessory dwelling unit on every parcel in a single-family zone. San Juan County assures a guest house is not a "second dwelling unit" because of limits on:

- Size (1000 square feet – just 1/44th of an acre; 1/440th of a ten-acre parcel);
- Location (in the shoreline -- landward of the main house and outside of meadows, etc.);
- Occupancy (not more than one family per parcel – main house and guest house);
- Ownership (same owner of main house and guest house); and
- Proximity standards (must be served by same driveway and use same septic and water system as main house).

Recent studies have confirmed that guest house construction has not "doubled density." Only one in seven single-family residences have an attached or detached guest house. Only four percent of all parcels have a guest house that is used as a long-term rental. This same study showed that only 48 guest houses, county-wide, are permitted for short-term rental. This hardly leads to "double density." Moreover, this small increase in use is more than offset by the substantial stock of housing (25 percent) that is occupied only seasonally.

When challenged, the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board accepted the county's approach, but imposed a requirement not found in the law that the accessory unit must be attached to the main house. The Growth Board said a detached accessory dwelling unit – a guest house or garage apartment – will create "structural density" in violation of the anti-sprawl goal of the Growth

Management Act. Why have a different rule for attached and detached accessory units? The Growth Board said that a detached ADU has all of the characteristics of a second residence -- i.e., it "looks like a second residence" and, therefore, it must be counted as a second "dwelling unit."

The Growth Board's preoccupation with "structural density" and appearance does not make sense. Neither the County, nor the Growth Board, impose restrictions on other buildings on a parcel such as a garage, a barn, a studio, a wood shed, a tool shed, or a bunkhouse. Thus, while the Growth Board prohibited a guest house, an owner may build a trophy home of 10,000 square feet or more, and a combination of other structures.

Many citizens have told me they would rather have their parents live close by in a guest house than in a retirement home. A guest house can be used by growing teens, friends, guests, a gardener, parents, siblings, a nurse or caretaker, depending on the stage of the owner's life. A guest house is a flexible living arrangement. It is affordable because the structures are small and do not require additional infrastructure costs - new roads, driveways and separate water systems.

Today, many properties in the San Juans have more bedrooms than people. The housing policies of this county should promote the use of desirable and affordable housing, not restrict it.

A committee of the state legislature will be in Friday Harbor for a hearing to consider this issue. Please attend and tell the committee how you feel about the ability to construct a guest house. The legislative committee will meet at the Friday Harbor High School Commons on Wednesday, July 21, 2004 at 12:30 p.m.

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