

From the editor —

# Buying into affordable housing

Here we go again. Whatever the merits of Greg Ellis' proposal to build six or so houses on the Washington Street lot behind Pioneer Market, he provides the opportunity for town and Skagit Valley residents to again wrestle with the complexity of gaining affordable housing in La Conner and throughout the county.

At his permit hearing Sept. 21, Ellis shared his pitch to offer "affordable housing, in the high 500s." That is pricing affordable only to folks downsizing from Seattle or San Francisco. Ellis is offering the wish, like Dorothy clicking her ruby slippers together in her attempt to get home in "The Wizard of Oz," as if a fervent hope will make it so. It will not. Putting the word affordable in front of the word housing — or placing it before a price, like \$500,000 — will not make it so. The town's government, elected officials and staff, have the same habit and make the same mistake.

Better that the town council outlaw the term or create a penalty if it is used inside town buildings or at meetings. We are too civilized to put folks in stocks or to flog them, but some punishment is warranted.

Better that council define the term "affordable housing" in the municipal code or policy. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sets income limits that determine eligibility for assisted housing programs at between 30% and 80% of an area's median income. To buy a Skagit Home Trust home, you must meet specific income guidelines.

After outlawing that term, the town council will help low income housing advocates by putting in the comprehensive plan the terms "first time home buyers" and "starter homes." Then, when developers share their plans for housing, our government can ask, "are you building starter homes for first time home buyers?" That means younger people with jobs as teachers, para-educators, fire fighters, law enforcement and, yes, grocery clerks.

The first need in developing affordable housing is to embrace the complexity of the issue while believing the mantra that it is one of the most significant and intractable issues our society faces locally, statewide and nationally.

It will take decades of year-in-and-year-out effort to move any community into the position of having a reasonable supply of starter homes housing stock.

Communities, led by visionary elected officials, will commit to long term planning, knowing the four pillars to gain first time home buyers starts with planning. The second pillar is funding. Face the reality that getting lower income people into local housing requires financial subsidies. Third, specific, detailed regulations provide a blueprint for staff, housing advocates and developers so everyone knows the targets to achieve and the rules for getting there. And fourth, control of property is the only way that starter homes stay in a price range that first time buyers can purchase generation after generation.

— Ken Stern

## LETTERS

### Ending Afghanistan war right

I fully support President Biden's decision to end the 20 year war in Afghanistan and the presence of American troops in the impoverished war-torn country. Here is why: while the withdrawal was always going to "messy" and fraught with violence as in most evacuations, from Dunkirk to Vietnam, it was like finally pulling off the bandage. It needed to be done.

It was crazy, for sure. There were 15,000 allied lives lost in trying to evacuate those soldiers off that beach in France in 1940. Yet Churchill is considered a hero for his decision. So it never was going to go smoothly.

Truthfully, we never should have been in Afghanistan in the first place. Not to the level that we were involved. The 20 year history is fraught with deception, war profiteering, corruption, needless death, especially for the Afghans who lost approximately 71,000 civilians and 170,000 military, and destruction.

"Truth is the first casualty in war." We need some truth telling. No celebration or politically motivated finger pointing! We need to learn our lessons from the past. War should be the absolute last resort after diplomatic efforts have been exhausted. We lost the wars in Afghanistan and Vietnam because they were wrong.

I don't think we should be killing people in other countries who posed no threat to me or you and who never attacked us. I could go on about the fact that the citizens happen to be brown and deemed to be more expendable.

To those who worry about the military hardware and other property we left behind I say, "it's the cost of war," an especially long, costly, unnecessary one.

Bully for Biden for doing the right thing!  
Doreen Sadler  
Anacortes

# If I ran the zoo

By MEL DAMSKI



These are very challenging times for so many reasons. Many of us have lost loved ones, some of us have lost our jobs or had them shut down, hopefully for the time being.

This is especially trying times for people like me who are very social and love to be out and about. Ironically, as much as I love directing television, my shpilkes makes it very difficult for me to hunker down at home.

"Shpilkes" is Yiddish for a playful gas and a fun way to describe being ADHD.

Fortunately, I chose this time to adopt a puppy, which I could not do when I was directing, going from movie to movie. I've got a wonderful companion who is by my side most of the day unless I'm playing golf or singing karaoke.

Rosie is now a year and a half old and like me she is very social. We rotate between several off-leash dog parks and we've both made lots of new friends.

And there is another new huge sea of change in my psyche. I've always been impatient, in a hurry to get from one place to another, in a hurry even if there was no reason to hurry. The people who hired me to direct projects with challenging schedules really appreciated my pace and efficiency as well as my storytelling ability.

Recently I had an epiphany and had a very serious talk with myself and decided that I ain't in no hurry and it's time to take a deep breath and smell the roses. Literally, as well as figuratively.

So one of the things I do now is to take a different route each time I go somewhere. One way there and another way back. That's not always possible but I'm discovering wonderful new places and have moments of pure joy as I drive along the waterfront or head to Mount Baker or discover new lakes in Skagit and Whatcom counties that I didn't even know existed.

I figured out how to get satellite radio in my car and I listen to a little news, but so much of it is sad and depressing that I tune into '60s on 6 or The Bridge and sing along with the music I grew up with and occasionally come up with a new karaoke song.

I've always been charitable because I grew up economically challenged since the holocaust kept my parents from getting an education. I got a wonderful education and found an occupation I loved that allowed me to live in beautiful places like La Conner. And I've doubled and tripled down on contributing to local people who are now jobless and homeless.

We are blessed to live in a place where we can keep away from crowded interiors and go boating and fishing and camping, exploring new horizons and for many of you, continue to work from home.

We just need to do everything we can to keep ourselves healthy, help out those in need, and appreciate the gift of life and the beautiful place we live in.

Okay, you'll have to excuse me now as I place a classic LP on my turntable and plop myself down in my massage chair.

All together now — BREATHE!

A citizen's view —

# Affordable housing and fully contained communities

By John Doyle

I guess we should have expected it, but it's disappointing none the less. Since "affordable housing" is a critical issue for all our communities, it is now being used as a cudgel or enticement for what would otherwise be an unacceptable development options.

For Skagit county, the implementation of the Growth Management Act was particularly painful. We were delinquent in implementing the law and were at risk of sanctions from Olympia by the time we actually adopted our Comprehensive Plan. There was also significant tension between the county and municipalities. GMA calls for urbanization to occur within and/or adjacent to the existing municipalities to avoid spot development and sprawl.

For that reason, we did not include Fully Contained Com-

munities (FCC) as an option in Skagit County. FCCs in county areas would draw development away from cities, towns and urban growth areas. It would begin a process of chopping up county lands. Once allowed, FCCs will be given an opportunity to rationalize their existence to profit developers. This is exactly how affordable housing is now being used to rationalize FCCs and overlook the potential damage to rural farm and forest lands. Affordable housing does not need resource lands.

It is important to understand an FCC is an urban development strategy that specifically targets residential/commercial development outside Urban Growth Areas. The Revised Code of Washington that specifies the conditions of an FCC does require that the FCC offer housing to "a broad range of income lev-

els". However, it does not specify: How broad or what range of income levels?

There is an underlying focus with single family affordable housing with regard to "first cost". This leads to the addition focus on suppling new low cost housing to low income and first-time buyers. While this has been the strategy for the last 70 plus years, current demand has outstripped the market. Once the first-time buyers sell their home, it is no longer affordable to the target families.

This is a sad distraction from the actual issues of affordable housing. Like any development activity, affordable housing has to grapple with the costs of land, materials, labor and infrastructure development to name a few. An added issue is the escalation of the value of property over time. These are the driving forces of af-

fordability.

Development strategies, even if they include "affordable housing" as an element, are not a primary instrument to attain affordable housing. Jurisdictions have to start developing housing inventories that are only available to target family incomes.

There are some good models for local governments to adapt. The "land trust" model is a good start. Local governments can combine the "land trust" financing model with the development of "surplus lands". The larger municipalities in Skagit county have significant inventories of "surplus lands". These "lands" are properties that have been acquired by the municipality for infrastructure purposes such as parks and public works that are no longer needed for their original purpose. Municipalities are authorized under RCWs to dedicate these lands for afford-

able housing.

This will begin to create a separate market and inventory of single family housing. Entities like the Skagit Land Trust and Skagit Habitat are currently building these inventories within communities of Skagit County. Local jurisdictions can partner with entities like Skagit Land Trust and Habitat for Humanity to develop their surplus lands and establish affordable housing inventories.

FCCs are not a solution to affordable housing. They do not maintain an inventory or supply of affordable housing. The overwhelming destructive potential of FCCs is not counterbalanced by a small affordable element that disappears after the first sale of a property.

John Doyle retired as La Conner's town administrator and planner in 2017. His article is reprinted from the Skagit Scoop.

### LETTER POLICY

Please write! Letters up to 350 words are welcome as are longer analyses and statements.

Write a 450 word guest column.

**Deadline: 5 p.m. Sunday for next issue.**

Include your name, address and phone number for verification.

Letters are edited for civility clarity and style.

SEND TO  
editor@laconnernews.com

# Friday Harbor Film Festival guide is now online

Friday Harbor Film Festival's online film guide, detailing the 30+ feature films and 30+ short films to be shown at the Livestream/Online Festival Oct. 14-24, is now available at FHFF.org. Students have submitted 10+ films that will also be screened.

In the film guide, click on a poster to access full details and filmmaker information. Trailers provide a glimpse of what's to

come in the full show. While browsing you can star those films you most want to watch during the festival. All-Access and 5-ticket passes are available now at FHFF.org/passes. Single tickets will be available beginning October 15.

Feature and short films are categorized by theme: "Explorers and Adventures," "Things to Consider" and "Tales from the Heart." Winning films, both

feature and short, will be honored in these categories at the Audience Choice Awards at the awards webinar on Oct. 24.

In addition, the Film Festival's most popular feature film will receive the Audience Choice Award — Best Overall. The most popular short will receive the Audience Choice Award — Best Short Film. These will be screened at the Oct. 24 awards webinar. Winning stu-

dent films will receive awards in two age groups: 13-17 years of age and 18-26 years of age. All award-winning films are determined by votes cast online by the viewers.

It is time to mark your calendar, choose your favorites in the film guide and purchase your pass for the Friday Harbor Film Festival October 14-24. Don't miss it!

Source: FHFF

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