

Need for housing-related OCP changes questioned by CRD director

BY GARY HOLMAN

As both the Islands Trust Policy Statement and Salt Spring's own official community plan (OCP) are being reviewed, a conventional wisdom is being promoted that these fundamental planning documents are obstacles to affordable workforce housing, protecting rural lifestyles and agriculture.

Eric March's recent article in the Driftwood exemplifies this rhetorical arm waving that ignores existing land use policies already supporting such important values, without offering specifics about what changes are necessary. "Everything is broken, vote for change" – sound familiar as a political strategy?

Trust policy and OCP direction to locate affordable housing in or near villages or transit service to minimize impacts on agricultural and environmental values is not just rhetoric. Over 140 units of affordable rental housing of all types have been constructed in and around Ganges over the past several years.

A significant proportion of these units are rented by workers, but also by other community members needing secure, affordable housing. Hundreds of properties have also been rezoned recently, allowing suites or cottages, including on Agricultural Land Reserve land to support farmers — all consistent with Trust policy and our OCP.

My "celebration" of this progress does not obviate the need to do more. We need to continue our focus on projects and properties such as the Gulf Islands Seniors Residence Association's Kings Lane, the CRD's Drake Road and IWAV's Norton Road (altogether representing at least 125 additional units of affordable rental housing), incentivizing affordable suite rentals, providing community water and sewer, and securing funding partnerships. Those clamouring for vaguely defined land use changes seem offended by any acknowledgment of progress, perhaps

IN RESPONSE

because it contradicts the narrative that our land use policies are the problem — a narrative also conveniently ignoring the housing crisis in many other non-Trust communities.

We should also be clear that neither the current OCP or Trust Policy Statement mandate a hard population cap. Salt Spring's OCP policy B.2.1.2.1 explicitly supports upzoning, but only for affordable housing insulated by housing agreements from inexorable market pressures, or to achieve other objectives of the plan (land donations for The Root and Burgoyne Community Farm are examples of such amenity zoning provisions). On a Trust island, eliminating or watering down such important policies could open the door to for-profit, market housing taking up our very limited water, sewage treatment and transportation capacity without addressing

housing affordability or other community objectives.

Another example of OCP misinformation is that the definition of affordability is too stringent. In fact, the definition allows for low end of market housing permitting family incomes of over \$110,000 and is actually less restrictive than requirements of BC Housing, the main affordable housing funder on Salt Spring.

The OCP also prohibits short-term vacation rentals that are not owner or permanent renter occupied. The Trust has opted in to provincial legislation that will help enforce these rules, but it would be helpful if the Trust were to join the CRD in advocating for inclusion of Salt Spring in the Speculation and Vacancy Tax.

In short, Salt Spring's current OCP and Trust Policy Statement are not constraints on affordable housing of all kinds, including worker housing, and the OCP affordability definition still allows for low

end of market units (as with Croftonbrook, Salt Spring Commons, and the former Seabreeze Inne). Our OCP also includes a number of policies requiring location of new development in or near villages or transit service, preventing sprawl that gobbles up rural, agricultural and drinking watershed lands, and sensitive ecosystems.

Those urging land use changes aren't acknowledging existing policies that already support the very objectives they are advocating. I urge the Trust to provide such information, but the question is still begged: If the OCP already supports a wide range of affordable and low end of market housing, and strikes a reasonable balance between housing development and environmental protection, what exactly needs to change and why?

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