

Dear Gorge Commissioners and staff,

I'm writing about the housing situation in the National Scenic Area. These are dire times for affordable housing for the residents of the NSA. First, we need a common definition of affordable housing. And, it's not one defined by builders and developers. This is a social issue. Second, we need to have a discussion about what makes a sustainable community that is filled with residents who invest and are invested in the community in which they live, play, and die. Third, a harder discussion needs to take place about vacation homes and vacation rentals in our communities that take housing stock off the market for permanent residents.

Skamania county's Planning Commission will be taking on the issue of short term vacation rentals at their September 22nd meeting. I spoke to a Skamania county commissioner and he told me that the county is also discussing hiring a professional group to audit the number of vacation rentals that exist in Skamania county. Of course, there are different types of rentals, long term and short term. One guesstimate is that there are some 250 known vacation rentals just in Skamania; the belief is that there are many more. No matter what type of rental, there are tax implications: rental income, state and local occupancy taxes, and Washington State B&O taxes. Communities should benefit from these taxes since it is the community's common resources that are being used.

I urge the Gorge Commission to also participate in finding out how many vacation rentals exist in the NSA counties so we can get a clearer picture of the state of housing stock in the NSA. And, we need to know how many second homes are being built in the Gorge.

Second homes in the NSA are a real issue. Apparently, we have urbanites building large homes in Gorge communities and using them as weekend housing. These are not cottages. These folks are not voting or permanent members of the communities in which they recreate. They are not vested, in any meaningful way, in the community since their primary residence is somewhere else. They might pay some taxes locally, but they don't make that crucial investment of themselves. They use the resources but I don't believe they pay the entire bill for the infrastructures that they are using. It is the counties' citizens who bear that cost.

Urbanites appear to have more money than many residents of the Gorge and are pushing up the price of existing homes out of the reach of local residents who actually keep these communities working and viable.

Population and carrying capacity matter and the Vital Indicators Project should be part of the discussion about housing in the Gorge.

I urge the Gorge Commission to participate in Skamania county's proposed audit to figure out how many vacation and short term rentals are in the county, and in the entire NSA. Or hire a firm yourselves. It would probably be cheaper to hire a firm together and share the cost.

Please contact me if you have any questions. Thank you.

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