



FACT SHEET: AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN SAN JUAN COUNTY

THIRD IN A SERIES OF FIVE

MARCH 2006

THE SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING ENDANGERS THE QUALITY OF LIFE WE ALL ENJOY.

One consequence is economic: Employers in San Juan County find it harder and harder to attract and retain employees.

Here are the facts: We surveyed the employers who offer the best jobs in the county: those who employ our teachers, firefighters, EMTs, paramedics, nurses, deputies, utility workers, and others in the public sector. These jobs typically pay above average wages, full benefits and often retirement plans. Across the board, employers face an aging workforce with many retirements expected over the next five years. They are all deeply concerned that they will not be able to attract and retain the skilled workers that they need to maintain the essential island infrastructure. For example, half the faculty of the Friday Harbor school system will retire within the next five years. The primary cause cited by all respondents was the high cost of housing. **Working people cannot afford to buy a home in San Juan County.**

These “infrastructure jobs” represent approximately 9% of our workforce. However, across the remainder of our workforce signs of strain are also beginning to appear. Employers are finding that labor costs are making them uncompetitive with mainland businesses. We are all paying for this as costs for simple services like calling a plumber or electrician become more difficult and expensive. A simple maintenance call on an appliance can quickly add up to hundreds of dollars.

A second consequence is the loss of cultural diversity:

Our island character is a rich, stimulating stew of lifestyles—hip to square, leftwing to right, Bach to rock. Our newspapers’ letter pages—among the liveliest, most articulate you’ll ever see—reflect this range. They also reveal a shared sense, at all economic levels, of personal ownership of our island home.

We have invested heavily in preserving the physical beauty of our islands, the rock that grounds us, forested mountains vaulting half a

mile out of the sea, the iconic, many-hued madronas, the rare wildflowers that hunker in secret shady spots, the saltwater reaches, and the cascading waterfalls. We recognize the value of these natural assets and regret the loss of any of them.

The diversity of our residents rivals that of our scenery. In addition to retirees and other seniors, historically generous in putting their experience to community benefit, our islands also boast a population of uncommon creativity, resourcefulness and high energy. We also recognize the value of these intangible assets and regret the loss of any of them. Even so, all of us know someone, a family perhaps, who have been forced to leave because they cannot afford housing.

“Our young people are still experimenting with lifestyles, with new visions in music and art, and are raising children who don’t identify with boredom and material accumulation. What if these exceptional and adventuresome people are no longer able to find housing in our community? What will potlucks and picnics be like with no children? What will schools be like when most of the population has no direct interest? What a loss for us all!” —Steve Garrison

When islanders are forced to leave because of the high cost of housing, each takes away a portion of the community culture and character. All of us are the poorer when they go. One by one, you may not feel it matters, but collectively the losses mount and it matters deeply. How many goodbyes will it take before we realize that we have lost not only friends and neighbors but a part of our unique culture as well? That our island home has changed and become...something else. As it is with natural beauty, so it is with people. Human diversity is

at the heart of a healthy community and we are at serious risk of losing it. We must act now before housing prices get any higher!

The Housing Bank will make modest, high-quality affordable homes available to working islanders.

When working people are priced out of the housing market, the whole community suffers. As a county we can take a stand for working families and keep our communities healthy and whole.

What can you do help?

- ✓ Stay informed: Go to **www.sanjuanhousingbank.org**
- ✓ Share the facts with your family, friends and neighbors
- ✓ Tell your elected officials that affordable housing is important to you
- ✓ Support your local providers of affordable homes (go to **sanjuanhousingbank.org** for links to organizations that are currently working to solve this problem)



*Dedicated to making quality
affordable homes available
to working islanders
in San Juan County*

An educational outreach effort of
Navigating Our Future
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Please read on to become informed.

Why does affordable housing matter?

** Paid for by Navigating Our Future in collaboration with the Housing Bank Education and Outreach Committee, to keep the people of San Juan County informed about local issues.*

The shortage of affordable homes in San Juan County threatens not only the island economy but also the quality of living. Quality of life is a community asset and shared possession.

Most working people in the San Juan Islands cannot afford to buy a home here, no matter how hard they work and try to save money. The gap between working incomes and housing prices is too wide. This is a challenge for us all; until we tackle the issue, we are endangering the quality of life we all enjoy in the islands. We need to begin to solve this problem now, before prices get any higher. The Housing Bank in San Juan County will encourage, facilitate and help fund initiatives to create attractive, quality homes that will be affordable for working people in the county.