

Progress on the (Affordable) Home Front

By Paul Losleben

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On Valentine's Day, the County Council gave San Juan County residents two important new tools to assure that working families will be able to afford a home in the islands. The first is an ordinance establishing the Housing Bank, a county commission that will pull together all of the county programs in affordable housing. The Housing Bank will have responsibility for awarding competitive grants to non-profit organizations, addressing the full spectrum of housing needs from the homeless through middle income households. This will allow us to include assistance to those professionals, such as teachers, health care professionals, sheriff deputies, and other service workers so necessary to maintain a healthy community. For the first time, we will have a comprehensive approach to bringing together public and private funding to assure that wage-earning islanders will be able to afford a home in their home community.

The second ordinance is an expenditure plan outlining how the proceeds of a proposed one half of one percent real estate excise tax will be used to help fill the funding gap between what can presently be done with public and private approaches to financing. This expenditure plan provides the blue print for a key funding measure that will be presented to the voters on a special ballot on May 16th. Although we are building a large toolbox of alternative approaches to providing the necessary funding, the real estate excise tax is critical to provide the baseline funding upon which all other programs will be built.

We have all seen the rapid increase in home prices, even doubling over the past three years. We can't afford to ignore this problem. The quality of life for all islanders is at stake when working people can no longer afford to live in the community. The funding that will be provided by the real estate excise tax is critical to solving the problem and we must act now before prices get any higher.

We can solve this problem as a community and these two ordinances give us the tools that we need to be effective. The artful combination of public and private funding, use of surplus public lands, careful attention to construction that is appropriate to our island climate, volunteer efforts by those who have the skills, and education of new homeowners will come together to create an elegant solution. With priority given for permanently affordable homes, the community can build a core of modest, quality homes which will remain affordable for future generations of islanders.

A dedicated core of volunteers have been working on this solution for many years. It has been a long and arduous process, but the efforts of the many volunteers, the county staff, and the County Council are now paying off. The innumerable drafts of legal documents, the public meetings, the thoughtful review of details, have resulted in a pair of official documents that give us a solid plan for the future.

These two ordinances are a major milestone. Please join with us now in launching a new era of county collaboration. Visit our website at <http://SanJuanHousingBank.org/> to learn more.