

Adam Zack

From: Jan Alderton <janetmalderton@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, August 16, 2021 10:33 AM
To: Vacation Rental Comments
Subject: Fwd: Vacation Rental Cap Numbers

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From: **Jan Alderton** <janetmalderton@gmail.com>
Date: Mon, Aug 16, 2021 at 10:25 AM
Subject: Vacation Rental Cap Numbers
To: Jamie Stephens <jamies@sanjuanco.com>, <christinem@sanjuanco.com>, Cindy Wolf <cindyw@sanjuanco.com>, Lynda Guernsey <lyndag@sanjuanco.com>

Vacation Rental Proposed Caps: Data-Based? Maybe Not.

As a scientist, when I hear the word “data”, my mind lights up. Scientists love data! So when I had the opportunity to see our San Juan County Department of Community Development’s most current data spreadsheet for short-term vacation rentals two days ago, I dove right in.

I have been following the Orcas Island community’s response to what is essentially a market and technology-driven phenomenon ever since people I know and care about the raised concerns. The Vacation Rental Working Group formed in the summer of 2019 to study the issues and look for potential solutions. In response to the Vacation Rental Working Group’s call to adopt a pause in the issuance of permits, a group called Hosting on the Rock organized. Their mission statement is:

As hosts we want to serve our guests while preserving peaceful neighborhoods, our livelihoods and the beauty of the islands.

Sounds good, right?

Ok, hosting is when you are there interacting with your guests. I am totally in favor of this. So let me say, right off the bat, that I am not at all interested in regulating property owners who actually “host” their “visitors”. If the owners are on the premises or, even on the same parcel in a separate structure, during the time of the rental, this allows all the good things that Hosting on the Rock promotes: visitors being gently introduced to our “unique island ways” while being nudged to be courteous to the neighbors and “follow the rules”.

But let us consider the completely separate category of short-term vacation rentals where the “host” is not actually present. These are the enterprises that need regulating. When they cluster in neighborhoods, negative impacts occur.

These impacts range from loss of neighborhood character and cohesion (getting to know your neighbors is what builds “community”) to impacts on shared resources such as water, parking, and tranquility.

Thinking about tranquility, I have heard throughout my years on Orcas Island that, “San Juan County” is “different”- as if the usual laws of physics and market forces do not apply here. Water does run downhill- even in San Juan County. But I digress. It is the “market forces” that need tempering in this case.

San Juan County used to be truly “different”. It was a sleepy place with a total population under around 3,000 until sometime in the 1960’s when things changed -bigtime. The latest estimate is that there are 17,788 people who are “residents”.

No longer “sleepy”, in my opinion.

And this estimate is likely to be low. The pandemic has led many property owners who were once part-time to seek full-time refuge here. With the availability of high-speed internet, many have realized they can work from here. Remote working has become mandatory in many cases during the pandemic and employers have realized that they can be more flexible in negotiating when in-office work is required.

Back to the “data”!

The most recent San Juan County data for short-term vacation rental permits shows the following active and compliant permit numbers for each island (some of these “compliant permits” might be in the process of updating their required documentation -so these numbers could be a bit on the high side):

Orcas Island: 299

Lopez Island: 68

San Juan Island: 182

There is a troubling disconnect between these actual San Juan County spreadsheet numbers and the “caps” proposed by our Community Development and Planning Department Director Erika Shook at the July 16, 2021 Planning Commission meeting:

Orcas Island: 500

Lopes: 174

San Juan Island: 520

The Orcas “cap” far exceeds the number of permits that are active and compliant -according to the latest county data.

If many voters who live on Orcas are already hurting because of short-term vacation rental impacts, why would it be ok to increase the legal number from 299 to 500? This would make the distress much, much worse. There are residents of San Juan and Lopez Islands who are also concerned about current negative impacts of short-term vacation rentals.

If Lopez Island active and compliant permits are at 68, why set a “cap” at 174?

If San Juan Island active and compliant permits are at 182, why set a “cap” at 520?

It also occurred to me to look at the data in relation to the population of each island that allows short-term vacation rentals. Shaw and Waldron Islands ban short-term vacation rentals. The Town of Friday Harbor does not allow short-term vacation rentals for any residence that is hooked up to “town” water. This is probably most of the residences -but someone could ask for this data.

The latest population estimates show that the Lopez Island population is about 47% of the Orcas Island population. Yet the active and compliant short-term vacation permits on Lopez impact about half the proportion of its residents compared to Orcas Island:

Orcas Island has about one VR permit for every 20 residents.

Lopez Island has about one VR permit for every 41 residents.
and (!!!!)

San Juan Island has about one VR permit for every 49 residents.

The Orcas Island neighborhood communities are obviously living with much greater impacts from short-term vacation rentals than are communities on Lopez and San Juan Island. Of course, this is the “high elevation” take home message. There are certainly

neighborhood communities on both Lopez and San Juan Islands where short-term vacation rentals are concentrated. And they are suffering, too. The issue of “concentration” must be addressed after “caps” are adopted.

My plea to our Planning Commissioners and to our County Councilors:

Please consider the short-term vacation rental data that explains why many people on Orcas Island say that are suffering. Please do not adopt “caps” that are well above the level that has caused, and continues to cause, such suffering that a large group of your constituents organized to work on a rethink of the “business as usual” that is being propelled by market forces.

I know that our Orcas representative, Cindy Wolfe, has been listening to her constituents. I am grateful to Counselor Wolfe. But Counselors Minnie and Stephens appear to have been listening to the Hosting on the Rock’s soothing words about short-term vacation rentals.

The people of Orcas Island do actively participate in the election of all three County Councilors. If short-term vacation rental “caps” are set unreasonably high, many voters will not forget which of our representatives listened and which instead were soothed by the Hosting on the Rock mission statement:

As hosts we want to serve our guests while preserving peaceful neighborhoods, our livelihoods and the beauty of the islands.

Let hosts serve their guests, but please separate the regulation of unhosted market-driven short-term vacation rentals from this lovely ideal.

Janet Alderton
Orcas Island Resident Since 2005