

Adam Zack

From: N. Donnelly <besatori@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, August 16, 2021 6:06 PM
To: Vacation Rental Comments
Subject: Fwd: A vacation rental housing perspective from a "younger" professional.

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Hello Planning Council and County Council, I wrote this post to Lopez's local online community site "Lopez Rocks" as part of our own community discussion. I would like also to submit it for the planning council's consideration on the matter. Thank you so much for making the effort to collect our thoughts and experiences.

"I feel a need to offer another perspective on the vacation rental/housing crisis we have on Lopez and around the county. Mostly because the discussion seems to be focused on service industry "workforce" housing. I suppose this makes sense because that is what gets noticed when a restaurant or grocery store is closed in the Village. The "workforce" is who we talk to about empty shelves while we're ringing up. (For the record, I'm not really keen on how one-dimensional the consideration of their lives seems to be in these discussions. Like we need affordable housing simply so we can keep the servants around. I don't feel like this is how most people actually feel about our service industry folks, but hopefully the dialog becomes more considered.)

What about the skilled professionals running businesses, managing our public lands, teaching the children, building things, farming, etc.? Some of us are doing all these things in the course of a single year. Making the world go round, making Lopez possible. You don't hear much from us because we're too busy, exhausted, and stressed out of our minds. About housing. And becoming homeowners and homesteaders. Hoping for a place we can be buried on, not just make it through the summer. Hopefully, while we're still young enough to do it for ourselves and build in some resilience for the coming climate. Something to reminisce over when we're old. Without a sense of trauma. Maybe even with a sense of pride in how well we took care of things, built up the soil, collected the waters, grew the trees, stopped the fires.

In the 7 years since I brought myself and my skills here (a 25 year dream), I've worked or volunteered on nearly every piece of public land in the county. I have visited hundreds of client's homes to improve their orchards and gardens, consult on their wildfire risk, rebuild old decks and put up new roofs, plan for the earthquakes and winter storms. Not such a big deal, I've seen friends do more while raising kids to boot, but I've learned some things. I've learned that the single biggest risk to San Juan County's future is absentee landowners, commodifying not just housing but our neighbors, and acting like our "right" to earn money at any cost trumps our responsibilities to each other and this place. I've seen people twist facts and figures in misleading ways to justify it too. But for me the most telling fact is more personal; of the hundreds of properties I've been asked to consult on for stewardship purposes I have been to many full-time Islanders homes, I've been to many long-term rental owners rental properties, I've been asked by many long-term renters themselves to look at the homes they care about even though they don't own them. I've even been to quite a few vacation-rental owner's personal homes. But the number of times I've been asked to help with the stewardship, safety, or sustainability of a vacation rental property is exactly ZERO. Even when I'm standing with the

owner in front of the building and it's a free consultation demanding little more than half an hour of their time, they won't be bothered with it.

That house has got to earn its keep! Which of course means in money. Not in housing a family so our schools have children and teachers attending them. Not in the character a well lived-in home adds to its place. Not in the safety neighbors provide each other when something happens. Those things aren't so quantifiable. The integrity of a place, as with a person, can be sold but never bought. There's no accounting for the kids that are now raised in another state because their parents had to move away in order to have them. Or the businesses they started in another community because it hadn't yet learned to butcher itself and sell off the pieces to the fastest bidder. You can see it though. For those of us that haven't decided to completely uncouple from reality, the change is as apparent as last month's heatwave. Uncomfortable, forboding, unsustainable. We have more leverage though over our little island than we do the whole global climate.

Vacation rentals of course aren't the entire cause of our tourism woes. People come here to camp in the parks, stay at the resort, and visit family (after they had to move away), and yes this uses finite resources (I hosted friends and family as often as possible pre-covid). But none of them involve displacing people from homes. Placing functional caps on active, compliant, vacation rental permits is one of our biggest crowbars with which to leverage our Island's peace and resource depletion issues. It would have been nice if it were done back in the 90's when organizations like LCLT recognized what we were staring down the barrel of, but here we find ourselves in the now. Recently there was a proposal to INCREASE Lopez's VR permit quota to 174 (up 34%!), which on the face of it is madness until you look deeper. Of our current 130 permits only 53 of them are active and compliant according to a public records request for the most recent data taken in Jan. '21. That means without even lifting the moratorium there is potential to increase VR traffic by 245%! That is madness. Raising it to 174 might as well be infinity, as even 53 is a strain. The cap needs to be for current active compliant VRP's and be drawn down slowly as permits become inactive. Anyone currently using a permit would be unaffected by this.

In this letter to the county planning commission (copy/paste <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/lopezletterplanningcommission>), written by a group of concerned Lopezians, there are a number of other suggestions for reigning in VRP's I would encourage you to look at. You also have the opportunity to add your name to the letter if you agree with it, and add a comment of your own if you're so moved.

Statements like "If SJC limits permits too strictly VR owners will have to sell them" are disingenuous and manipulative propaganda. The VR industry in SJC now has a lobbying wing that has been very active, but not very trustworthy in how it has decided to interpret certain information for you. There have been no proposals that involve taking active permits away from VR owners. In fact, by capping future permits they would have less competition to contend with. The only reason a current VR owner would want to oppose those caps is that they plan on buying up more housing to turn into vacation rentals. With so many dozens of unused VR permits out there it makes you wonder how important they actually are to the livelihood of someone who already owns multiple homes. Or maybe they're just going unreported and untaxed.

We need to be moving in the direction of putting able-bodied people in homes and on land, not incentivize turning homes into commercial enterprises, more than half of which are owned by non-residents/entities. Which begs the question of why they are even allowed in areas not zoned for commercial use. There needs to be clarity around whether or not businesses like AirBnB, Vacasa, etc. are actually chains, and if so why are they being allowed to proliferate in our county which does not allow new chains because of the damage they do to local economies. We need to ask if with all the rules put in place for the use of vacation rentals in 2018 (born out of the

complaints neighbors were having to make) if it is even possible to comply with them (many having to do with monitoring guest behavior and being available when things get out of hand) if they are not even living on the island. Even coming over from another island is not possible in the middle of the night.

At the moment the islands are being taken for patsies. Maybe you've been receiving junk mail from investment groups offering to buy your place sight-unseen. Do we want these businesses making land-use decisions for our county? Do they know about our fossil-water wells, rich Salish history, or that we have two species of orca and one is gravely endangered? I have spoken to elderly couples who are the last full-timers on their long road that is swiftly growing narrow with brush, a nightmare scenario in a wildfire. But none of the neighboring owners care enough to invest in doing something about it when asked. These are not the kind of "neighbors" I want to have when I am elderly (or ever), if ever I am able to find a place I can buy here.

In the 7 years I have lived here I have had 6 homes, including 1 summer in a tent, and another under a tarp, while I waited for rental opportunities. I've taken huge risks with my safety in attempts to earn money for land and build my own place. Can you imagine the amount of strain that would put on a parent? Or their children? The word "traumatic" comes to mind. Luckily I am now in a stable rental with landlords who are saints, but unfortunately, stable housing may be more atypical than tent living, or at least "sub-standard" housing, for many in my demographic. I have friends who have lived, or currently live, in renovated chicken coups, vehicles, boats, self-built tiny homes, school buses, mud huts, barn lofts, and a fascinating array of cabins with varying degrees of plumbing, electricity, and insulation. Every year there's a big game of musical chairs as some of these homes become available or not. There is a constant need to watch for a place, like hermit crabs in a tidepool, each one eyeing their larger neighbor's shell so they can scurry into it when it's discarded by the crab that has grown too large for it, or is pecked out by a seagull who decides it would make a better vacation rental. These people are professionals running businesses you rely on. Some of them are raising kids or hope to soon. Many are gone now.

We're trading them for tourists."

-Nathan Donnelly
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