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To: Vacation Rental Comments
Subject: Tourism expansion via new VR permits

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As a Lopez resident, I would like to comment with data about Lopez demographic and housing trends that appear to necessitate an end to tourism expansion via new VR permits on Lopez. As these trends are not as disconcerting on Orcas and San Juan, each island would benefit from a tailored approach. One-size-fits-all policies of VR caps based on future expected housing units are **thoroughly** misguided.

The Lopez working age population (18-64 traditionally) is critical for a functioning community with diverse businesses/organizations, and a solid EMS and fire department relying on volunteers (in addition to all the other countless fabulous volunteers).

This working age population is what makes tourism here possible. It also provides services for vacation homes. Lopez has the highest % of seasonal housing units: 51% of total housing units (O: 44%, SJ: 34%). Seasonal housing includes VRs.

Since 2010, the working age population as a percentage of total population decreased from 60% to 50% (the lowest % of all three islands). The total population has increased by 27%, not including the pandemic year 2020. The trend being that a smaller working population demographic supports a much larger total population.

Anecdotally, Lopez experiences a labor shortage and a strain on services to keep up with population growth. Businesses/organizations wishing to expand and hire are limited by lack of rental housing. Ferry service is equally impacted. Without the ability to make reservations, Lopez residents wait 2-3 hours to leave the island.

The working age population has decreased because real estate prices have doubled in the last ~6 years, because Lopez has the lowest percentage of rental housing of all three islands (21% – O: 24%, SJ:28%), and because Lopez has the lowest rental vacancy rate (0% – O: 2.5%, SJ: 5.5%).

If these trends continue for the next 10 years, Lopez would need to add 282 people to their working age demographic to maintain the current 50% working age population. At a typical 2 person occupancy rate, this equates to 141 affordable housing units. We all know that's not going to happen.

In my humble opinion, Lopez is strained to keep things running for ourselves and the tourism levels as they are. As the working age population will continue to decline without a massive intervention, strains **will** increase.

Increasing tourism with additional VR permits would exacerbate these strains more rapidly. This is why I believe that tourism expansion has come to an end. The phrase “carrying capacity” was censored from the tourism sustainability town meeting 5 years ago. And here we are – maxed out.

Please consider freezing Lopez VR permits at the current active VR permit level and revoke all other permits. The dramatic rate of change over the last few years requires an equally swift and commensurate response.

Thank you,

Heike Uhlig