

Brief to Islands Trust Forum on Community Housing, June 13, 2016

submitted by Harlene Holm, Denman Island

As someone who has worked to create affordable housing on Denman Island for eight years and provided information to those working on similar projects in the Trust Area and elsewhere, I have the following suggestions for consideration at the June Forum on Community Housing:

1. Articulate the capabilities, limitations and priorities of Islands Trust land use powers in relation to creating and/or supporting affordable housing the Trust Area.

The existing Trust Policy Statement is essentially silent on the subject of affordable housing. Because local trust committee bylaws cannot control the use or limit the resale value of development intended for this purpose, adding densities for 'affordable' housing may well have the undesirable consequence of simply adding more houses to the market. As a result, the Trust needs to support non-profit organizations which can and will control use and which can and will take the land out of the market place.

2. Create clear definitions of 'low-income,' 'affordable housing' and 'attainable housing.'

There is an urgent need for clarity and consistency in the terminology used when discussing this subject. In practice, terms such as 'near market' and 'under market' are basically meaningless. As well, using a one-size-fits-all term such as 'affordable/attainable' invites confusion and abuse. One need only look at the results of the catch-all terminology used around the Province: increased density and a smatter of 'under market' units that often are only distinguishable from market units by their cramped square footage. Those creating the definitions need to identify the purpose of 'affordable' and/or 'attainable' housing and incorporate these ideas into the definitions. For example, is the purpose to meet the need for housing among those with an established residency in the community or is it to attract professionals and tradespeople to the community?

3. Seek an understanding of the 'market.'

Real estate prices, number of houses for sale, and available long term rental units are aspects of 'market.' Is the number of available rentals diminishing? How many houses are empty, either as part-time vacation homes or as speculative holdings? How many houses are used for short-term vacation rentals? The Trust may not solve housing issues by establishing this kind of a broad understanding of the problem, but understanding the problem is a necessary first step. As an example, on Denman Island more properties than ever are listed for sale, housing starts continue and the population (according to the most recent census) is declining.

4. Consider breaking down the silos and opening the door to communication among the islands.

Planners, Trust offices and local trust committees are constrained by structured administrative mechanisms and appear to have little interest in exchanging information among interested parties. I suggest that the Islands Trust collect, identify in plain English (for example, Bylaw 205 reveals nothing of its content) and maintain an island-by-island list of local OCP policies and land use regulations which address affordable housing. This collection should include the contact information for all island organizations working on affordable housing and it should be available to Trust planners, local trustees and the general public via the Trust website. Once created, the site should be regularly updated.

Harlene Holm
April 7, 2016