



Publisher's Notebook

May 2021 Matt Winters

We must plan better to meet housing needs

A year ago Americans were still caught up in the throes of the Great Toilet Paper Catastrophe of 2020. In most respects there never was an actual problem and there certainly shouldn't have ever been cause for worry in Clatsop County, where Georgia-Pacific's enormous Wauna Mill turns out unimaginable quantities of consumer paper goods every day.

Thankfully, that particular weird overreaction fairly soon ran its course and did no real harm, other than adding to anxiety in a year that included many worse things to worry about.

Some strange product gaps persist. For example, it's been more than a year since any of the stores I shop has stocked the particular kind of generic mint-flavored antacid my wife and I prefer. Why should that be? I don't really care enough to investigate, and it probably just comes down to many other people suffering from 2020-21 indigestion snapping it up before I get there. But it seems like the pandemic not only made lots of people sick, but revealed every hidden vulnerability in the whole world of economic interdependence.

Among the many peculiar ways in which the pandemic disrupted ordinary supply chains, none has more genuinely serious consequences

than the fevered lumber market, along with other building and construction-related products like appliances and windows. Even things most of us don't often think about, such as solar panels, have increased in price and require careful logistical scheduling. The cost of skilled labor — another major component in the price of any house — is also way up.

As you will read in CRBJ editor Emily Lindblom's excellent survey of how local contractors are coping, the cost of lumber and materials is playing an oversized role in driving up the bottom line for new construction and remodels. This is a pressing issue in these Columbia-Pacific counties where housing has already been at an ever-increasing premium for years. Residents newly arriving from other places make important contributions to our economy and community life, while finding affordable housing is a dire problem for many who grew up here and want to join the ranks of homeowners. We need more housing at every price point.

There is a realistic though still hypothetical hope that material prices will begin trending downward. COVID-related slowdowns in sawmills and factories should gradually abate, the labor market should sta-

bilize once emergency pandemic aid expires, and market forces should respond to increasing demand by ramping up supply. As a side issue, many assume that President Biden will eventually lower Trump administration tariffs on Chinese-made appliances and other building-related products — tariffs that are actually taxes paid by American consumers.

When it comes to lumber, it bears remembering that this especially Pacific Northwest industry has been struggling for decades — most recently hammered by the housing crash a decade ago. Restrictions on harvest that began in the 1990s mean there are now far fewer producers competing for our business and meeting the demand for new housing. How odd it is to live in one of the world's greatest tree-growing regions and find ourselves in such a pinch for 2x4s.

Sawmill workers like my grandfather could afford to pay off mortgages on their own comfortable wood-frame homes. That's becoming an elusive dream for today's blue-collar and service industry workers here on the Northwest coast. As we emerge from the COVID disaster, we need to really consider as a nation how best to plan for our own future, with enough walls and roofs for everyone.



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