Publisher's Notebook

Matt Winters • December 2021

It's time to develop smarter housing strategies

Continuing scarcity in the residential real estate market is not just a result of the pandemic, the rise of remote work, vacation-rental investments and relocations from troubled or drought-stricken places. Decades of well-intentioned land-use planning set the stage for current tight supplies and unaffordable prices.

A housing shortage in some price ranges on the North Coast was a topic of news coverage and civic attention long before the current situation, which we highlight again in this edition of Coast River Business Journal. Though not quite so dire, Pacific County also has experienced steady erosion in home affordability and availability.

Americans like to live near saltwater, a preference that is reinforced in the Pacific Northwest by tree plantations and state forests that preclude housing on relatively inexpensive land located farther away from shorelines. Some of the coastal zones and river valleys that theoretically remain available for residential development are wetlands, prone to landslides (as in Astoria) and subject to flooding (parts of Seaside, Naselle and north Pacific County).

Laudable goals of preserving farmland, curbing rural sprawl and concentrating development near existing municipal utilities further constrain where houses can go. We shouldn't abandon these strategies, which arguably are more important than ever as population pressures intensify in this area that enjoys some protection from factors like freshwater shortages and drought-related wildfires. We must never compromise our commitment to Northwest values, such as protecting abundant green spaces and salmon-friendly habitat.

But upholding our values doesn't mean we should give up on making certain our children and grandchildren can afford to live here.

How can we preserve the qualities that make this such a desirable place to own a home while ensuring there are enough homes for future generations of native Northwesterners? Despite the current market imbalance, there are achievable strategies, providing we possess enough backbone and political savvy to see them through.

For one, planners and citizens must come together in a realization that new houses and multifamily dwellings have to go somewhere. This means not giving in to the loudest voices at the hearing. Developers absolutely should be made to pay for impacts, including any road enhancements necessary to avoid unreasonable nearby traffic congestion. It isn't fair to make long-term residents pay extra taxes to deal with problems developers should price into their houses. But it also isn't fair to flatly reject construction just because we've gotten used to enjoying viewsheds over property we don't own.

It's also time to evolve better density strategies. Five-acre, one house tracts — a concept that still persists in some jurisdictions — have always been ridiculous. It will be a difficult mistake to untangle, but we should emphasize denser development in smaller areas — perhaps 50 houses clustered into 5 acres, surrounded by 45 acres of parkland. Knowing as we do that the sea level will be rising, it's time to look for such development opportunities well above the flood zone.

Creative thinking is also called for when it comes to financing home purchases. Too often, we are still constrained by old patterns that worked well for the post-World War II decades when buying a house required a far smaller percentage of income than it does today. Current low mortgage interest rates won't last forever and it's time to think up new ways for novice homebuyers to step onto the escalator of upward mobility.

All this is achievable — here better than most places, thanks to our remarkable talent pool. Action, not worrying and complaining, is what we need.