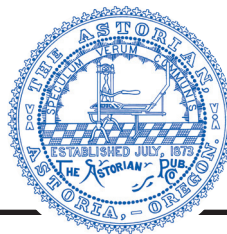


# OPINION



# the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Make affordable housing a priority

For years, folks in Clatsop County have talked about how to get more affordable housing. This term usually means private housing available to anybody on the open market and costs no more than 30% of monthly gross income.

In 2015, Astoria issued a report specifically about affordable housing. The report has a good description of demographics and the need. It suggested code changes for accessory dwellings. But Astoria's code as later amended for that kind of housing is too restrictive and hasn't been very effective. The report, however, has a new and helpful inventory of the city's vacant,



**DON HASKELL**

buildable land.

Early this year, Clatsop County and all five city governments issued a combined housing strategies report. The study and 40-page report cost \$100,000. The report's primary focus is zoning and land use for housing in general.

For its cost, the report has a lot of bureaucratic bone and nowhere near enough meat. Little is new about affordable housing. It has good suggestions, however, for accessory dwellings.

The study revealed none of our cities applied to participate in a 2016 legislative effort involving urban growth boundaries that was "a pilot program to help cities build affordable housing." The report mentions public-private partnerships as funding for affordable housing and specifically suggests the public vote to issue more bonds. But higher taxes and more bureaucracy aren't the answer.

After many thousands of tax dollars spent on government studies and reports over the years, and lots of talk about it, affordable housing is as elusive as ever. Perhaps it's time to try to figure out why that's so.

It seems to me there're at least six considerations that can influence a community's success or failure in resolving the affordable housing dilemma.

First, attitudes toward local government. Negative attitudes of voters can lead to failure of elected officials to act. Poor attitudes can result from public employees who're arrogant. Or believed



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**Affordable housing is a challenge in Clatsop County.**

to be unfair. Or change prior commitments. Or ignore voters' ballot decisions.

Even lots of potholes, street litter, or lousy park maintenance make a difference. Folks usually keep negative thoughts to themselves. It's easy to be against something when feeling negative. And elected officials sense that.

Second, double taxation. User fees are government charges on the theory all taxpayers shouldn't pay for one person's specific government service, such as a building permit. Yet the taxpayer already has paid general taxes for public needs, such as a need for building permits. Nobody voted to pay more in this way. But user fees are held constitutional by the courts. Almost everybody grumbles about user fees. And they contribute more to poor attitudes toward government than public employees realize.

Third, government requirements. All costs of housing development, permits, construction, maintenance and repair are passed on to and paid by tenants in the form of rent, and paid by buyers in the price they pay. Most career public employees, and even some elected officials, don't appear to understand the more costly in time, money, mandates and complexity government intrusiveness is, the more expensive affordable hous-

ing becomes.

Fourth, public transportation. There's no way housing can be affordable unless there's close-by public transportation for folks who can't afford to buy and keep a car or truck. This is a forgotten part of the affordable housing dilemma.

Fifth, willingness to change. The "I want affordable housing, but not in my neighborhood" mentality is deadly. It will hinder any action when there's agreement more affordable housing is needed.

Sixth, willingness to be bold. Folks elected for local office usually aren't career politicians. Most of them don't mistake the loudest voices for community consensus. But they often follow staff recommendations that are too timid. Elected officials need to be bolder when convinced most of their constituents really want affordable housing.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Eliminate all county and city user fees for all housing development and building permits. To charge thousands of dollars for housing development and building permits is counterproductive to the need to make all housing more affordable. Change bureaucracy's culture to service to the public rather than to make more money for government.
- Give top priority to affordable hous-

ing building permits. Issue them much faster, within a week or less. Fast-track resolution of disputes.

- Allow outright one or more accessory dwellings in all residential areas. Conform to Oregon law about that kind of housing. Enact appearance guidelines. Eliminate unnecessary restrictions. Homeowners should be able to quickly build accessory housing with no hassle from government.

- Allow outright duplexes and fourplexes in all residential areas. Spreading the high cost of land among more than one housing unit lowers costs.

- Strengthen public transportation within cities. As one example, cities could partner with the Sunset Empire Transportation District for more buses to be used specifically in areas zoned to encourage affordable housing.

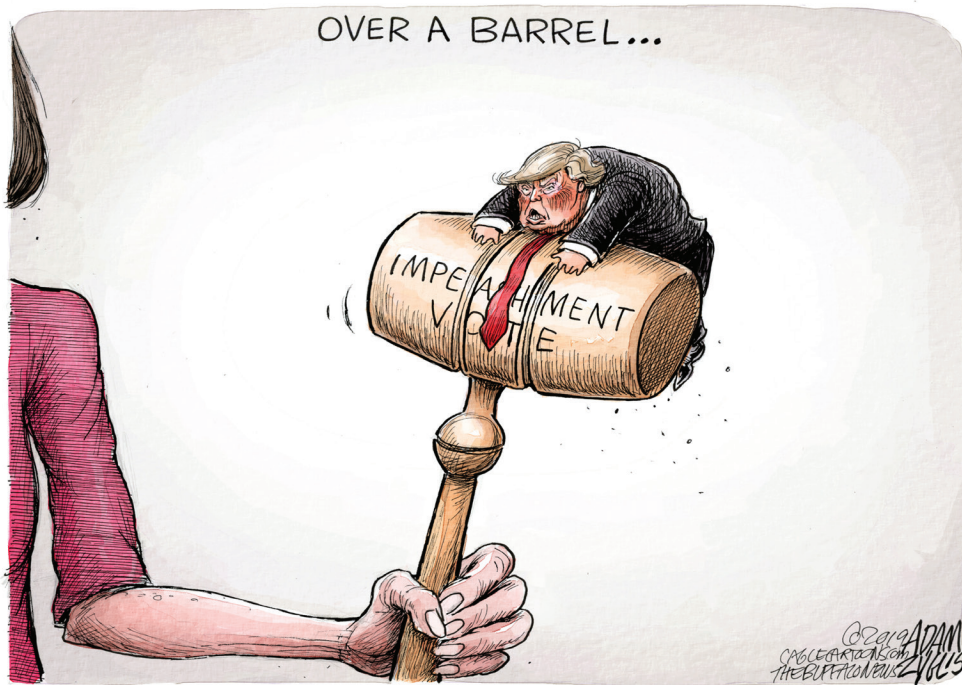
- Revise building code mandates to lower the cost of accessory dwellings. Make it easy for folks to safely build and rent them.

- When something doesn't work, elected officials should try something else — just like they do in their private lives. And they need to be bold enough to eliminate a low priority matter when a more important one needs attention. There are good reasons public employees should be timid about change. But elected officials sometimes need to be bold.

- More education about workforce benefits to business and the local economy might help the "not in my neighborhood" mentality. So would more education about the need. Educate homeowners what an accessory dwelling is, can look like, and the financial benefits of a rental. And assure homeowners that neighborhoods won't change in character if an accessory dwelling is built next door.

Whether folks think any of these suggestions are doable or crazy isn't the point. What's really needed is an unswerving determination to make affordable housing a top priority. It seems to me most folks don't want to see the dilemma of affordable housing end up as just another expensive government report sitting on a shelf.

*Don Haskell is a retired attorney and former Clatsop County commissioner who lives in Astoria.*



## LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian.

Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner. Letters in poor taste will not be printed.

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## GUEST COLUMN

# A vote is a voice

The ability to vote is the single greatest representation of democracy in existence today.

The power to choose and the capacity to participate in a process that so often seems out of reach for America's masses are why I will always vote. A vote is a voice, and with a voice, one has the power to enact change. Every voice matters. No two voices are alike.

The importance of the right to vote simply cannot be understated, yet it is often cast aside, one single ballot seemingly rendered useless by millions of others just like it. But in truth, there are no others just like it.

My vote will not, cannot, be whittled down to a statistic. It is an encapsulation of everything I am as a person: the beliefs I hold, the laws I analyze, and, most crucially, the decisions I make. Every time I vote, I share a unique perspective, and I am joined by millions more at the state and federal levels, all of whom voice their own perspectives when they cast their ballots.

To vote is to take yourself and your convictions firmly into account. But that does not mean your vote cannot be influenced by the lives of others. The concept of voting carries with it an inherent responsibility, almost a duty, to be informed, but you must also consider the impact your vote could have on the people around you.

Whether those people are friends, relatives, or strangers, their circumstances should have a say in your vote, and vice versa.

When I vote, I will take a good long look at those around me, a collection of people from all walks of life who, in many cases, are more personally affected by issues such as poverty and immigration reform than I am. My vote is not only a reflection of myself. It is an echo of the disenfranchised people I see around me every day.

I have always been inspired to vote, perhaps in part because I am not able to do so just yet. But when that time comes, I will not take voting for granted. I will mark my ballot, empowered and emboldened, because I know for a certainty that



**A voter drops off a ballot in Astoria in 2018.**

Colin Murphey/The Astorian

my vote is helping bring about the change I, and others around me, want to see.

Democracy, true democracy, encompasses all of us, and therefore it must work for all of us. That is why I will always vote.

*Tristan Trudell is a senior at Ilwaco High School. He won first place in an essay contest for high school students on voting sponsored by Indivisible North Coast Oregon and the American Association of University Women, Astoria branch.*