

Housing Bank – A Solution for Our Working Families

In the islands we have a strong heritage of hard working people who have been able to “make it” despite difficulties. Even those who came to the islands just 20 years ago talk with nostalgia about how it was tough, but they were able to get a small piece of land, build a house and raise a family. Today I’m hearing something different. Our young families are having trouble “making it” and they are leaving the islands, despite working very hard, sometimes at two or three jobs. There are fewer people here today in the 25-44 age group than there were in 1990. What is going on here?

What does it take to “make it” here today? I am led, inevitably, to the increasing cost of housing. A few years ago, the cost of housing was increasing at an annual rate of 8%. Then it reached 10%. In 2004 it reached a staggering 27%. At the same time, wages have gone up less than 3% per year. In this kind of market, how much does a young family with moderate income have to save to afford a home? If they cannot afford the down payment today, then with normal income growth, they will find it even more difficult to afford the down payment needed in the future. Worse, their income would also have to increase at the same growth rate as housing cost in order to qualify for a mortgage. This has become an impossible task for our young families.

Is there anything that can be done? The answer is an emphatic YES. Building on work done over the past five years by many concerned members of our community, a group of local citizens has studied the problem in great detail. We have come to the conclusion that with creative private financing, with building quality affordable homes, and with a small amount of public support, we can provide perpetually affordable homes for working families.

Over the last two months we have been making the rounds, talking to individuals and groups about the concept of a Housing Bank. We’ve heard lots of useful feedback, and together have explored questions and concerns with community members. This month, we are asking the county commissioners to approve a Housing Bank Commission, to serve as a focus for solving this problem. In November we will be asking San Juan County voters to approve a one half of one percent excise tax charged to the purchaser of property. The funds collected will be used to support a variety of programs to provide housing for the people who provide our most basic and essential services: our school teachers, deputies, paramedics, nurses, utility workers, and all those who work hard to assure that our community is a great place to live.

This will be a timely and important step toward a permanent solution to our housing crisis. So, we ask you to be informed. Visit our website at <www.SanJuanHousingBank.org>. Read about what we have learned and what we are proposing. Then, discuss it with your friends and neighbors. Write a letter to the editor. Volunteer to help. Join one of our working groups. And, vote your conscience in the fall.

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