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City of Leavenworth

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Community Members,

Perhaps there is no other issue quite like housing to spur involvement from our community's residents. How could it be otherwise? Our homes mean far more to us than the wood or brick or metal within which we lie our heads at night. They are, for all intents and purposes, our nests. They are meant to be a haven from the storms that come our way. Of course, when we feel proposed changes shake the roots of the tree that holds our nest, we will respond. And for those for whom functions as a safe place (as it should be), anything that disrupts it will be met with suspicion at best, hostility at worst, and most certainly with resistance from more than a few.

Our community is heavily involved in redefining the spaces we hold dear. Redefining sacred spaces is not something that ever would, or should, go quickly or easily. It will be, and should be, done thoughtfully, with care, and even with hesitancy. Yet, there are times when it simply must be done. Now is one of those defining moments. We are facing a housing crisis, not just in Leavenworth, but in our valley, state, and nation. It is not – as some would suggest – simply a matter of building enough “units.” Because the root issue is more complex than a simple number of units, we will not build our way out of it.

Historically, we have been able to open up more land for development, expand perimeters and parameters, with the thought that more homes will naturally drive the prices down and keep things affordable. Today, our reality is different, and I believe it will never go back to the way it was. Everything is just too expensive! Developable land values are high and raw material costs are also so high that people with approved permits are choosing not to build because it is no longer within their budget. Our huge virgin forests are gone, never to return. Labor costs are much higher. Infrastructure costs, and limits, are another factor – it's expensive to build and to maintain the complex infrastructures that support our lives in a way that is sustainable and protects our natural environment.

All of these factors mean that the days of old, when large single family lots were the norm, and easily justifiable, are gone. Also gone are the days when the salary of a retail sales clerk was enough to raise a family on, buy a home, build that nest for the family to dwell in safely and securely. For most of my growing up years, my dad was the sole bread winner and he worked in an auto parts store as a retail clerk. Nostalgia will not bring them back. What this means, among other things, is that if we are going to house the workforce of the future, it is going to take using our available, developable land and available infrastructure more efficiently. This means a greater variety of housing options, including more duplexes, courtyard buildings, townhomes, and cottage homes, etc. It means that the large lots of yesteryear, the 10,000 – 12,000 square foot lots, are no longer a practical use of our urban landscape and urban utilities. Larger lots, or multiple lots, will always be available to those who can afford them. But it does not make sense, given our current realities, to plan for a future built around what worked in the past.

As Leavenworth seeks to move forward with two separate zoning changes that would reduce lot sizes from 12,000 sq. ft. and 10,000 sq. ft. to a minimum of 8,000 sq. ft., and allow duplexes to be built on standard lots – and then other types of housing that fulfill our growing community's needs – I am keeping in mind and understand that this is an uncomfortable place to go for many. People have expressed their support, concerns, desires, and even opposition. As I said above, we are upsetting the roots that support our nests. We are challenging past practices so that the future is brighter for everyone.



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If we take these steps – and I am confident that we will take many of them – there may be frustration, disappointment, even anger or a sense that concerns have not been heard. All of that is understandable. However, these are the voices of those who have a nest, who are secure in that nest, for whom it is a place of safety and security. Those of us called to civil servants, who work for the future of our City, have the difficult job of listening to the voices of all of our community members - those who are able to attend meetings – or not. This includes listening to those for whom just eking out a living and caring for their families takes all their time and energy and they just don't have the personal capacity to engage on these issues. It is our duty to hear them – even in their silence. And this includes all those who work here, supporting our businesses, agencies, and organizations like our schools and hospitals, who are not living here because we have not created spaces for them to have their nest in our tree.

Over the past decade or so, we have seen our workforce grow by many hundreds of jobs, many in the hospitality industry. And yet, the “newest” and only subsidized affordable rental housing (that is not created for our senior population), is over 40 years old. We have not stepped up to provide the housing we need to keep our economic engine humming, nor our community whole. Some do not see this as a problem. They do not see the importance of being able to house our workforce here. There are many western mountain communities that are no longer able to house their own workforce, who are basically resorts that import their workers. I understand that is an option, and the direction we have been heading by default. It's the path of least resistance; the path we take if we assume what worked in the past will work in the future.

Heading down a path that has resistance but looks to the future foremost but still learns from the past is the path my administration is recommending. There are multiple reasons why taking the path of least resistance is unhealthy for us. For me, personally, a big reason is the moral imperative. If we are asking people to help us build our community and keep it going, we should welcome them fully into our community and create spaces “at our table.” Or, to use the above analogy, places where they, too, can occupy a nest on a branch that gives them a place of safety and security. There are other compelling reasons why we should be doing more to provide housing for our workforce. From a purely economic standpoint, it is better for local businesses and organizations if at least some of their workforce is local. A local workforce does not require extra “incentive money” to get them to commute. We know from studies that those who live in the same community as their job have higher satisfaction. The “mom and pop” operations that have long been the lifeblood of our tourism economy are generally the ones who don't survive as communities lose the ability to house their workforce. There are also strong environmental reasons that we should attempt to house a significant number of our workforce here. As we move forward aware of the impacts of climate change, and trying to move towards a more green, sustainable economy, one of the big emphases of such a move is trying to get more housing closer to where the jobs are.

These are the reasons why we are looking anew at our zoning and how we use our land. It is not that we don't appreciate quality of life concerns. It is just that we must figure out a way to bring that quality of life to future generations, and to more of a largely displaced workforce. While we know we will never create enough housing for all who work here, we also know that we will all benefit to the degree we keep a community with mixed ages, mixed incomes, mixed ethnicities, and mixed experiences. Diversity is a strength we don't want to lose. It will take all of us keep this a real possibility moving forward.

Carl Florea, Mayor