

Business and Commerce Committee

Meeting Minutes

June 24, 2019, 12-130pm

Hosted by/at Faithlife

Voting members present: Bob Pritchett, Chair; Clark Campbell, Vice Chair; Andrew Gamble, Casey Diggs, Ryan Allsop, Troy Muljat, Brad Rader, Pete Dawson, Debbie Ahl, Paul Burrill

Non-voting present: Councilor Carol Frazey, Mayor Kelli Linville, Don Goldberg,

Public present: Jennifer Noveck, Guy Ochiogrosso, Councilor Satpal Sidhu, Councilor Rud Browne
Jacquelyn Styrna, Tony Larson

Please make sure to sign in at the beginning of each meeting

Meeting called to order at 12:05pm by Chair, Bob Pritchett.

The Chair asked for a motion to approve May minutes. Motion was made by Troy Muljat, seconded by Clark Campbell. Meeting minutes approved.

Don gave an overview of the Committee's work to date on housing recommendations. BAC's letter with specific recommendations for remedying the housing crisis was sent to the Whatcom County Council. On July 9, Don, Pete Dawson, and Clark Campbell will give a presentation to the Council regarding their final recommendations. It is important to note that this truly is a crisis and that our area of focus is on how the housing crisis is impacting businesses in Whatcom County. We have drafted a presentation, but should have a discussion about what is most important to include, what do we want the County Council to know?

Jennifer provided a brief outline of the draft presentation.

Clark asked if declaring an emergency was possible and if it necessitated any specific actions or parameters by County Council. Mayor Linville explained that when we had the cold spell this winter Bellingham declared an emergency and it is indeed short term and limited. Typically there are rules to regulate so that it is not a free for all, but declaring a crisis with criteria and a timeframe is definitely something that can be done.

Satpal noted that if they can be specific with a time frame of how long it will take to achieve an ample housing supply and then the Council can extend the crisis rules every six months until targets are met.

Clark described current legislation being put forth by Seattle City Council to limit the ratio of building size to lot size to a maximum of 2500 sqft (built up). Seattle is also treating this as a crisis.

Satpal said that an area where we could get a lot of units on the market easily would be to make the ADU permitting easier and faster, particularly for property owners that are renting to longer term renters (you can set minimums and penalties to avoid all ADUs being taken up by air BNBs). Short platting is another area that can be addressed easily and quickly. Both would create a lot of inventory.

After some discussion the group decided that the main message or format of the presentation should focus on 1) this is a crisis (not a question), 2) wholesale change for an entirely new rule book that can be developed by a neutral 3rd party / experts or something that mostly avoids the public process, and 3) recommendations 2-6 are actually suggested tactics that the Council could take. The new rule book should be written in accordance with what the County needs (at least 10,000 housing units over the next 3-4 years) and any law or policy that undermines achieving those targets needs to be addressed / potentially revised. We cannot continue to have ordinances that are not in line with what the public actually wants (more housing).

Allsop noted that some of the group could even volunteer to help the county identify property developers, as the developers currently in our county cannot take on the volume or size of many of these projects.

Carol suggested discussing what will happen if we do not declare a crisis and create a new rule book. She also is interested to know what young people want as we want to build housing they want, not what we want.

Guy reminded the group that this is all linked back to workforce development. We care about housing because it is preventing multiple companies that are currently based in Whatcom County from expanding. More than one business has mentioned the need for workers and that they cannot find workers because the workers cannot afford to live here on the salaries currently paid. But the bottom line issue is: is the County committed to increasing housing capacity or not? Are they going to own this being a crisis or not?

Allsop agreed and noted that while improvements have been made to the existing codes, it is not working and we are seeing workers move further away from city centers, increasing commutes and traffic.

Clark reaffirmed that we are not asking if this is a crisis, we are telling them that it is a crisis.

Mayor Linville noted that she thinks part of this is an issue with how the ordinances are made to begin with. We should be using performance-based regulation that includes accountability standards. These standards can then be applied to all future legislation and would be much more effective in the long term. She also noted that businesses or their representatives need to start attending public meetings. Every time there are code changes the neighborhood associations come out and the people who come to the meetings end up being the ones who policy is made (or changed) for. She also agreed that outside developers need to be brought in to seriously address the shortage.

Pete noted that we all need to address the issue as something that is much bigger than any one neighborhood. We need codes that are separate from special interest groups.

Rudd said that it would be helpful if the group could focus on tactics that the County can actually do, as the Council is actually very restricted by state and federal laws (such as the GMA).

Satpal agreed and said that it would be great if the presentation could present a pathway from the Crisis to out of it, being very specific is actually helpful to the Council because they do not know everything.

The group agreed that the Vision should include a new clean rulebook that is free of special interest influence.

Tony noted that the group may want to focus on the why rather than the how – many companies are looking for workers and many companies are looking for buildings and they cannot find either. This situation is only going to get worse. What kind of future do we want for Whatcom County? The Council should know about businesses that are leaving.

Finally, the group had a short discussion on the dearth of childcare in Whatcom County. Childcare can cost just as much, if not more, than housing for many families. There are long wait lists for those that can afford childcare and there are many people who are leaving the workforce because they make less than daycare costs. The group is considering childcare as their next topic to make recommendations on. Rudd noted that the state prohibits companies from opening their daycares to the community, they are for employees only.

Pete also asked that the group consider taking a look at the new apprenticeship ordinance.

Clark noted the time and asked to adjourn the meeting at 1:35pm. Motion moved by Troy, seconded by Allsop. Meeting ended at 1:35pm.