

WASHINGTON STATE
Academy of Sciences



Science in Support of Local Decision Making for COVID-19:

A DIALOGUE WITH COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Summary

About WSAS

The Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) was requested by the Governor and authorized by the Washington State Legislature in 2005. WSAS is a not-for-profit organization of Washington State's leading scientists and engineers dedicated to serving the state. Members are elected by their peers for outstanding contributions to research.

WSAS is modeled on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. WSAS provides independent, objective analysis and advice to the State and conducts other activities to solve complex problems and inform public policy decisions. WSAS also encourages education and research, recognizes outstanding contributions to knowledge, and increases public understanding in matters of science and engineering. Learn more at www.washacad.org.

Acknowledgements

WSAS thanks the panelists who participated in this community dialogue event:

Celestina Barbosa-Leiker, *Vice Chancellor for Research, Washington State University Health Sciences Spokane (moderator, WSAS member)*

Laura Benjamin, *Senior Planner, Puget Sound Regional Council*

Gregg Colburn, *Assistant Professor, Real Estate, University of Washington*

Lance E. German, *Real Estate Agent, ReMax Prime, Clallam County*

Jamie Maciejewski, *Executive Director, Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County*

Jennifer Sherman, *Professor, Sociology, Washington State University*

Greg Winter, *Executive Director, Opportunity Council, Island, San Juan, and Whatcom Counties*

WSAS is also grateful to the many community organizations that helped shape and disseminate this event: Bayside Housing & Services, Clallam EDC, EDC Team Jefferson, Empowered Teens Coalition of Jefferson County, Habitat for Humanity of Clallam County, Housing Solutions Network, Jefferson County Community Foundation, Jefferson Healthcare Population Health Department, Oak Harbor Youth Coalition, OPAL Community Land Trust, Orcas Island Community Foundation, Orcas Island Market, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, South Whidbey CARES Coalition, and Washington State Health Care Authority, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery.

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Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication constitute the proceedings of an event and do not necessarily reflect the views of WSAS or the organizations or agencies that provided support for the project.

COMMUNITY DIALOGUE OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

In October 2021, the Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) hosted the second in a series of dialogue events on COVID-19 response and recovery. The purpose of the dialogue series is to bring together scientific experts and community members to discuss issues being navigated by local communities.

This event was designed and planned through months-long engagement with community members and organizations in coastal counties to understand which issues were most pressing for them. The engagement was not a comprehensive representation from the region, but it was a chance to hear from a number of perspectives about challenges that stood out, questions that were top of mind, and key local factors and context. WSAS connected with its statewide network of scientific and technical experts to complement local expertise from a broad set of community members.

This virtual event focused on housing concerns facing coastal counties, especially Clallam, Jefferson, San Juan, and Island counties. These counties, made up of rural and suburban communities, range in population size from 17,000 to 85,000. Many of these areas have historically served as tourist and retiree destinations supported by various service industries, such as hospitality, healthcare, and community services. They also host above-average levels of vacation home ownership. They experienced an outsized impact from shifts in housing patterns due to the pandemic, alongside disruptions in income for many local workers. These shifts have exacerbated challenges with affordable housing in the region.

The dialogue began with Roger Myers, current WSAS president, who described how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of life in Washington State,

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and that many decisions are made at the local level, as well as outside of government. Myers described the need for the evolving knowledge gained from research and experience to be part of a dialogue about the interpretation and implications for decision-making, with a community approach to policy and solutions. The goal of this dialogue was to help use the available knowledge base toward the shared purposes of reducing harm caused by the pandemic and contributing to the future vitality of communities in Coastal Washington and beyond.

Celestina Barbosa-Leiker, the dialogue's moderator, then framed the conversation around a question: How does housing contribute to a thriving community? The engagement leading up to the event shed light on many aspects of this question.

Housing is important in and of itself, and also affects communities in multiple intersecting ways. The availability and cost of housing is related to economic stability and growth and the wellbeing of those who live in a community. It is part of what sustains the vibrant identity of a place and the local workforce who provide essential services. A dialogue of this kind is also an opportunity to highlight that how we talk about housing reflects attitudes and assumptions that make a difference for how we view potential solutions and what actions we can take.

Housing issues and thus efforts to address housing needs are often thought of in discrete segments. The WSAS team heard during the planning process that it is important to emphasize that housing needs are part of a continuum, and success in any one area relies on the rest of the continuum. For example, emergency shelter is more successful if it connects to affordable permanent housing options, which are affected by the commercial housing market.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused shifts in housing in ways that amplify aspects that were already in motion. For example, the pandemic exacerbated income instability and therefore housing instability, changed the conditions required for shelter to be safe, and shifted the locations that people live and work.



QUESTIONS AND THEMES

As a group, the panelists brought decades of experience to speak to the complexity of current housing issues in coastal Washington:

- **Laura Benjamin**, *Senior Planner, Puget Sound Regional Council*
- **Gregg Colburn**, *Assistant Professor, Real Estate, University of Washington*

- **Lance E. German**, *Real Estate Agent, ReMax Prime, Clallam County*
- **Jamie Maciejewski**, *Executive Director, Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County*
- **Jennifer Sherman**, *Professor, Sociology, Washington State University*
- **Greg Winter**, *Executive Director, Opportunity Council, Island, San Juan, and Whatcom Counties*

Throughout the discussion, panelists fielded questions and built on or responded to each other's remarks, often highlighting the interconnectedness of the issues at hand and bringing in the context of broader social issues as well as experiences in other localities.

Questions posed in the dialogue came from the preceding engagement process, the panelists' input during planning, and from event registrants prior to and during the dialogue. The questions covered themes such as:

- What are the long-term impacts on a community that lacks affordable housing?
- What is the role of housing in meeting other community needs?
- Can equitable housing be achieved without encouraging more growth?
- What regulatory changes have worked to increase the housing supply?
- How can market pressures be mitigated to protect affordability in destination communities for vacationers, retirees, and telecommuters?
- How do state policies and regional approaches intersect with local policy options?
- What can be learned from other regions addressing similar issues?



KEY INSIGHTS

Describing a Healthy Community

With a focus throughout on how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing housing issues, the panelists covered several factors affecting the housing landscape in Washington's coastal communities.

Retirees, remote workers, and service workers

Panelists conveyed that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing contrasts in coastal communities between subsets of the community who rely on fixed income or service industry salaries, and new homebuyers from metropolitan areas or regions with different economic profiles (such as greater King County), some of whom were previously seasonal or weekend visitors. Maciejewski noted, for example, that Jefferson is demographically the oldest county in the state, and retirees from higher-income and wealthier areas bring equity and assets that price out local buyers. She added how tourism has a related effect on local renters, as some local owners rent to vacationers who pay a premium rate, which supplements income for homeowners, but also removes housing stock and prices out the very workers who provide services to these visiting populations.

Panelists noted that similarly, the arrival or expansion of high-speed internet in rural communities and the recent accelerated shift to remote work during the pandemic has transformed prospects for workers with high salaries who were once tied to the city, including younger workers with families. While these new demographics bring an influx of money into rural areas, local salaries have not kept pace, which has

further constrained rental options and broader housing availability and costs.

Broader economic context

Looking across the Northwest, Sherman described similar patterns of growing economic inequality when there is an expansion of people moving in or buying second homes in rural places with desirable natural amenities. There was a general emphasis that when local communities face economic strain and disparity, it has a negative effect on the region as a whole.

Many of the panelists considered the issues facing Washington counties through a larger macroeconomic context. As German put it, the bottom line is that although homes are fundamental, housing is impacted by so many other larger aspects of the economy and society. To address it in isolation is very difficult.

German also spoke to another broader economic trend, which is that properties have increasingly become an investment vehicle, which has driven up prices and increased market volatility as people seeking to purchase a home to live in are competing with people who are making speculative investments.

Housing as a continuum that includes people who are unhoused

Panelists noted that homelessness has become increasingly common in rural and small communities in Western Washington. Colburn stressed that policy makers too often treat homelessness and housing markets as separate issues, when the two are actually tied to similar social and economic issues.

Winter added that while homelessness is often correlated with rising home prices, it is very often rising rent prices that contribute to the number of people who are unhoused. In recent years people on fixed incomes, often seniors, who don't own homes with fixed mortgages, have more frequently been priced out of units by rising rent. In Whatcom County, Winter notes, the unhoused population aged 55 and older has doubled in the past ten years.

Long time horizons and holistic approaches at scale

Benjamin spoke to another macro-level factor by highlighting the timeline of land-use planning, which is not in months or years, but decades. As a result, when questions of public housing, subsidies, and other of-the-moment political issues come up, they often miss the longer timeline of policy that focuses on holistic land-use issues (for example, the Puget Sound Regional Council's Vision 2050).

Speakers noted that often when funds are allocated for housing solutions, they are seen as a failure and abandoned if they do not produce short term results. This, one speaker analogized, is similar to abandoning a round of antibiotics before the full course of treatment required for it to be effective.

The challenge is beyond the control of a single group or company.

Some groups are starting to use longer time horizons to better serve their communities and anticipate increases in market prices. Habitat for Humanity, for example, is seeking to close the gap between rising home prices and the ability to subsidize housing. This would ensure “permanent affordability” such that the sale price for their projects is always pegged to local incomes.

Colburn emphasized that even as some major companies, such as Amazon and Microsoft, explore how they can have a role in addressing housing challenges in the region, the challenge is beyond the control of a single group or company. What is needed is a holistic public sector partnership with the private sector to enable larger scale intervention. Despite the challenges, one reason to be optimistic about the potential posed by the pandemic, Colburn concluded, is that historically it is in moments of major crisis (such as the Great Depression) that the country can pass big-ticket measures that produce true change.

Final Reflections

The panelists were invited to close with something they took away from the conversation. These reflections highlighted the following:

- The dynamics and crossover effects across rural communities and larger urban areas, such as Seattle, especially how growth and migration to smaller communities contribute to housing challenges for those who have been in communities the longest.
- The specific experiences in coastal communities around second homes and vacation homes that affect both housing and community connections, in contrast to the emphasis in larger cities like Seattle on short-term rentals.
 - The importance of strong public sector leadership for solutions to be sustainable.
- The need for partnerships among nonprofit and for-profit organizations, alongside more public investment, to make those partnerships work and scale up proven tools we have at hand to solve these problems.
- The value of considering the right level for any given policy decisions, whether it is the family or the local community, or the county, state, or federal level.
- The importance of addressing larger policies and social factors that affect housing in addition to suggesting more individualized and localized fixes.
- There are all sorts of stereotypes about people who struggle to afford housing, that they are lazy or dependent—they are “not wanted” in a community. Yet many workers deemed so essential to a community during the pandemic cannot afford to live there. This disconnect and the stigma of housing need are among the biggest deterrents for public support for creating and sustaining affordable housing.

Panelists shared that they were able to form new connections and collaborations with groups they had not worked with before the community dialogue – a testament to the impact of WSAS convening individuals with different expertise and experience.

OUTCOMES

This second WSAS event on how the pandemic has affected local communities brought together community members, organizations, and scientific experts locally and from across the state. After the event, some panelists shared that they were able to form new connections and collaborations with groups they had not worked with before the community dialogue – a testament to the impact of WSAS convening individuals with different expertise and experience .

Panelists provided their unique perspectives and deep insight to the challenges of the current moment. They agreed that there is no single solution to the housing challenges that face coastal Washington, and that the multiple issues involved in limited housing availability and rising housing costs must be thought about holistically and within the context of COVID-19, regional factors, remote work, and growing income disparities. Participants who responded to a post-event survey acknowledged that such conversations are just one small part of realizing solutions that take time and resources and can be affected by politics and other decision-making factors.

One of the goals of the dialogue series is to deepen science-for-policy discourse at the local level. Nearly all participants responding to a post-event survey found the event informative, and more than half left feeling more confident in considering the many factors in how housing contributes to a thriving community, and with more interest in seeking more and different kinds of information about the topic.

A major outcome was to engage a variety of perspectives in a thoughtful dialogue about a complex issue

In keeping with the event’s purpose, a major outcome was to engage a variety of perspectives in a thoughtful dialogue about a complex issue with planning and participation from across the broader community . This event, as with the others in this series, sparked those conversations, made new connections among panelists, and brought awareness to how non-partisan and science-based entities can contribute to dialogue about local solutions across communities.