

Sophia Cassam

From: Kai Sanburn <kaisanburn@gmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, April 3, 2022 7:52 PM
To: Vacation Rental Comments
Subject: For community wellbeing, limit VR permits to 'active and compliant'
Attachments: Letter- Jean Vortex w.docx

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Hello Council Members Minney, Stephens and Wolfe,

Thank you for dedicating time and energy to the issue of Vacation Rentals. It is an important issue, no doubt one among many, but one that impacts the fabric of our communities.

There is so much that has been said about the issue of Vacation Rentals. I have my own story about the vacation rental conundrum but because tourism and visitors are often spoken of in terms of how they support local businesses, I will submit a letter written by a Lopez business owner last summer that counters that narrative. There is a supportive response from the owner of one of our bakeries. There were two other responses that spoke to the challenges of the summer influx. When I asked Jean Perry for permission to submit this letter, she reiterated her concerns and expressed her wish that decision makers would listen to those working to support our community.

It's understood that the problems are multifactorial but increasing VR permits will increase the number of visitors and that is an issue.

Please read the letter - copied here and as an attachment.

Thank you,
Kai Sanburn
Lopez Island

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Letter with permission of the writer, Jean Perry, owner of Vortex in response to an inquiry about Vacation Rentals and visitor impacts on Lopez Rocks 8/9/21, owner of Vortex

8/9/21

The comments above were not written with the thought that they would be publicly shared, although I did agree to allow Kenny to post them. **They were written specifically in response to three questions posed to me as a business that directly serves tourists, and they were aimed at informing those who are evaluating the matter of increasing vacation rental permitting on Lopez.** My responses represent the experience of one stubbornly persistent and generally resilient business owner who has daily, visceral reactions to the situation at hand. **The questions had to do with my ability to handle a larger volume of visitors, the availability of labor, and my experience with the ferries. My comments do not imply a call for help, and they are not complaints. They are a simple setting forth of the situation as I experience it.** A final point I would like to make is that my comments do not reflect on the quality or efforts of my crew, who in spite of the onslaught have valiantly faced every day's challenge to the best of their abilities.

Letter:

This is the **26th summer that my year round business has operated on Lopez** and there is no doubt that this is the most challenging and least rewarding season I have ever experienced. **Increased tourism, as well as the change over time of the kinds of people visiting the island, have made operating within the restaurant infrastructure that our seasonal economy can support nearly impossible. (That is, our year round income cannot possibly support the size of facilities we would need to handle summer volume.)** We are completely overwhelmed with people, some of whom have chosen us carefully or have eaten here for years, and some who are just looking for a meal, someplace that is open. Our local and regular customers wait ridiculous amounts of time for food, sometimes even if they have called ahead. Our quality control is compromised, our ability to have specials

or accommodate deviations from the menu is curtailed, and our spirits are brutalized with every day that demands more of us than we can comfortably provide. Beyond this, **the increase in sales does not mean an increase in income**: chaos, mistakes, needing to purchase supplies at retail prices when we run out, offering consolation prizes in the form of drinks, appetizers, or baked goods for inordinate wait times, stress on refrigeration, the need for extra labor that is unskilled and lacking in judgement, and **the sheer volume of labor necessary to keep moving forward all contribute to a very marginal increase in profit for a small business like mine, while wearing greatly on our energies and outlook.**

As to the labor force situation, my business was open 60 hours/week during the summer of 2012. For the last several years, the most we have been able to manage is 20 hours/week, due entirely to the lack of available labor, especially people who stay at the job long enough to become skilled. I consider this to be **mainly a result of the lack of affordable housing for service workers** whether long or short term, and the addition of more vacation rental permits can only make this situation worse. But I would also consider the gradual increase in property values and the growing imbalance between people who require services and those who provide them to also contribute greatly to this problem. Many of my longer term workers have migrated to higher paying jobs in landscaping, housekeeping, or elder care. Because the cost of housing is so high, it is no surprise that people need to work at the highest paying jobs they can find, and there are plenty of people of abundant resources who can pay much higher wages than any restaurant. Those of us who are trying to serve food in this environment find we have constant turnover and spend untold hours training people who will not be staying long. Serving really good food in a pleasant environment cannot be done with only unskilled labor. The few people who are available to work are pressed into service at multiple places. It has become almost a competition sport to find workers and manage their availabilities. My work force this summer is comprised entirely of people who live with their families. This does not make for a stable or well trained staff, and there is no doubt that the quality of our offerings and also our work environment suffers because of this.

The situation with the ferries this summer has become almost impossible to negotiate as a business. I have stopped even attempting to go to the mainland for supplies, and am paying very high shipping costs to order items like paper products online. It is difficult to imagine that visitors would choose to return to the islands after some of the experiences I have heard about this summer. Friends routinely take two or even three days for medical appointments, some of them buying RVs to make staying overnight on the mainland feasible. While ferry staffing (or lack thereof) is responsible for much of this, **increasing the number of vacation rentals can only exacerbate the situation.**

In all these ways I believe that we have reached--or passed--the tipping point of benefits to be gained from tourism in the islands vs. the detriments. Every Monday and Tuesday, when we are in the restaurant preparing for the deluge of customers who show up on Wednesday through Saturday when we are open, we face a constant stream of people looking for a meal that is not available anywhere. Some are disappointed, and others are outright angered that there is so little available to them. There is a degree of disingenuousness to advertising the islands as appealing destinations when there is so little to offer in the way of eating--much less dining--options. I cannot even number the conversations that I have had with visitors who were perplexed and irritated by the restaurant situation on the island, and it is at no small cost to my own time that I make the effort to explain the constraints involved. This is not a sustainable situation, and for myself, the constant challenge of providing a service against the odds with untrained and inexperienced help is deeply dispiriting and greatly undermines the joys of providing local foods to appreciative visitors. **Looking across the landscape of eateries on Lopez, I can easily imagine that several of us entrepreneurs would abandon the struggle if it became even a little bit more difficult.**

Jean Perry
Vortex Cafe and Juice Bar
Lopez Island

From Stephanie Smith - Holly B's Bakery

Aug 8, 2021

I have really debated whether to weigh in on Jean's letter. Shouldn't another business owner back this up, nod their head in agreement, or suggest it's not that bad? Honestly, I think in pure Jean fashion, it's just so nice. Jean and I speak of these struggles frequently. **This is no joke, and I think everyone should re-read that last sentence of her letter a few more times.**

I'm really saddened to read a comment on here that suggests these businesses shouldn't close during the busiest time of year. Are we not human? Are we only here to make money?

Sometimes businesses have to be closed due to staffing, even in the busiest time of year. Sometimes businesses have to be closed because we didn't receive enough product to be open, even in the busiest time of year.

Sometimes businesses have to be closed because the owners and staff need a day (or more off), even in the busiest time of year. We are here to make money to pay our staff and our rent, but it is ludicrous to suggest that just because it's the busiest time of year that we can't close to recuperate from busy weekends, enjoy time with our families or travel or enjoy the nice weather. Should this only be afforded for those not in the service industry? I for one enjoy days off island for regular medical appointments, then pick up supplies, and then off load 1000 pounds of flour.

It is unfortunate that some closures cause so much business for another, but I am so thrilled when someone chooses to prioritize their health, their family time, their staff. We literally do not have to kill ourselves or our staff in order to make this work. And we don't have to be or shouldn't try to be everything to everyone.

Obviously I don't all have the answers. Some days I wonder what the question is. But I do know that the restaurant industry folks that I'm connected to love making food for people and have done everything in their power to keep their businesses afloat over the past year plus, when closing up shop would have been so much easier.

