

September 14, 2021

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I was thinking recently about some of the feedback you received at your prior listening session — a couple of folks expressed frustration with working with Astoria's Planning Department. The following is in a very real sense ancient history but it highlights why I was sympathetic to their feedback.

In late 2019 Nelle & I were looking to purchase and donate to a 501(c)(3) a building for group housing. We toured a building near Safeway that from the assessor's office has 6 bedrooms... we counted 8 bedrooms in our tour. Apparently in its history it had been used as a boarding house. In some sense that's what we wanted to recreate (e.g. for folks moving out of Helping Hands that cannot find or afford market rate housing). We checked in with the Planning Department — shared our thinking — and were told we would need 12 off-street parking spots! I suppose property like that exists in town but none that I've encountered. A possible variance was discussed but it didn't sound promising and the last thing we wanted to do was buy a house and then not be able to use it for our intended purpose. We moved on and ended up purchasing a 3-bedroom house on Bond Street for pretty much the same purchase price. Lately I've been thinking of those five additional people that could have been housed with those additional bedrooms this upcoming winter. What happened to the house near Safeway? It sits empty after being snatched up by an individual from southern California.

So what does this have to do with the Planning Department? They just explained the rules.... Which leads me to another short story....

In January of 2019 I met with Brett Estes to let him know we were exploring locations for a drop-in center in Astoria. I was armed with some knowledge from the success of creating a tiny home village in Clackamas County. The Clackamas project manager said the key to their success was the county commissioners encouraged county staff, and others, to figure out paths forward instead of creating roadblocks of "we can't do that because of...." I asked for that kind of support from Brett. He said in Astoria city staff support everyone with moving projects forward. On the surface that may sound fair. However, the Astoria City Council goals for 2019-2021 included "Support work and recommendations of the Homelessness Solutions taskforce (HOST) as well as other community efforts to address homelessness." What's the point of mentioning "community efforts" if there isn't some sort of added effort, added support, by city staff?

Back to the 8-bedroom house requiring 12 off-street parking spots — given the city's goal I would have expected SOME sort of encouragement and support working through the parking issue. The planner simply said we could file a variance... basically giving us a form. While that's certainly treating everyone equally it didn't occur as very supportive. What good is having a goal including "Support... community efforts to address homelessness" if that simply means handing me a form?

My question... given the new City Council goals I'm wondering how they are communicated throughout the city staff and the process for accountability?

I should point out the American Planning Association, a national organization that certifies planners, has a code of ethics that states "We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a **special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged** and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs [emphasis added]."<sup>1</sup>

Sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.planning.org/ethics/ethicscode/>.