

Situation Assessment: Housing & Transportation

Internal Analysis

Housing: Strengths & Weaknesses

1. According to the Anacortes Community Profile, the demographics of the city are significantly skewed toward an older, more affluent, and educated citizenry. The quality of the local environment, small town character/charm, with bountiful access to recreational opportunities is, and will continue to be, an attractor to this mostly retired segment of the community. This segment of the population is a key driver for the purchase of higher-end single family dwellings. The good news, building permits and sales taxes generate significant income for the city. The bad news, the demand for higher-end homes puts upward pressure on the prices for all properties in the city (see 2 below).
2. Affordable housing for the lower income segment, particularly for young first time buyers (and renters), continues to be a problem. The positive trend of the Affordability Index (AI) that started after the housing bubble collapse of 2008 has reversed and is now headed in a negative direction. The housing sale data from the period between Sept 2010 and March 2014 suggests that the median house price is increasing at a 7-8% CAGR. Over this same period, the Bureau of Labor Statistics show the private sector wages have risen less than 2% CAGR. If this trend continues, the AI will decline at the rate of 5-6% per year. Without proactive steps by the community, affordable housing for this segment of the population will get worse, not better.
3. Unless we change the zoning of some currently single family or non-residential land, all of our increased density will have to squeeze into a very small area (R4 comprises just 5% of non-public lands). Much of the area zoned for multifamily is occupied by older single family homes, and of the few new units built in the R4 zones in the last decade, many are single family homes on small lots, rather than multifamily - thus using multifamily land for single family homes. Medical uses are also taking up R4 zoned land.
4. Population analysis shows that 66% of our households are 1 or 2 people, and 80% of the housing is single family dwellings. That suggests that many people who could live in multifamily units do not choose to do so. Is that because folks would like to live in smaller units can't find any, or because they really prefer detached units? Probably both.
5. Affordable housing is a concern, and multifamily units can address part of that need because they lower the land cost per unit. But smaller detached units on small lots can also make more intensive use of land, while addressing people's preference for their own single family home.
6. There are also very few mid-range or luxury multifamily units available for those with higher incomes who might like to downsize but stay in their larger homes because of the lack of other options.
7. Home building is booming, though houses are single family and range from \$480K to 1.9M. Hardly starter homes.
8. Rental availability and affordability a weakness. Not affordable for college students or single parent families.
9. Permits for four-plex apartments, but not for full scale apartment complex.
10. There are no affordable starter homes
11. Apartments & condos scattered around town (strength), However too affordable (weakness)
12. Median house prices rose 4.8% in county, Anacortes' cost of living in 9.5% higher than the rest of the county

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13. Re: Transportation- we have SKAT, Mert's Taxi, Bellair Shuttle and one electric charging station.
14. Why wasn't anything done when Portalis & San Juan Passage started to add a traffic light, possibly a ferry lane. Why wasn't developer held to account for traffic management?
15. 20 spur needs to be resurfaced, ferry lane needs to be added.
16. Shuttle to ferry at peak times
17. Trucks only to use R Ave, not on Commercial.
18. Lack of meaningful jobs

Transportation: Strengths & Weaknesses

1. Traffic along 12th/Oakes is nearing capacity.
2. In general, the public transportation services available to Anacortes residents are, at best, only fair. Transportation services to schools and shopping in Mount Vernon/Burlington are cumbersome (transfers) and inconvenient (correlation to school/shopping/work) for many. There is no regular downtown only service.
3. I believe the private Airport Shuttle services are meeting the need.
4. Intracity public transportation bus services are available (SKAT, Mert, and Dial-a-Ride), but not robust enough to attract additional riders.
5. Many parts of the city are not pedestrian and/or bike friendly. South Commercial is an example.
6. For non-drivers (children, elderly) or those who would use public transportation if they could, there are few options. It's a chicken-and-egg situation, no one rides the bus because the schedules are infrequent and don't go where they want to go, but SKAT doesn't want to add routes because no one rides the bus.
7. A regular (every 20 minutes) bus that circulates through the neighborhoods so anyone can hop on board to go downtown at any time of day would probably be well used if people could count on it.
8. Much of the city was developed without sidewalks.
9. Oakes Ave. is a disaster on holidays. Vehicles waiting for the ferry make it impossible to get to Skyline, Washington Park, or even to the ferry terminal to pick someone up. Ferries leave part-empty because even folks with reservations can't get to the boat when they're stuck in traffic. This MUST be improved to create a good long ferry holding lane, and a continuous left turn lane so that on the big holiday weekends when even the holding lane overflows, through traffic can use the left turn lane to get around the back-up. This is an emergency services safety issue, not just convenience.
10. R - Q Ave. is supposed to be the main truck route, but trucks headed to Skyline or the ferry can't conveniently get to 12th/Oakes without going down Commercial.
11. Limited number of arterials is a weakness, but also strength because it keeps the residential streets relatively quiet.

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External Analysis

Housing: Opportunities & Threats

1. People will continue to want to move here (as we did) for the small town character, and the single family neighborhoods. Many want to get away from big-city living, including multifamily buildings that are taking over their old neighborhoods in other cities. Is there a solution, such as infill units on small lots that could increase density while keeping the neighborhood character?
2. Multifamily units above the ground floor have been allowed in the C and CBD zones for at least 20 years and in the CM zone by Conditional Use Permit, but none have been built except at Portalis. Factors are: current property owners don't want to tear down their buildings, parcels are too small to develop cost-effectively, people want to preserve some historic buildings, lenders aren't willing to finance this type of development, rents aren't high enough here so it doesn't pencil out.
3. Mixed-use development is allowed in the CM1 zone by Conditional Use Permit, but most of that land is owned by MJB and they have chosen not to develop it so far.
4. Based on the population growth projections provided by the county (see data) via the GMA process, current per unit housing density, land currently available for development, and current zoning, it would appear that Anacortes will either have to increase the land available for residential development, rezone existing land to higher density use, initiate higher density redevelopment in areas already so zoned, or a combination of all three strategies. I believe this is an excellent opportunity to launch redevelopment initiatives in the south Commercial and surrounding mixed use areas targeting housing for lower income residents. The envisioned redevelopment would be mixed use combining apartments with street level businesses and shops in a walkable environment per the Walkability and Livability Assessment Workshop by Dan Burden in 2006. These units could also be models for "green" construction techniques and energy efficiency, e.g. solar (passive and active), etc.
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6. I-5 corridor & Mt. Vernon/Burlington and Arlington developing faster than Anacortes. Housing is cheaper than Anacortes, but still above the national average.
7. More rentals & shops with access to I-5, north & south.
8. More folks going off island for work than staying in town.

Transportation: Opportunities & Threats

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1. The biggest external factor affecting traffic and congestion in the city are the ferries. As the popularity of the San Juan Islands and Victoria continue to grow, the traffic on 12th/Oakes will continue to get worse, particularly in the summer. This fact is compounded by the additional traffic that will be generated with the build out of the San Juan Passage homes.
2. As long as we depend on SKAT for public transportation, we won't get much. Could the City or a private company provide local bus service that is more responsive to local needs (connecting to SKAT, of course)?
3. Traffic on SR 20 will continue to be an issue because of the many thousands of non-residents needing to access the ferry and Whidbey Island, over whom we have no control, and the fact that WSDOT controls the budget, planning, and scheduling of highway improvements, over which we also have no control.
4. Congestion at Sharpe's corner, lights & signage needs to improve. Sharpe's corner needs to improve.
5. Access to I-5 16 miles away.

Issues

1. Infrastructure needs to be attended to.
 - a. Proper roads, traffic flows, storm sewers, home sewer systems, police & fire services.
 - b. Responsible zoning & placement of homes, paying attention to slide prone areas and ecosystems.
2. Locate areas in which apartments can be placed. Speak with landowners & developers. Are grants available?
3. Given our proximity to I-5, which is 16 miles away - and Oak Harbor is 20 miles – cars are a necessity.
4. What we discuss needs to happen, we can't just throw out fluff & then not do anything.
5. We need to look at old-town and ignite construction as envisioned years ago; retail on first floor, condo's on the second floor. Require affordable housing as part of the build.
6. The plan needs to address the critical need for affordable housing for lower income residents and would-be residents (see above). The city simply can't rely on organizations like the Skagit Housing Authority, Home Trust of Skagit, and Habitat for Humanity to meet the low income housing needs. It must take strong proactive aggressive action to address these needs or risk becoming a "Monterrey of Washington" community in 20 years.
7. The city needs to take a thoughtful and careful look at providing more assisted living and other types of housing for the elderly. With a population significantly skewed with people over 65, more of these facilities will be needed in the future.
8. The city needs better intra and intercity public transportation services. With regard to intra city services, a seasonal trolley serving the downtown district might be an effective way to reduce automobile traffic and promote tourism. A ridesharing service is another idea that might have merit. Another idea is to run a regular shuttle between the downtown district and the ferry terminal in the summer. This could reduce traffic on 12th/Oakes and promote downtown business.
9. The city MUST engage with WADOT to address the 12th/Oakes traffic congestion issue. A dedicated ferry lane, additional traffic controls, shuttle, are all possible solutions.

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Most of us are familiar with some of the concepts used by planners in creating self-contained new towns or "urban villages" within existing large cities. In thinking about Anacortes, it occurs to me that we are already a city that has many of those concepts in place. By strengthening those that we have and incorporating a few that are weak or missing, Anacortes could become a model town.

One of the key concepts in planning a new town or urban village is that housing, employment, recreation, education, and shopping should be in a relatively compact area, so that residents can walk to many destinations and get to others with a short ride on public transportation.

We already have much of that. We can make it even better by

Increasing the density of our housing areas in and near the downtown core so that more residents can walk to work and other destinations

Adding employment opportunities in the areas near downtown housing, so that more residents can find a job near where they live

Improving pedestrian and bicycle connections between residential areas, commercial areas, and employment centers

Enlarging the range of goods and services available in our commercial areas

Providing frequent bus service for those who can't walk or bike to their destinations

- Circulating through downtown (so a person can make several stops for errands)

- Connecting neighborhoods to downtown

- Connecting neighborhoods to each other

- Connecting neighborhoods to employment centers

Currently we have a large percentage of workers who live in Anacortes but work elsewhere, and another large percentage who work here but live in other areas. Only a small number of people both live and work in Anacortes. There are many reasons that people make job and housing choices, but if we can improve both housing and employment options within the city, more people will be able to live near where they work, saving time, money and energy by avoiding long commutes - and increasing their sense of "belonging" to the community.

Although manufacturing of "things" like boats and fish products will continue to be an important source of local employment, we can increase the diversity of jobs by enlarging our definition of industrial to include "idea" industries like software development, medical records, engineering, insurance, finance, and others where people work in offices rather than factories. The more diversity we have in types of jobs, the more people will be able to find a suitable job near their homes. Improving housing options goes hand in hand with improving employment options.

Urban planning principles for new towns, and urban villages in larger cities, assume that jobs, retail, entertainment, services, medical care, and recreation opportunities are close by residential areas, so that things people need on a daily or weekly basis are convenient. But there are also connections (bus, light rail, highways) to regional hubs for things that are only needed occasionally (like buying a new sofa or car) or need to be supported by a larger population base (like a symphony orchestra or regional

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medical center). Each urban center does not have to have everything a person might need, but it should provide what is needed for daily life, while assuming a trip out of town now and then for specialty items and occasional needs.

We already have that. Our daily and weekly necessities can be taken care of right here in town, and we can drive to Mt. Vernon/Burlington as well as Everett, Bellingham, Seattle, and Vancouver for less frequent needs. As our population grows, we can support additional retailers and services locally, but access to regional centers, including by public transportation will still be important.

Consider this 1863 quote from William Makepeace Thackeray:

We who have lived before railways were made belong to another world.... It was only yesterday, but what a gulf between now and then! Then was the old world. Stage-coaches, more or less swift, riding-horses, highwaymen, knights in armour, Norman invaders... and so forth all these belong to the old period.... But your railroad starts the new era, and we of a certain age belong to the new time and the old one.... We who lived before railways, and survive out of the ancient world...

Perhaps our new era starts with returning to the local-centeredness of the more distant past, rejecting the current notion that long commutes to jobs are a necessary evil of modern life, and making it possible for people to find a diverse selection of both jobs and housing in Anacortes.

What do we need to know?

1. What areas of growth are available and what will developers be responsible for re: infrastructure.
2. What city controls need to be reassessed to promote higher density that would fit the island's character?
3. Start discussions with State regarding Hwy 20, include ferry lane.
4. Seek grant to initiate solar roadway
5. What is the scope and magnitude of the unmet need for affordable housing? I would like to see some data on the number of employees that work in Anacortes but live outside of the city BECAUSE of housing costs. Also, some numbers on people who qualify but cannot get affordable housing due to a lack of availability.
6. I would like to see some information on cities that have successfully deployed a redevelopment strategy to convert from single to a mixed use environment. Are there some model or pilot projects that can be used as examples?
7. I would like to see some detailed recent home sales and rental data from the real estate industry.
8. Latest WADOT data and plans with respect to traffic along 12th/Oakes ferry route.
9. Data from recent pedestrian/biker city survey?
10. Public survey data on citizens about using public transportation services. How many people would use public transportation services to MV/Burlington if price/schedule was acceptable? What are riders saying?
11. Data on the downtown parking situation. How many cars vs slots?