

Writers on the Range: The housing crisis is harming my town

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In Girdwood, Alaska, we'll long remember the snowstorm of Dec. 6, just three months ago. But it won't be for the school cancellations. We'll remember it as the night dozens of residents traveled a snow-packed highway to testify at a public meeting — about housing.

Residents across the West will recognize why so many came out that snowy night. A proposed development, called Holtan Hills, would expand our town's footprint but include almost nothing affordable for teachers, firefighters, wait staff or others who comprise the soul of our community and drive its economy.

With no guardrails to support local homeownership, second-home real estate investors would likely gobble up the project's predominantly high-end units. It's happening already, with most shunning the long-term rental needs of a few thousand people in this south-central Alaskan community. New owners often offer nightly rentals or just leave their houses unoccupied.

That would mean more empty houses in a town with a severe housing shortage. The dozens who testified that night, and the hundreds who wrote letters, described the impacts.

They included Emma, who runs a fishing boat with her husband, and whose young-adult daughter can't find a place to rent in the town where she grew up and now works. And Amanda, the pizza shop owner, who is overwhelmed trying to help her employees find housing, including the 65-year-old man whose landlord recently booted him out on short notice.

Erin described bailing on her long-held dream of raising a family here after 11 years of pouring her talents into nonprofit youth education programs. She reminded me of Autumn, my daughter's former piano teacher, who recently moved away after years of teaching music to local kids. She had been unable to find steady housing.

Such stories swirled into that winter night from the heroes every mountain community knows — the ones who clean rentals, provide health care, build houses and teach our kids to speak, spell, ski and say “thank you.” Business owners were there, too, detailing how the lack of attainable housing causes employee shortages that curtail operating hours, leaving fewer visitor services.

Some who didn't speak that night included the local workers who sleep in their cars or in drafty cabins on the edge of town. We also didn't hear from the Filipino parents of my daughter's close playmate, who are trying hard to remain in the town where their accounting jobs are located, and where their daughter is thriving.

Dozens of us highlighted how communities across the West have fought similar battles for an entire generation now. We talked about Whitefish, Tahoe, Breckenridge, Boise and other towns. We explained their use of sensible deed restrictions, limits on nightly rentals, incentives that promote local home ownership, and concessions from developers. All helped local workers attain housing.

I know the benefits. Living in Colorado in the 1990s, I accepted a financial incentive to put a deed restriction on my modest condo. After my wife and I sold the condo, the payment became seed money for our first house. Meanwhile, the condo still holds a deed restriction that helps locals enter the market. Under such reasonable measures, developers could still make buckets of money while workers gained access to housing.

Someone else who didn't show that night was the developer, who instead dropped a guest column in the state's largest newspaper.

We just need elected officials to understand that people can't work here if they have nowhere to live.

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