

Forums explore vacation rentals to create workable solutions

Submitted by the San Juan Islands Community Network.

The number of vacation rentals in the San Juans has been a contentious issue in the county over the past few years. Letters to the Editor of local news outlets presented a divided community on the viability, use, and number of vacation rentals throughout the islands.

In an effort to provide a greater understanding of the issue and seek workable solutions, the San Juan Island Community Network (SJICN) is conducting a series of three Zoom forums that begin Wednesday, June 9. The forums will focus on Discovery (June 9); Common Ground (June 17); and Collaborative Action (June 24). All sessions are free, and accessible through zoom. They will also be live-streamed on Facebook and Instagram.

Over the years, accusations have been made that have inflamed the situation. Many unanswered questions about the county's intentions, and efforts to find common ground-based solutions continue to frustrate islanders. Questions like how do VRs affect the local economy? What can neighbors do to deal with problems created by VR renters? Where is the data necessary to make wise decisions, who is responsible for collecting the data, and when will it be available for all islanders to review?

The June 9 forum, entitled Discovery, will focus on the facts, feelings and positions of members of the island community. Moderated by Michael Soltman and Diane Craig, panelists for the first forum include Lopezian Jan Scilipoti of Hosting on the Rock, an advocacy group for owners of vacation rental property; Toby Cooper from the Vacation Rental Working Group (VRWG), a fourth-generation Orcasonian concerned about the proliferation and impact of VRs on the islands; San Juan Councilmember Jaime Stevens who, along with council members Christine Minney and Cindy Wolf are responsible for evaluating and monitoring vacation rental permitting in the San Juans; and Doug Whittaker, who has conducted exhaustive research on tourism and the impact of vacation rentals on communities.

SJICN recognizes that the issues surrounding vacation rentals are interconnected with other issues that islanders face, now and in the future.

"Issues such as housing, including affordable housing; the environmental capacity of the islands, especially as it relates to water; island economies, and the need for diversification also need to be explored," added Larry Greene, SJICN co-founder. "The Vacation Rentals Forum series is a beginning."

To learn more about the Vacation Rentals Forums and to register, visit <https://www.sjicn.org/forums>

These forums are sponsored by The San Juan Islands Community Network, offering islanders an opportunity to engage in democratic self-governance.