

Date: 10/19/19  
To: Participants of Habitat for Humanity Candidates Forum  
From: Seth Fleetwood, Candidate for Mayor of Bellingham  
Subject: Answers to questions requested for Habitat for Humanity Candidates Forum

**Would you characterize our current housing situation as a crisis?**

Yes. Housing is unaffordable for half the people who live here. That makes it a mental health crisis causing enduring anxiety, among many other things. In this respect it negatively impacts our ability to be happy. As a public health crisis it requires a vigorous public response which makes it the highest priority.

**What do you see as the major contributing factors?**

We live in a system of private property rights. Our constitution is undergirded by it. We can identify both good and bad effects. Yet, it undoubtedly creates all kinds of very real problems. Many of us like to assert the maxim that housing is a human right. I believe this inspired view was part of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Yet, in our system we commodify it and regard housing, by those who own, as investment for profit. Again, this is our system and we can identify good and bad effects. But somewhere in this observation is a question that seems to imply a conflict between the idea of a human right and the inconsistency of its actualization being dependent on a capacity to buy or sell for profit, and, of course, in our system some people have a capacity to buy and sell and some don't.

But back to the real world we live in. Our market today is not delivering affordable housing. Wages are not keeping up with the cost of housing. There are many complex factors. With effort and commitment this will change over time. Perhaps we can restore our Republic to a place where systemic inequality is not the norm. The Mayor must join a growing chorus to lobby for federal reforms in this regard so that cities must not eternally be victim to the effects of bad policy. Of course the object will continue to be bridging the gap between housing costs and wages.

**What will your policy priorities be in mitigating these contributing factors?**

I will be a housing champion for the right policy, funding and capacity building. I will continue to partner with people and organizations who have earned our trust as experienced and knowledgeable on the question of how to deliver affordability. I will be an advocate for creating permanently affordable housing; for Community Led Housing; I'll be an advocate for intelligent use of the Bellingham Home Fund, which I sponsored as a City Councilmember in 2012 and which was recommended by the Countywide Housing Affordability Task Force which I chaired; I'll be an advocate for appropriate and creative use of the County's Economic Development Investment funds (EDI) which I voted to create in 2004 as a County Councilmember; I'll urge our legislators to increase the State Housing Trust Fund; I'll support expanded use of Community Development Block Grants which I can hope will be increased with improvements at the federal level.

**What role do you envision for non-profit, low and middle income housing producers?**

I see a major role. I see their role as continuing to be leading innovators, and a necessary creative force behind housing reforms and I will partner with them actively. Most fundamentally I want them to be able to do more of what they already do so well.

**What role will your administration play in supporting housing producers?**

My administration will be very supportive. And I hope that my record would give confidence that I will be supportive. I mentioned my collaboration and involvement with the CHAT and the HomeFund. I want to be very thoughtful and intentional about creating good policy; and I'll do it the way I've always done it by engaging with people and organizations who have earned our trust because of experience and expertise. I want

to be a Mayor who willingly harnesses the power of that office to actively support and partner in this cause of creating permanently affordable housing. And, of course, I want us to import, with pride and humility, brilliant ideas from elsewhere.

**What resources will your administration provide?**

Staff, time, and energy. I will consider the viability and efficacy of uncoupling the Department of Planning and Community Development. I know there are examples of cities that have a stand-alone Department of Community Development that see benefits.

**Do we need more permanently affordable housing?**

The City can do more by working with developers who build homes that remain permanently affordable. Roughly half of the working people of Bellingham cannot afford current market rate housing, either to own or rent. Wages have simply not kept up with the cost of housing, and many people moving here can afford to pay more. With effort these dynamics can change over time but not immediately. The housing market is not delivering in Bellingham for too many of us. Private business owners increasingly report they can't recruit good workers because of this issue. A critical and necessary method to deliver affordability to half our residents who are at or below area median income is to collaborate with developers who build non market rate housing that is made permanently affordable by virtue of a one-time subsidy. The question then becomes by what means our housing sectors can generate a funding source to provide a subsidy. Fortunately, a growing number of innovative means is allowing us to generate funds to assist in that regard. Under this framework we can expand non market rate, permanently affordable homes to a number that meets the needs of people who live and work here already."

**How would your administration un-complicate and or reduce cost in the permit process?**

As Mayor I will convene a special ad hoc committee made up of developers, for profit and not for profit, and planning staff and mediate a discussion whose object is to successfully find solutions that resolve a seemingly perennial problem and make real headway in improvements in permitting process.