

May 8, 2023

RE: HOUSE BILL 3414

The proposed House Bill 3414 is intended to help developers construct affordable housing. I am concerned about this legislative proposal. It removes the ability of city government to regulate development in our small cities. This bill would undermine the work cities have been doing to encourage the development of affordable housing, protection of wetlands, historic, and other sensitive areas.

Small-to-midsize cities like ours have struggled with many recent legislations that were meant to encourage affordable housing. The State should give these efforts a few years to take root before considering the type of far-reaching steps proposed in HB 3414, which would give developers wide latitude to bypass city codes, not just on design elements but on size, wetland, historic, and habitat conservation requirements. Additional requirements such as proposed in HB 3414 do not necessarily help achieve the goals of more housing. Restrictions on use of housing solely for transient lodging would do more to retain the existing housing stock than what would be gained by the proposed regulations in HB 3414.

Cities already have regulations in place that allow for variances and exceptions on a case-by-case basis with accepted criteria for approvals. Many design standards and criteria are culturally responsive and protect diverse and underrepresented histories from erasure from market-rate development. Historic resources are unique assets for our communities and their long-term preservation requires adherence to longstanding protection rules. The proposal to force cities to grant automatic variances to such codes is not tied to the building of affordable housing. In many communities HB 3414 could lead to the construction of large expensive homes and actually undermine efforts to provide housing at a broader range of affordability points. The only one to benefit from this bill is the developer, who in many cases, has no interest in the community other than in their own financial benefits.

The City of Astoria's economic vitality is based on tourism, its location on the Columbia River, and its historic character. We have worked hard over the last two decades to develop a code that allows development, but development that fits with our community and the desires of its citizens, and supports affordable housing. The State Main Street program, historic preservation, and scenic waterway issues could be drastically and negatively impacted by the loss of local controls. These are all economic tools used by small communities such as Astoria to maintain a healthy, viable economic base, and livable community for all its residents.

I urge the Legislature to not approve HB 3414 and allow cities to continue to regulate development within their jurisdictions based on codes that are in compliance with the adopted Statewide Planning Goals.

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