

April 8, 2025

Dear City Council,

Stevenson is an amazing place to live, but as everyone knows, it's becoming unaffordable to live here. The boom in Vacation Rental properties, like Airbnb, really makes this problem worse. As is well-documented elsewhere, as the number of Vacation Rentals rise, long-term rents and housing prices rise.

Back 10 years ago when Vacation Rentals were first allowed by the City of Stevenson, it made sense at the time because there were not adequate hotel options. Since then, we've had 2 new hotels open and Skamania Lodge expanded. And we've added many dozens of Vacation Rentals. That's enough. We don't need to keep giving up more of our small town's housing stock to tourists.

Neighborhoods need neighbors. Our neighborhood is starting to feel hollow. Over the years, the City has done a lot of great things to make Stevenson more walkable and bikeable, with plans to improve this further. This attracted me to buy a house near downtown 18 years ago. But now, on my normal walk around the neighborhood between the fairgrounds and City Hall, it seems like I notice a new Vacation Rental almost every time. It's starting to feel like a sad, empty ski town in its off-season. Fewer neighbors. Fewer families sending their kids to school, fewer folks chatting from their front yards or walking their dogs. Who are we making Stevenson more walkable for?

Let me be clear - I don't begrudge a homeowner who wants to make extra money from their property. And, I do appreciate having *some* rental houses available in our town. In fact, when we have family visiting from out of town, they love to rent a house.

But there are different types of Vacation Rental hosts. Some rent out parts of the home they live in full-time, helping them afford to live in the community they love and otherwise couldn't afford. But then there are investors who sometimes have no ties to our community. They buy up houses to convert to Vacation Rentals that sit empty most of the time. A Vacation Rental that's only occupied a fraction of the year can still make a profit for these investors. And the tourists who visit are surely helping certain parts of our economy. But they don't work here and they don't volunteer and they're not invested in the community. We can't let the number of Vacation Rentals ruin our sense of community.

In 2020 the percentage of housing stock in Skamania County used as either second homes or Vacation Rentals was already 18%. Certainly it's higher now. It's a real shame when houses converted to Vacation Rentals were previously long-term rentals and/or affordable houses. Is the City taxing the Vacation Rentals at a rate that can help compensate for other lost values, such as decreasing school enrollments, shortage of volunteer firefighters, and businesses struggling due to lack of housing for their workers?

How many under-the-radar Vacation Rentals are operating? The annual application fee for the City's license hasn't been adjusted since 2016. Is it really sufficient to cover the City of

Stevenson's costs for robust tracking, inspection, and enforcement? Platforms such as Airbnb must be required to remove listings without a valid license on file. Licenses must be revoked for failing to comply with the "Neighborhood Notice" provision and other requirements in our City code.

And we need a new rule: within City limits, we should cap the number of unhosted Vacation Rentals, where the host lives off-site, to the number that currently exists. Any new Vacation Rentals would have to be within the host's primary residence, and/or an additional dwelling unit on the same property. Many cities have enacted rules such as these.

Reining in Vacation Rentals won't singlehandedly solve our affordable housing issue, but it's a good place to start. And it will certainly help our neighborhoods feel like neighborhoods again. It's time for us to take a hard look at our situation and move towards solutions.

Sincerely,

Dana Hendricks
Stevenson

Save Our Stevenson (SOS)

Draft Ordinance

4/4/2025

Purpose

The goal of this law is to prevent Stevenson from becoming a “town” of vacation rentals rather than a town of people who actually live here. It will prevent additional houses from being bought up by out-of-town investors mainly for the purpose of operating as vacation rentals.

Definitions

“City of Stevenson” refers to the legislative body titled as such.

“Vacation rental” or “Short term rental” is defined as a rental unit rented for periods lasting less than one month.

“Proof of Residency”: possession of a voter registration card showing the primary residence in Stevenson

“Hosted Vacation Rental” is considered to be hosted because the owner lives on-site. The rental unit may be within the host’s primary residence, or an additional dwelling unit on the same property.

“Unhosted Vacation Rental” is an unhosted rental unit, where the owner lives off-site.

Application of Rule

This rule only applies to properties zoned residential.

Text of Rule

The annual number of licenses granted by the City of Stevenson for Unhosted Vacation Rentals shall not exceed the number that currently exists on the date when this rule is enacted. As existing license-holders decline to renew, or otherwise forfeit, licenses for Unhosted Vacation Rentals will be phased out. Any new Vacation Rental licenses must meet the definition of a Hosted Vacation Rental.

Enforcement

In addition to the tracking and enforcement mechanisms already in the City code, these will be added:

- The annual cost of the license shall be adjusted to a rate sufficient to cover the City of Stevenson’s costs for tracking and enforcement.
- Platforms such as Airbnb must be required to remove listings without a valid license on file.
- When the City of Stevenson is alerted that a property owner may be in violation, by operating under a Hosted Vacation Rental license without living onsite, the legal property owner will be given 30 days upon notification from the City of Stevenson to produce proof of residency. If the legal owner of the property does not produce proof of residency, the City of Stevenson will turn off sewer and

water services to the property. The City of Stevenson will refund any portion of the sewer and water bill that was already paid at point of termination.