

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nhatt Nichols, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, March 11, 2026.

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Today, reporter Rachael Nutting brings us the story of how an appeal from homeowners could derail Port Townsend's housing plan. Teachers, nurses, law enforcement, and firefighters are still struggling to find homes they can afford in Port Townsend. The city has a detailed White Paper: a years-in-the-making roadmap to fix it. But a new group called Affordable Hometown Port Townsend may hamper that plan with a state appeal, raising the question: affordable for whom?

City staff have confirmed the appeal will consume precious staff time and may push affordable housing work off the schedule. To understand what's at stake, you have to understand the numbers. Port Townsend Public Works Director Steve King put it bluntly, saying that the city faces a deficit of investment of the \$17 million a year it needs to build the 85 units of affordable housing needed annually.

After two years and more than 60 public meetings, the City Council passed a new 20-year Comprehensive Plan in December 2025, as required by Washington State law. The city's strategy is to allow higher density by changing restrictive zoning rules as the first step. Discussions about implementation of affordability measures were set to follow this month. The goal is to reduce the required public subsidy from an impossible \$17 million to a more manageable \$5 or \$6 million by letting the market help carry the load, a plan laid out in the 2023 White Paper informing the city's attainable housing plans.

Enter Affordable Hometown Port Townsend. The group filed a petition in February with the state Growth Management Hearings Board, seeking to challenge the zoning changes. On paper, the appeal is about process. The 13 questions raised by Affordable Hometown Port Townsend ask whether the city adequately planned for housing across all income levels, addressed displacement, and met public participation standards. Board president John Watts, a former Port Townsend city attorney, argues that the city council "chose to pass a plan lacking any" affordable housing measures and that density without requirements for affordability will not work. But the city maintains the plan is valid and will remain in effect during the review.

At a joint workshop between the City Council and Planning Commission on March 9, the true cost of the appeal became clear. Planning and Community Development Director Emma Bolin walked the joint body through the 2026 docket, explaining that the department is operating with two professional planning vacancies and facing a series of state-mandated deadlines. Factoring the appeal into the year's docket cast a bleak tone for the discussion. The list of work the city had hoped to accomplish this year included exploring other affordability strategies from the White Paper. But those items are now in jeopardy.

The frustration was palpable. Planning Commissioner Dylan Quarles said he felt disheartened by how much time the appeal process will take away from other potential housing affordability mechanisms. Council members and planning commissioners alike urged city staff to find a way to still prioritize affordability for the 2026 docket. The *Beacon* reached out to Affordable Hometown Port Townsend president John Watts, treasurer John Capps, and secretary Todd McGuire, with eight specific questions about their vision for affordability, their proposed solutions, and their personal financial stake in the outcome. In an email, Watts declined to answer the questions directly, instead referring to the group's petition and website at <https://affordablehometownpt.org/>.

He reiterated that the city "failed in the end to meet its Growth Management Act mandate to identify how the comp plan addresses affordability for different income segments." He added that they "support greater density, if combined with guarantees that some new units will in fact be affordable for middle and lower incomes." He did not provide any alternative policy proposals for how to build the 85 units needed each year, any funding

mechanism to replace the \$17 million annual gap or any response to questions about the personal financial interests of the petitioners.

The state hearings board has scheduled sessions for April, June, and October. While the legal process drags on, the housing crisis doesn't pause. Watts, in his email, suggested the burden should be on the city, saying, "That is the city's responsibility, not ours. The city has resources. We don't. The city should have done this work before adopting the sweeping zoning changes that do not even address affordability." But the city's roadmap, the 2023 White Paper, contains dozens of pages analyzing affordability tools, funding mechanisms, and policy options. The question is whether that roadmap will now gather dust while the legal battle plays out.

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