



FALL 2005: SPECIAL EDITION

# OPAL NEWSLETTER

HOUSING ISLAND PEOPLE, MAINTAINING ISLAND CHARACTER

## OPAL'S NEED FOR LAND IS ANSWERED IN A BIG WAY

OPAL's staff and trustees have been increasingly concerned about finding land to build more permanently affordable housing, because the demand for OPAL homes remains high (see p. 3) and suitable building sites are harder to find and more costly to buy. A year ago we started an intensive search for land for a new neighborhood. After completing a thorough inventory of all available land in the Eastsound area, prospects looked bleak—there were very few parcels zoned appropriately, and none appeared likely to be available in the near future.



Conceptual site plan: 882 Mt. Baker Rd.  
*Rendering by Frank Loudin*

Then, in late spring 2005, a local Realtor and OPAL supporter brought to our attention a seven-acre property on Mt. Baker Road. The site was affordable, centrally located, flat, and zoned to allow 28 homes. It also had access to water and sewer hookups and was screened from the road with a berm and mature trees. It looked very promising, and so the board and staff conducted a thorough feasibility analysis (see p. 2). After three months of close evaluation, we concluded that the property was perfect for our needs.

To buy it, OPAL's trustees set a goal of raising \$700,000 in cash and pledges (payable in 2006-2007) by January 5, 2006. Thanks to some generous lead gifts, we are almost three-quarters of the way to reaching that goal. Every trustee has committed to this effort with pledges of money and energy, and the community response has been tremendously supportive.

One of our goals for the Mt. Baker Road property is to develop a mixed-income neighborhood. By purchasing the land with private donations instead of government grants, OPAL can provide housing to individuals and families with incomes slightly higher than those allowed under government grant restrictions.

We are very excited about the Mt. Baker Road property and the opportunity to take a big step forward in our mission to “house island people and maintain island character.” On behalf of the trustees, staff and homeowners of OPAL, I invite you join us in this next big adventure.

—Lisa Byers, Executive Director

## THE SEARCH FOR LAND: THOROUGH AND DELIBERATE

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As everyone is aware, property on Orcas is in high demand and limited supply, and as a result, costs are increasing exponentially. Since OPAL acquired its first property in the early 1990s, its costs to purchase land have soared a whopping 750%. During that same period, all other costs of providing an affordable home (site development, construction, professional services, carrying costs and management) have risen “only” 83%.

So when the seemingly ideal Mt. Baker Road property emerged on the horizon, we were elated—but still cautious. With so much at stake, the board and staff needed to examine numerous details and options. Trustee Brian Ehrmantraut recommended that OPAL thoroughly and thoughtfully explore the affordability of the property, as well as undertake a risk analysis to make sure the project wouldn’t endanger the health of the organization. As he summed up the process, “the board discussed several possible scenarios, conducted an extensive set of analyses over a period of months, did their due diligence and ultimately decided that the project met the board’s criteria. Letting it get out of our hands would have been a big error.”

Trustee Joan Pedrick was especially concerned about the proposed density of the project, wanting to see a good balance between meeting the need for affordable housing and honoring the rural nature and way of life on Orcas. The tipping point for Joan was the lack of any other available land. “We have no choice if we want to continue to pursue the mission that OPAL stands for. There just isn’t another opportunity on the horizon to meet the demand on this scale, nor will there be in the foreseeable future.”

*“We have to do this. There is no other suitable land available.”*

*—Trustee Michael Whellams*

For both Joan and Brian, the board’s decision-making process was the key to becoming comfortable with and supportive of this project. “The board works on consensus,” Joan explained. “We wouldn’t be moving forward without one hundred percent agreement. The results of a board decision represent the true examination of people’s thoughts and feelings about an issue. It’s a process that works and is a pleasure to be a part of. I know that if I have concerns or hesitations as we move forward, those will be heard and honored before action is taken.”

Another tough question the board wrestled with was whether or not this fall was a good time to ask the Orcas community to participate in a capital campaign. Joan sums up the board’s response: “We have to make it work and address the need. There just is no perfect time.”

The board acknowledges that this project is a stretch for OPAL. Fundraising campaign chair Mary Blackstone reports, “I have been both delighted and humbled by the response to the campaign so far. Our supporters are making the stretch with us. I’m inspired by the large lead gifts which have brought us to three-quarters of our goal—and I’m inspired by people of modest means who are making such big donations in relation to their circumstances.”

## SKYLER COOKSTON AND TIRZAH FIORITO

### *HOPING TO BECOME A SECOND GENERATION OPAL HOUSEHOLD*

Orcas is home for Skyler, who grew up on the island and lived in Opal Commons with his mom during high school. “People really care about each other here. It’s safe and it feels good to see so many people every day that I know and that know me.” Skyler has worked the gamut on Orcas: for Rosario, Island Excavating and various construction and landscape jobs. He has also served as a volunteer firefighter.



Tirzah and Skyler at home with Luca

Tirzah has been on Orcas since 1998, when Skyler asked her to come home with him for a college break and summer job at Rosario. She started that summer as a hostess and is now a catering and sales manager for Rosario, managing events—from weddings to retreats—and maintaining community partnerships through donated events at the resort. Tirzah grew up in Stanwood and appreciates the value of close community.

After Skyler and Tirzah married in 2001, they were clear that they wanted to make a life for themselves on Orcas. That feeling is even stronger now that their first child, Luca, has arrived. “People brought us meals, offered to clean our house—there was a tremendous outpouring of support. That’s how community works here. We’re looking forward to living in a neighborhood and being able to give back in that way—friends and neighbors supporting each other.”

Both have had stable employment and make “an average wage for off-island” but find it doesn’t go as far on Orcas. An OPAL home would give them the opportunity to stay in the place where they have strong family and community ties and raise their children in a safe and supportive environment.

The young couple looks forward to having more children, getting involved in community activities and possibly coaching youth sports. “The only reason to move off island would be to be able to afford a home and not continue to waste our money on rent.”

## GREAT NEED FOR AFFORDABLE HOMES

The median sales price of a home in San Juan County, which doubled in the last three years, is today the highest in the state at \$475,000. Unfortunately, average annual wages in the county have remained close to flat and are currently only \$25,479 (or \$12/hour)—the sixth lowest in the state and 35% lower than the state average of \$39,351. The 2000 census reported that 30% of Orcas Island households earn less than \$25,000 per year.

OPAL currently has 59 applicant households on its waiting list or in the process of qualifying for the waiting list, 23 of whom are in a position to purchase a home within the next six months. Who are these households in need? They are people who have lived on Orcas Island for an average of 13 years. The current list includes 64 adults and 53 children. Their average income is \$23,950. They serve the community as bakers, teachers, small business/restaurant owners, store clerks, restaurant cooks and wait staff, grocers, bank tellers, journalists, construction workers, ferry workers, ministers, housecleaners, dental assistants, daycare providers and postal workers. Where would Orcas be without these essential workers?



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#### IN THIS ISSUE

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Sketch of one-story cottage

## MADRONA STREET UPDATE

Thanks to the generous support of many individuals, OPAL reached its goal of raising \$35,000 for two new permanently affordable homes on Madrona Street. Construction began in October.

OPAL is pleased to once again be working with local contractor Justin Paulsen of Terra Firma, NW, LLC. Justin came onboard near the end of the design process and helped Project Manager Gabriel Olmsted complete cost-reduction analyses. With the added challenge of price spikes for materials, owing to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, this was no easy task! “The value of

working with Justin as a partner—not just as a contractor—was tremendous,” says Gabriel. “His willingness, enthusiasm and interest in finding ways to reduce costs to meet budget made the difference on this project, and on every other project I’ve worked with him on. We’re concerned with how to get the most bang for your buck—and how to get the greenest bang for your buck.”

The site is beginning to take shape. Stem walls are framed and utilities in place. Construction will continue this winter and spring with occupancy planned for the summer of 2006. Stop by and watch the site take shape on your way to the library or school.