

# Housing Affordability and Livability

## Introduction:

ASVWVU recognizes the troubling barriers students and community members face in obtaining affordable, safe, and quality housing in Bellingham. The housing crisis in Bellingham is complex, but as population in Bellingham continues to grow we must explore sustainable and comprehensive solutions. We face a shared challenge that threatens this basic human right. Rising home and rent costs are outpacing wages. The lack of affordable and quality housing options disproportionately affects marginalized communities: people of color, low-income families, first generation students, and more. These groups bear the worst effects of our housing policy; segregation and lack of access to resources like quality education and transportation. We need to improve our housing policy to create a livable, affordable city that benefits all citizens.

## ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Require information on tenant rights, responsibilities, support organizations, and other how-to resources be posted in rental units** alongside the certificate of registration as part of the Rental Safety and Inspection Program.
- **Cap move-in fees and application costs that landlords can charge incoming renters.** Offer renters the right to pay their move-in costs in installments with no interest. High upfront costs are blocking people from entering housing, with a disproportionate impact on low-income renters and families, communities of color, students, the LGBT community, seniors, people with disabilities, and those paying with alternative sources of income such as social security.
  - Model Legislation: [City of Seattle, WA Ordinance No. 125222](#). [City of Berkeley, CA Ordinance No. 7171](#)
- **Modernize our zoning laws** to allow for 'Missing Middle' architecture throughout Bellingham; housing options that represent an in-between subdivision and apartment high-rises.
  - Building enough housing in a variety of options will allow for renting students and community members to avoid being price gouged by landlords. We recommend updating outdated zoning laws to allow a richer variety of affordable and quality 'Missing Middle' housing options and applying the infill-toolkit in *all* neighborhoods, especially higher-income neighborhoods.
  - Model Legislation: [City of Buffalo, NY Green Code Unified Development Ordinance](#)
  - Require backyard cottages have the property owner live on-site for at least one year after a unit is created to prevent speculative real-estate and removing the on-site parking requirement.

## Equity and Inclusiveness

ASVWVU recognizes the injustices many people of marginalized identities face in Bellingham. Bellingham has a long history of white supremacy, from the colonial violence against Coast Salish peoples, to the white mobs and leaders that drove out Chinese families in 1885, Sikhs in 1907, and Japanese in 1942. The present-day racism directed against people of color and city's denial of racial profiling shows that this is not an issue of the past. We also have a serious issue with too many people in our community experiencing poverty. We support the city's strategic commitments to 'Equity and Social Justice' and encourage the city to innovate robust policy and programs to back them up.

### ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Support the WWU Blue Group.** We believe their collaboration with local social justice organizations has produced a policy that will best protect vulnerable community members from racial and immigration status discrimination. We are especially in support of a civilian oversight board of Bellingham police.
- **Explore forming a Bellingham Office of Civil Rights to advance civil rights and improve equity in Bellingham.** A dedicated office to assist dismantling deeply embedded systems of oppression within our society would be a great asset. Further, this office could act as an resource for anonymous complaints for issues within Bellingham City limits.
  - Model Program: [City of Seattle, WA. Office of Civil Rights](#)

## Public Safety and Criminal Justice Reform

ASWWU recognizes two interconnected issues: our criminal justice system is broken and we have a homelessness crisis in Bellingham. Mass incarceration disproportionately affects people of color, the mentally ill, and low-income people in Whatcom County. We encourage the city to take actions to reform our broken criminal justice system and protect the most vulnerable in our community.

### ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Support the Ground-level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) program** to provide alternatives to incarceration. We encourage Bellingham to work with the county, tribes, neighboring cities, and the public, especially people of color and low-income people to design and implement GRACE. We thank the council for progress made in this area already, such as the electronic home monitoring and pretrial risk assessment programs.

- o Model Program: [City of Seattle, WA & Kina County, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion](#)
- **Reform our unfair bail system.** This system wastes taxpayer money on pre-trial detention and harms the lives of detainees by implementing a Supervised Bail Release Program. The majority of people in our jail can't afford bail, and they are simply spending time in jail because they are poor.
  - o Model Program: [New York City, NY, Supervised Bail Release Program](#)

## Voting Accessibility

ASWWU believes that voting is a right and recognizes that many communities do not have the access they need in order for this to be true. We believe the following recommendations will increase the amount of underrepresented communities and young people participating in elections and local governance.

### ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Increase voting access by amending the City Charter.** Change the qualifications for registering as a voter in municipal elections such that being a citizen of the United States is no longer a requirement to be a vote. Require residency for thirty (30) days is sufficient provided the individual does not claim the right and vote elsewhere in the United States. Further, allow in-person registration in municipal elections on election day.
  - o Model Legislation: [City of Hvattsville, MD, Charter Amendment 2016-2](#)
- **Require property owners and managers in Bellingham provide all new tenants with information about how to register to vote at the time they move in.**
  - o Model Program: [City of Minneapolis, MN, Tenant Notification of Voter Registration](#)

## Environmental Stewardship & Green Jobs

ASWWU recognizes the people of Whatcom County and our environment are interconnected; each depends on each other for long-term success. As Whatcom County becomes more populated and our economy grows, we recommend innovative solutions for an economy that is compatible with our planet's climate and health. We must transition off of fossil fuels to clean energy, creating new green living wage jobs, especially for new graduates. In addition, we must support policies that protect our prosperity depends on protecting safe and clean drinking water, farmland, salmon and the people who depend on them, and honoring the highest law of the land, treaties with tribal nations.

### ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Continue the moratorium against future fossil fuel export projects indefinitely.**

With a new federal administration that has made removing environmental protections a priority, we need strong local protections for the people of Whatcom County. The safety of our rails, water, air, and climate can't be compromised.

  - *We thank the County Council for their work on this issue so far and urge you to keep our community safe using local tools like the comprehensive plan and its subsequent land use regulations.*
- **Shorten the timeline for meeting the Lake Whatcom Water Quality Project (TMDL) water quality improvement plan to reduce phosphorus and fecal coliform in the Lake.** The investments in protecting our drinking water will reduce the cost of water purification and save taxpayer dollars in the long run. Clean drinking water is a must for the residents of Whatcom County.
- **Reduce the number of housing units planned in rural areas** to prevent overdrawing aquifers connected to the river or needed for other uses like agriculture by supporting policies like Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) and Purchase of Development Rights (PDRs). Preserving farmland, protecting salmon and treaty rights, and improving water quality are all higher priorities than making money off of sprawling development.
- **Support the Nooksack Wild and Scenic designation to promote stewardship of our local rivers.**