Awakening to Reality

If you read the forward to my book The Path Less Taken (attached at the end of this commentary), you'll see the beginning of where I found myself being inexorably and inextricably caught in a passion-driven defense of the island home I had determined, starting in 1970, to be my permanent residence.

I think of myself as a basic guy. No frills, not much of an ego, yet, that said, I can't help myself from paying attention to many things that I have come to understand are not attended to by the majority of my fellow humans. I chose Orcas, or perhaps it is/was the other way around, because I had never been anywhere where I had felt such resonance to a place. Not realizing it at the time, I had fallen in love with the whole experience of living here. That experience deepened as the clock ticked off the years. During the decade of the 70's, when our household had two adults and two young children, the population was a small fraction (about 20%) of what it is today (2026). We enjoyed a classic west-coast version of Robert McCloskey's "One morning in Maine" with the freedom of feral children unbounded in their explorations, a 10 party phone line, no electricity for several years, and the unappreciated boundlessness offered by my youthful body.

My unsolicited, unconscious attention to my environment easily revealed that the island population and flows and dynamics was changing quickly. Having become a volunteer firefighter for this remote end of the island—and in an echo of Aesop's fable about the fox that lost its tail and wanted others to appreciate the joys of taillessness—I recruited other volunteers, one of whom became the Orcas representative for the 3 at-large commissioner positions, positions that control the budget and priorities of the county. Perhaps as a consequence of our mutual belief in the importance of cooperative behavior when a tragedy (say, fire or heart attack) befalls a neighbor, and in spite of our diametrically opposed views regarding the role of government, my council neighbor asked me to serve on the just-forming new island-based committees to completely rewrite the county's comprehensive plan (CP); I was offered the position of chair for the Orcas committee.

As noted in the Foreward, I accepted, though I was aware of how much I didn't know. No committee member had a clue about what a CP was. We didn't know they existed, what they said, how they worked, what they meant. More broadly, whatever notion our committee members had about the role of government (some conservative, some progressive), few had any knowledge about the realities of land use determinations. I don't recall if any of our committee members worked in the real estate community. I think none, and, if they had, they would have been relieved to be spared the burden of having to think about what land use density changes might impact their economic survival. Prior to the introductory meeting where the committees were welcomed into the adventure of crafting a new CP purportedly guided by the 14 principles of the GMA, I was yet another innocent bringing my idealistic mindset to the table.

When, at that welcoming "Let's get started!" gathering, the BOCC announced, along with their apparent joy that we were going to join the late 20th century in doing CP's

“right”, they also revealed that committees could talk about anything except density. I have no idea how that landed with any of my compadres. I’m no expert at anything, particularly politics and money as motivators for ways of gaming a system. I didn’t really know what “density” meant in terms of how hot that button is. It became clear that there was a subcutaneous thread of serious energy (perhaps personal gain, or fear of personal loss) tied up with this word. That’s my sense of the impact on the individual.

That sense of home I mentioned earlier apparently wasn’t really shared by almost anyone, or, if it was, it was buried under the energies stirred, I suspect, by fear of loss. Messing with density goes granular very quickly. No one knew what the density assignments were, save perhaps on their own property, and for sure no one was asking just what all that “density” would add up to in impact should every parcel could be developed to its maximum “highest and best use.”

Thus when the commissioners prohibited the committees from talking density, we accepted it as part of the rules of the game. There was no pushback.

Except for me.

I had no idea what the density map was, or what it said. I was riding on the discovery that in the first 2 decades of living at my new home (the county, the island), the population had tripled. Where’s this going? was my immediate thought. When the planner guiding our river trip down an as yet-unmapped river told me the next day, when I asked what the buildout population was and she had no idea what the buildout was nor had any plans to determine it, since it “wasn’t on the table”, the rotten smell of “are you kidding me?” became a new landmark in my psyche. It was beyond my understanding that a professional long range planner wouldn’t all but be required to know what the landscape of development might encompass. To dismiss this, as I saw it the Most Important Single Question about a plan going forward, signified something seriously amiss.

This was 1992. There was a lot of water over the dam during the CP construction period, not much of which is memorialized in the materials recorded in this website. Plenty of drama moments which helped me realize that what I thought the CP construction process was based on the rules and style of softball was wrong. In fact, SJC was playing major-league hardball but publically pretending it was softball. Betrayal came increasingly to my mind as the fog of innocence burned away.

My awakening to reality revealed how poorly I understood what was going on. To be fair, few understood the true nature of what our work was, which, as far as I was and am concerned now, in looking back, a feint, a deceptive public face on a decaying and decadent mindset in which the individual was ascendent over a community, regardless of this being a Comprehensive (i.e., for everyone) plan. Home? Nowhere in sight.

I had run the mental numbers (not the emotional ones). There were 3 commissioners. I had an audience of 3 and only needed 2 to agree that there was something rotten in

Denmark. I figured a solid argument about our collective future would at least be ruminated on if not serve as an opportunity to see what the community really felt.

I was dead wrong. Rationality was not on the table, and I, a pressure-soaked new-england private boarding school and private college elitist (or so I thought I might be characterized), had completely mis-read this unfolding deception. What we were engaged in was not centered anything rational. It's about sound-bite ideas of land ownership and power, infused into the psyche of America from its European roots, perhaps a reaction to the King of England. Whatever. There's no sense of *collective home* here, i.e., something to protect because it is the ecosystem of what we *love*.

I love the smallness, the slowness, the mostly non-human-impacted landscapes, the water views, the willingness to work together especially when something (a storm for example) goes into overdrive. Those qualities, memorialized in the SJC CP's Vision Statement, were supposed to have chops. Real chops. The CP was to be designed and built to operationalize, to manifest, to create and maintain and ensure accountability to the Vision Statement. Today the 2026 call in the CP's Introduction describing the role of the vision statement is that it is the "north star" and that the entire CP, including the UDC (uniform development code), is (or perhaps was publicly intended to appear) to honor it in deed not just in the hollow air of words.

There's no disclaimer that says the Vision Statement, or the CP in its entirety, is really just a mandatory requirement in order to get Department of Commerce funding for planning. There's no "Well, actually, we have to set expectations. This document is aspirational, not a work plan; don't expect it to actually do what it says".

Few in SJC really believe in the CP or the vision statement, where belief translates to taking action to demonstrate the strength of that belief. It's another version of apple pie, mom, and the flag. The real work goes on by those who wish to be unrestrained in their use of private property. Almost no one who intends to stay here who has come in the last 30 years can plant a flag without a serious quantity of money. Accompanying that money are values and desires. The money often comes from urban-centered work, which brings along urban center expectations (public services, entertainment, restaurants, effectively instant gratification of desires for services and goods), virtually none of which is available in the quantities and qualities of the urban area that has been abandoned for life in the islands.

The idea of "home" seems like a convenient placeholder for a still-urban-centric mind set, supported, in just one example, by daily deliveries by Amazon. Home seems to be defined as a rural-extension of the values of the city, including no *personal* identification with the ecosystem that encompasses their individual tax parcel. People move around in cities. It's shelter and convenience, not a *home* like it is in small rural places.

I find myself where I've been most of my life, caught between my own orientation for what Schumacher called "Small is Beautiful" and that of the ecosystem, the culture, within which a fair amount of conformity is required. I'm also wincingly aware that I am

an old white guy in a culture that denigrates anyone who doesn't meet that standard, regardless of the fact that no one chooses to be born female, or black, or indigenous, or Muslim, or any number of "ism's" that separate for no reason and thus mark one for a life that is insufficient, weak, exploitable.

Thus when I felt, as I did when that odor appeared the day after we were convened to do something innovative and appropriate, revealing that the SJC Planners themselves were hip to their bosses and not to their professional standards, I had to take a more attentive position.

My first clue that the effort of being the chair was not going to go easily (for me) was when, at our first meeting at the Grange in the summer of 1992, Darcie (the long range planner) asked us to consider how long the CP planning horizon should be. Having no more experience being a chair of a committee than I had working the silks at Cirque de Soleil, I chose to withhold any of my own ideas until I had worked the room. Of the 15 other committee members, some said 5 years, some 10, some 15. At this point I trust my poker face did not reveal my horror. Finally, Darcie said that she felt the planning horizon should be 20 years. (Which is what GMA intended). I then weighed in that I personally thought the planning horizon should be a century.

A few years later, when the orcas committee met in the large conference room at the Library, I broke out of the don't-talk-about-density prohibition and started gently exploring the topic. The gridlock that developed in the space of a few seconds made it obvious that no one was indifferent to this topic but had absolutely no language for even approaching it. The exploration died because it was simply too hot. That's the argument that the BOCC would use, privately, to explain why they took density off the discussion table.

It is said that fools step in where angels fear to tread. By that definition, I've been a fool all my life. I march to the sound of a different drum. One that asks, of almost anything, almost anytime, Why? Or it's equal companion, Why Not?

There's an interior/exterior persona situation here. As chair, ***I*** was (according to Darcie, when asked why the Orcas committee was so effective while the Lopez and San Juan committees were embroiled in controversy) the reason. No ego puffing here. I was playing this role by ear, and that meant listening, summarizing, confirming I (**we**) all heard the response. I was engaging, kind, compassionate and on point. That's not hard, is it? Why weren't others bringing that mindset to the table? This is big shit, jah?

On the main page of this website, you may have read the part about commissioner game playing during the period between the election of 1996 and the swearing in of the commissioner in January of 1997. Another Awakening. These guys really do not want to play the representative government game. They want to Trump-ize the outcome. As you'll read, it didn't work. Like the 2026 mid-terms, there's a whole new game that blew into Dodge.

That we islanders now had two new smart, savvy, progressive women signified a dramatic change from a county that was solidly conservative white male-commissioner driven since the dawn of time. The voters have spoken. The CP process will be rescued from certain oblivion and irrelevance. I was very hopeful.

What I didn't account for was the politics behind the curtain. Now with just one white conservative male commissioner who could be outvoted every time, in a tit for tat which is what John and Tom did to Rhea starting in january 1995. But Darcie and Rhea were not paddling to the same stroke. All 3 commissioners went rogue. They couldn't get along. They couldn't get much done. A lot of wheels spinning in sand. They did manage to restart the CP process, but as before, and regardless of the overwhelming amount of public participation, they stayed the "avoid the real issues" course. The price paid for this dysfunctionality was the changeover to a 6 person by district structure which itself fared so badly the original 3 person at large structure was restored. Voters were frustrated by dysfunction and one might wonder: betrayal. But that comes later in the story.

When the ink began to dry on the completed CP, in late December 1998, the next phase of the adventure loomed: to appeal or not to appeal, that is the question. Whether tis nobler in men's eyes to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous indifference, or to step up to the plate and say 'not on my watch'.

Note that when I accepted the position to be on the CP construction committee, I felt like I was getting married to someone I'd never met. My concern about the growth potential and data to date told me I had to be at the table rather than in the audience. It was a gulp and I had no choice but to say yes.

However, now, there's a new marriage on the table.

Litigation.

Along with my inability to do cirque de soleil silks or neurosurgery with my Leatherman, I knew even less about the law. The question before me was: how much does this project mean to you? Can you walk away, saying you did your best, and now it was up to others (which in reality meant no others), or are you going to step up to the plate, full goose bozo, with nothing but your passion that this place is too important to leave to the commissioner generals.

Which, if you've read any part of this website, you'll know I did.

The record of documents in this website will tell you the nodes on the trail. It won't reveal some of the color behind the docs.

First, I had to write a PFR (Petition for Review). Then I had to show up at an opening hearing to review the petitioners and set the process in motion. That hearing occurred in the spring of 1999 in Friday Harbor.

I showed up early to the basement of Islander's Bank, where the conference room was being set up. I quickly discovered that the county team was over THERE and my team of five irregulars was over HERE. I had no desire to be visible. I wanted to watch. I'd never been a party to anything like this, so churchmouse was my strategy. I sat in the 3rd or 4th row back from where the action was. I was quietly hiding behind the person in the chair in front of me.

Bill Nielsen was the WWGMHB examiner for the meeting. He asked Karen Vedder, one of the SJC prosecuting attorneys, if she had any requests regarding standing. (Standing is the first step in any dispute process: are you qualified to bring a suit?). She said, "yes, I don't think Symons should be included as a petitioner".

Bill Nielsen looks around, inquires whether a "Symons" is in the audience, and I had no choice but to raise my hand. "Well, Mr. Symons, what are your qualifications for standing?" Those may not be his exact words, as my brain was rapidly draining of blood. I was trying to be invisible and now I'm the Very First Guy that is up for slaughter. I stammered out something about being a long term resident, of being the chair of the committee to rewrite, and god knows whatever I could dredge up to sound semi coherent.

"That's fine, you're in" said Bill. I sat down. I'm still capable of feeling the heat of that almost 3 decades later. Ah so. So *this* is how SJC is going to play this game. No prisoners. David v Goliath.

I'm in, and now I have to write a brief. I don't know how to *spell* brief. I don't know how to format the document (line numbers, page numbers and margins, etc.), or what the structure should be. I dig through the CP appendix looking for any information about population projections, because my central argument is that there is an internal inconsistency between 2 parts of the CP: the vision statement, which essentially says slow, small, quiet, rural, leave it just like it is, and the population forecast, which if realized would entirely eviscerate the intent of the vision statement.

I found a table on page 15 of Appendix 1 of the CP purporting to show the buildout population, at around 45k if I recall. Hmmm I thought, is this accurate? and started to drill down. It was clear to me that this one table was missing information. It turned out that it was missing a LOT of information. I had to discover the information in 5 other tables scattered through the appendix to find the data that should have been added to that table. I double checked my figures. What was being presented to the public was a buildout population about one fourth of the real buildout population, which penciled out around 180,000 people. Small, slow, quiet, rural, isolated? A county whose 100 year population following the first census in 1870 averaged less than 4000? Are you KIDDING ME?

I was advised to unpack this sequence of deception very carefully, to put it "in crayon" as a friend suggested. I wanted to ensure that there be absolutely no ambiguity about the numbers. During the hearing, SJC never whispered any objection to my brief. They couldn't. It was their data. They just got caught grossly underrepresenting the population

based on the assigned densities to every parcel. Densities they created a couple of decades earlier.

Along with my fellow petitioners, all submitting their own version of how and why the county was in egregious violation of the GMA, we prevailed over the many hurdles facing petitioners. SJC got an invalidity order on its density map.

As you might imagine, SJC was seriously disamused. A bunch of rag tag land use irregulars brought down the whole CP scam.

The party, however, had just begun. There were 2 more full cycles of remand and redo, culminating with SJC losing at the growth board level, superior court, and court of appeals. There was only one court remaining, and if it agreed with the previous courts, it would send a message to all counties in the state. I'll never know, but I suspect at that point that SJC's prosecutor office started fielding phone calls from every other county telling it to settle with the petitioners. Which they did, around the ADU issue.

IMHO, the settlement brought the litigation process to a close, but did nothing to solve the underlying problem: an egregious inconsistency with the vision statement, which remains today.

After I wrote my first brief, I was contacted by a staff member in the GIS department who had read what we petitioners were up to. He had access to all the public data and chose to send it to me on a CD. If I wanted the CD to be in the record, I had to contact the GMHB office to find out how to do this, since it would be impossible to print out the contents. A solution was crafted: the main page in this site reveals the obscurity of a critical number that SJC was hoping no one would notice.

One person who did notice was Randy Gaylord, the county prosecutor. He called me and demanded that I return the CD. I'd known Randy for years, the amiable friendly guy who always had a smile. During that call, I saw (I heard) his other side. Not pretty. I refused to return the CD. I still have it and the data it provided.

Another notch in the Awakening to Reality axe. We're in a power game here and SJC is **un** happy. Me? I didn't expect or anticipate any of this. These guys were willing to draw blood. In this vein, John Campbell, a stalwart housing advocate and petitioner, at the end of a HOM (Hearing on the Merits), said, "We're spattered with blood but we're still standing".

For me, a valuable reality check. Conflict is not and never has been my thing. However, it is the 'thing' that moves a lot of people, perhaps especially people in power or people who want to be in power or people who do not want other people in power or people who don't want to lose power.

"Saving" the county is very likely not going to happen thoughtfully or voluntarily, even if it is in the best interests of the vast majority to stop ignoring reality. If there is faith in

anything, it is with time and with Margaret Mead‘s observation: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."
Right now (2026), that small group of thoughtful, committed citizens doesn’t exist. SJC is besieged with financial problems. No one has pointed out to the County Council that their failure to deal with the population growth issue is a part, perhaps a big part, of the financial troubles they are in.

Perfect Storm might be an exaggeration. The rate of change experienced by all living (and non-living) systems in the world is several orders of magnitude greater than what we humans were designed to process. Decades ago I read a datapoint that revealed that the average Sunday New York Times contained more information than a typical person in the 14th century would encounter in their lifetime. This rate of change means less time to think about almost anything. Adjustments must be constantly made because systems, perhaps particularly digital systems, keep changing, requiring us to update our minds as well as our tools. Thoughtful conversations about the future experience of living in the San Juans are not happening, and in any case, no matter the number of conversations and letters to the editor and testimony before the Council, the wall of overwhelm and higher priorities will block any formal effort to investigate. One could call this rational. One could call this first things first. One could also call this nearsighted and stuck in a mindset that has singlehandedly created a mass extinction event for which no serious pushback is occurring. One could call this a betrayal of the intent and purposes of the GMA. One could call this pretty typical human irrationality, consequences for the children be damned.

If there is a slowing or possibly shrinking population in the San Juans, it very likely won’t be due to thoughtful community consensus. It may be due to some unavoidable regional (say, the Cascadian subduction) or national (say, a recession) or global (say, a Carrington event) tragedy. We humans seem to be in response rather than create and craft mode. We were biologically designed to move slow and to repeat behaviors that offered the best chance of survival. Indigenous societies all over the globe have survived for thousands of generations and many many thousands of years. The San Juans were home to uncountable generations of native tribes. The population of the islands never exceeded the carrying capacity of the land and waters.

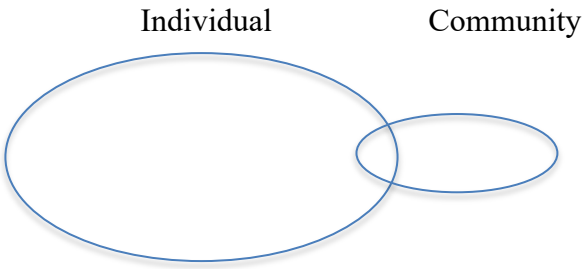
Asking that we return to a life style seen as hardship today isn’t going to fly, tho dealing with that hardship because we didn’t pay attention to our resource base may force us to fly the hardship route anyway. But long before that might happen, our refusal to do an honest assessment of our collective challenges will be analogous to too many refugees in life boats. Definitely not what we thought we were signing up for when we got on the ship.

I never received any instruction in my adventures with formal education about the reality of public decision making. I don’t think the vast majority of Americans did either. We may know how to craft a vision statement that we collectively agree is the way we want to live, but we don’t know how to turn words into action.

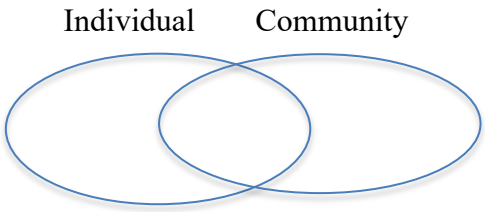
Discontinuities still exist and might be helpful. A few weeks ago (October 2026) no one anticipated how much pushback there was about AI server farms. A few months ago AI corporations were flying high. There's a house of cards process now underway that reveals how unstable the capitalist plans of some tech bros may be. How that instability might trickle down to SJC is unknown in time and consequence.

We need to much more effectively tap the power that we were offered by our Constitution to fulfill the intentions we wish to experience. **We** need to concretize and celebrate that our fragile ecosystem, of people, of limitations, of place, will be harmonious and sustainable. **We** need to lean in to community, not lean out to 'our home is a castle and stay off my land' individualism. The operant term here is **we**. Right now, **we** is subordinate to **I**.

The balance is off. We need to transition from:



To:



In which the feeling of love for one's home extends the definition of home to all the systems, people, nature, that sustain and expand that feeling of durability, stability, kindness and relief that we experience when we're *home*.

Words, like these, are air. Easily expendable, giving rise to "talk". What's on the table, for each person wishing to call SJC their *home*, is to step up to a generally very unfamiliar plate and certify their integrity by matching "talk" with "walk".

For me, the San Juans, even with their wildly different ferry-served-island's styles, constitute bear cubs, and I'm the Mother. Don't mess with the cubs lest you endure the my wrath. Not much power there in one person. But when, in 1999, a san juan islander

read the 1995 letter I wrote to the BOCC, published by a local paper, to discover the depth of the rabbit hole being papered over, she wrote a petition (see main page) that was signed by 10% of the county residents, in which:

> We undersigned residents of San Juan County support
>
> "A DECLARATION OF VISION
>
> AND COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE OF SAN JUAN COUNTY"
>
> which calls for preserving our rural character, social diversity, and abundance of resources. Since continual development and population growth would destroy these values, we ask that you forthrightly determine the population that is consistent with the Vision Statement. Please include in the Comprehensive Plan equitable measures such as density reduction and development limitation, sufficient to assure that our beautiful environment and friendly, diverse community will be maintained now and for future generations.

This was walking the talk. While it was entirely ignored by the BOCC, it speaks to what lies under the surface. Given the 2025 survey in which over 80% of respondents felt the population was maxxed (or more than maxxed) out, there's some untapped "we the people" energy that needs herding and perhaps stampeding into the Council's psyche that **we** are finally ready to take our home ownership seriously. If you are one of those who have been uncomfortable at the rate of change happening in the county, you can begin an information journey by exploring "IslandStewards.org" and "KeepSanJuansWild.org". Step up to a plate or, more bravely, create the plate and invite others to join you.

Forward to my book: The Path Less Taken

My purpose in assembling the essays in this book is to give the reader a glimpse into my passion for nudging the San Juan County archipelago into a refreshingly updated ecosystem of stewardship, wisdom, harmony and sustainability. While I started on the writing path in the first few years of the 1990's, the roots for my passion were developing in the late 1960's when I first came to Orcas Island. By 1992 my psyche had been fully integrated into the soil, mixing and blending with all manner of nutrients, material and spiritual. Two data points stand out. First, during the 20 years from 1970 to 1990, the population of the county, and proportionally of Orcas, had tripled. Second, in a move I hope he doesn't regret, my neighbor, at the time a member of the governing body of San Juan County (at the time it was called the BOCC; today it is the CC), asked me if I would chair the Orcas committee to rewrite the county's Comprehensive Plan (CP).

I said, not knowing any more about what I was getting in to than I did when I unexpectedly became a parent, yes.

I had no idea what a CP was. I'd never read one. I'm not sure I even knew they existed, certainly not what they meant, did, or implied. No one else on the committees that were formed did either.

I have been blessed, and cursed perhaps, with a surprisingly sensitive bullshit detector. The same might also be said about my willingness to be an information wolverine, digging into the underbrush for some form of truth. In our first meeting, I recall asking the planners who were leading the CP show what the buildout population for SJC was. They didn't know. I asked them to find out. They demurred.

Hmmmm. That seems odd. The BS detector went off.

The essays that follow riff off of that failure to pass the smell test.