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Off-shore strategies

Residents of the San Juan Islands juggle seasonal business, lack of employees



Roche Harbor is the only employer on San Juan Island to offer housing to its employees.

By Amanda Baltazar

*The Internet has changed the way that many people do business, but for the residents of the San Juan Islands, it has also changed where they can do business.*

*BI*n this digital age, growing numbers of islanders are working from their homes, in a number of different industries, which allows them to make a living at the same time as living in an idyllic location.

*“The whole idea of long-distance community by the Internet is growing greatly in the islands, allowing many more people to move here,” said Lance Evans, executive director of the Orcas Island Chamber of Commerce.*

*But the real truth of life in the San Juan Islands, the biggest of which are San Juan, Orcas and Lopez, is that very few people have just one job, and many dabble in several. This is in order to survive in an area that gets a huge influx of tourists during the summer months and is quiet in the winter.*

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*“We have more businesses per capita than anywhere in Washington, because everybody’s trying to do a little business on their own,” said Bill Watson, program coordinator, San Juan Economic Development Council. “All of our businesses are small businesses; we don’t have a major employer.”*

*This seasonality of business doesn’t mean it’s easy to make a living here. The number one difficulty for many business owners seems to be finding and retaining employees. But these are becoming fewer and fewer, and as Jan Bruce, president of the Lopez Island Chamber of Commerce, pointed out: “It’s a vicious cycle because as the cost of living here goes up, [workers] can’t afford to live here and leave, so there aren’t enough left.*

*“There’s a dichotomy on the island,” she added. “People are either at the poverty level or are very wealthy.” And the tourist industry typically doesn’t pay much, Evans pointed out.*

#### *Affordable housing, employment top issues*

*Because of this, nonprofit The Opal Community Land Trust is working to develop affordable housing – for sale and rent – on the fringe of Eastsound on Orcas Island, to attract young families. Names are added to a waiting list and families must meet certain income criteria.*

*Many of the trust’s homes may only be sold to households with incomes below 80 percent of the median, but the trust is increasingly raising money privately to help out families in need who don’t quite meet those figures.*

*The trust has been around for 20 years and began out of concerns that land and housing prices were escalating. “The San Juan Islands have the highest affordability gap,” said Lisa Byers, Opal executive director, explaining that they have the lowest wages and the highest housing prices in Washington state.*

*“They’re filled with people who’ve earned their living in other areas, which drives up prices.”*

*The trust is well supported by islanders’ generosity, she said, since they realize there’s a genuine need for affordable housing. Sister organizations on San Juan, Lopez and Walden islands are working toward similar goals.*

*To date, there are 65 affordable housing units built on Orcas Island, 58 of which are owned by their residents and seven are rented. Each house costs around \$300,000 to build and \$150,000 to buy, for slightly less than 1,000 square feet. And there are 30 more houses under construction. “We will keep going as long as there’s a demand for what we’re doing. Right now, we have a list of 100 households wanting [affordable housing],” said Byers.*

*To make matters even more difficult for workers on the islands, the government has been cracking down to prevent illegal labor. “It’s a double-edged sword,” said Michael Rivkin, co-owner of Crow Valley Pottery (with his partner Jeffri Coleman) in Eastsound, “because we really need these people.”*

*Crow Valley Pottery is also finding it difficult to staff its business. In the past it used some high school and college students but less so now. “American kids don’t want to work or have to work the way they did a generation ago. And they always go back to school early, before the season is over,” said Rivkin.*

*The San Juan Islands have only two big businesses: Roche Harbor Resort on San Juan Island and Rosario Resort and Spa on Orcas. Both of these offer housing to seasonal workers, which alleviates the problem, somewhat.*

*Roche Harbor Resort employs some 55 people in the winter and 220 in the summer.*

*“We use a lot of foreign workers because we can’t find enough people on the island,” explained Pat Carver, director of sales and marketing. “There are lots of high school kids but there are many restrictions for them, including working on the water or around machinery.*

*The resort houses around 70 seasonal workers in its village, all people from off-island and largely recruited from the ski industry in Utah and Colorado.*

*The housing units are the only available housing for these workers and the resort plans to add at least one more every year. Employees who live here pay rent on a*

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*sliding scale dependent on their wages.*

*These workers come from 13 or 14 different countries – lots of South Americans and middle Europeans. Roche Harbor treats its employees well and as a result, they come back year after year. They are all fully trained, and management holds an employee barbecue once a month.*

*And at the end of the season, just after Labor Day, there's a huge themed party (last year's theme was cowboys; this year will be superheroes). "Things like this encourages them to come back next year," said Carver. "One year we offered them \$100 each or the party, and they voted for the party."*

*This cost of living doesn't only affect seasonal workers. It is also threatening to push Jan Bruce and her husband Jim off the island since it's getting hard to run their business, Lopez Island Creamery, which produces the best-known local ice cream.*

*The couple had planned to retire in the San Juan Islands, she said, but real estate is getting too expensive, and they're becoming increasingly frustrated with the ferries. Big trucks, she explained, can reserve spaces on the ferry, but their truck is too small, and often they have to wait hours for a ferry.*

*Surviving the shoulder season*

*In an effort to spread out the working season, helping both the finances of local businesses and their ability to attract workers, the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau, which was established five years ago, struggles to promote business during the shoulder seasons.*

*The summers don't need any additional promotion, said spokeswoman Robin Jacobson. "We want to boost business in the shoulder season. It's spreading the joy, so we market in the spring and fall."*

*In the spring, she markets mostly to Seattle and the Puget Sound region, but about 20 percent of her budget goes to Portland marketing. In the fall she spends about half as much, often targeting Bellingham, and maybe British Columbia in the future, since the Canadian dollar is making the U.S. an attractive place for our northern neighbors to visit.*

*"The shoulder season is a great time to be here," said Jim Nelson, owner of Bayside Cottages on Orcas Island, who often offers the third night of a stay for free to encourage visitors. He also partners with the Visitors Bureau for an advertising push in these seasons.*

*To promote business during the shoulder seasons and winter, Roche Harbor encourages events such as weddings and corporate meetings, which cost half as much, typically, as during the summer months. "It's much quieter and our staff is less stressed," said Carver. Roche Harbor also opened a spa last year, which brings more visitors during the quieter months.*

*But it's not all easy during the shoulder season, said Daren Holscher, owner and executive chef of The Bay Café on Lopez Island. This is because Washington State Ferries run on very limited schedules out of season.*

*This has led to more and more businesses completely closing their doors during the winter. Holscher closes The Bay Café, a higher-end restaurant, for six weeks in January and February, managing to keep his business going the rest of the off-season because he attracts a lot of locals.*

*Amy and Ed Masters run the Orcas Island Shuttle, a bus shuttle service and car rental business, and manage to survive only on summer business, which booms, since they have no competition. During the winter the company does maintenance and repair work on the cars and it's all done in-house "which is one of the reasons we can survive here," said Amy Masters.*

*There are other challenges, however, she pointed out. "Everything is more expensive on an island. Fuel is 60 cents a gallon more and we don't have easy access to parts – we might need them immediately but we can't get them."*

*Despite the problems, there's a pride to living on the islands, said Evans. "We may occasionally lose sight of the fact that we live in this gorgeous spot but you stop yourself in your tracks and every now and then it hits you."*

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