





THE HISTORY OF THE Orcas Longhouse

A History of Community, Compassion and Home





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OCTOBER 2026

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Whalestooth Publishing

The Land Before the Longhouse

From the Ice Age to the Village of Eastsound

Every building has a history that begins long before its foundation is poured. The land upon which it stands has already witnessed generations of human activity, changes in ownership, the passing of families, and the gradual transformation of the surrounding community. Some of that history survives in photographs, maps, deeds, and newspaper accounts. Much of it exists only in memories, archaeological discoveries, and the physical evidence left upon the landscape.

The Orcas Longhouse, located at 236 Prune Alley in Eastsound, Washington, is no exception.

Today, the Longhouse is a familiar part of the village. Its modest two-story building has provided affordable homes for older islanders and people with disabilities since the 1980s. Generations of residents have passed through its doors, each bringing a lifetime of experiences and personal history.

Yet the story of the Longhouse does not begin with the organization that developed it, the people who raised money for its construction, or the workers who arrived to build it.

It begins with the land itself.

To understand the Longhouse and its place in Orcas Island history, we must first look beyond the modern village, beyond the early farms and orchards, and beyond the arrival of European and American settlers.

We must begin thousands of years earlier, when the San Juan Islands were emerging from beneath an immense continental glacier and the geography of the Salish Sea was still taking shape.

When the Ice Covered the Islands

Approximately 16,000 years ago, the landscape that would eventually become Orcas Island lay beneath the southern reaches of the Cordilleran Ice Sheet.

During the Fraser Glaciation, enormous glaciers flowed southward from present-day British Columbia, filling the lowlands of the Puget Sound region and covering the San Juan Islands beneath ice that reached thousands of feet in thickness.

The movement of this ice profoundly altered the landscape.

Glaciers scoured exposed bedrock, deposited enormous quantities of sediment, carved basins, and reshaped the valleys and hills that characterize the islands today. Rounded rock surfaces, deposits of glacial till, and large boulders transported far from their original locations remain visible evidence of this extraordinary geological episode.

Even Mount Constitution, rising 2,409 feet above present sea level, was overtopped by the ice.

The modern appearance of Orcas Island, with its rugged hills, sheltered bays, freshwater lakes, and forested valleys, owes much to the action of these glaciers.

As the climate warmed near the end of the Pleistocene Epoch, the great ice sheet began to retreat.

Between approximately 14,500 and 13,600 years ago, the San Juan Islands became largely free of glacial ice.

The landscape that emerged would have been almost unrecognizable to a modern resident. Vegetation was initially sparse, and the developing environment supported animals that have long since disappeared from the region. Forests gradually expanded as soils developed and climatic conditions changed.

The coastline was also dramatically different.

The immense weight of the glaciers had depressed the Earth's crust. As the ice disappeared, the land began to rise through a process known as glacial isostatic rebound. At the same time, melting ice sheets contributed to rising global sea levels.

These competing processes produced complicated changes in the relative position of land and sea.

At various times, shorelines stood well above or below their present elevations. Some areas now submerged were dry land, while other places experienced marine conditions quite different from those of today.

During an early postglacial period of lower relative sea level, Orcas, Shaw, Lopez, and Blakely islands may have formed a much larger connected landmass.

The waterways that now separate them had not yet assumed their familiar configuration.

The islands were still becoming islands.

It was within this changing environment that some of the earliest evidence of human activity in the region appeared.

The Ancient Bison of Ayer Pond

One of the most remarkable discoveries in the archaeological history of the San Juan Islands occurred on Orcas Island itself.

At Ayer Pond, researchers recovered the partial skeleton of an extinct ancient bison, Bison antiquus, an animal considerably larger than many modern American bison.

The remains dated to approximately 13,800 to 14,000 calendar years ago, placing the animal's death near the end of the last Ice Age.

What made the discovery especially significant was not simply the age of the bones, but the evidence found upon them.

Researchers identified modifications that they interpreted as marks left by human butchering.

If that interpretation is correct, people were present on Orcas Island remarkably soon after the retreat of the glaciers.

The discovery suggests that some of the earliest inhabitants of the region may have encountered a landscape still undergoing profound environmental change, where extinct Ice Age animals survived alongside emerging postglacial ecosystems.

The Ayer Pond findings were described in a 2010 scientific study by Stephen M. Kenady and colleagues.

The researchers concluded that the evidence was consistent with human processing of the animal. However, no stone tools were recovered in direct association with the bison remains, and the interpretation rests primarily upon the analysis of the bones themselves.

Consequently, the site is best described as evidence of possible human activity rather than an unequivocally established habitation site.

Nevertheless, the discovery is important.

It places Orcas Island within the broader scientific discussion of the earliest human presence in the Pacific Northwest.

Across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, near present-day Sequim, the Manis Mastodon site has yielded evidence of human interaction with a mastodon approximately 13,900 years ago.

Together, these discoveries suggest that people may have been present in the northern Puget Sound and Salish Sea region much earlier than once believed.

They also raise intriguing questions about how these early inhabitants traveled, what resources they used, and how they adapted to a rapidly changing landscape.

Some of the answers may remain hidden beneath the waters of the Salish Sea.

As coastlines shifted following the Ice Age, places once occupied by people may have been submerged, leaving important portions of the archaeological record inaccessible to conventional excavation.

The history of human occupation in the islands may therefore be considerably more extensive than the surviving evidence currently reveals.

Thousands of Years of Indigenous Life

Whatever the final interpretation of the Ayer Pond discovery, the archaeological record clearly establishes that Indigenous peoples have lived in the San Juan Islands for many thousands of years.

Evidence from sites throughout the archipelago includes stone tools, shell middens, hearths, food remains, and traces of settlements.

At Cattle Point on San Juan Island, archaeological investigations have identified evidence of human activity associated with the early Holocene, approximately 7,000 to 9,000 years ago.

Other sites reveal increasingly detailed evidence of fishing, shellfish harvesting, tool manufacture, food preparation, and community life.

Over many generations, the peoples of the Salish Sea developed sophisticated maritime cultures adapted to the extraordinary resources of the region.

The ancestors of today's Coast Salish peoples established communities connected through family relationships, trade, marriage, language, and shared use of land and water.

The San Juan Islands were not isolated outposts.

They formed part of an extensive network of Indigenous communities stretching across what are now western Washington and southwestern British Columbia.

The waters between the islands served as transportation routes rather than obstacles.

Canoes connected villages, fishing grounds, gathering places, and ceremonial sites. Families traveled between islands and mainland communities, maintaining relationships across a geography that modern political boundaries would later divide.

Salmon, herring, shellfish, marine mammals, waterfowl, berries, roots, and other resources supported a rich and complex way of life.

Seasonal activities followed the availability of these resources. Fishing locations, shellfish beds, plant-gathering areas, and sheltered village sites were known and used through generations of accumulated knowledge.

The landscape was not an untouched wilderness awaiting settlement.

It was a lived-in homeland, understood and managed by people whose relationships with the land and sea extended far beyond the limits of the written historical record.

On Orcas Island, this history is associated particularly with Northern Straits Salish peoples, including ancestors of today's Lummi, Samish, Saanich, and Songhees communities.

Their histories and relationships with the islands cannot be neatly confined within the boundaries of modern tribal jurisdictions or the international border between the United States and Canada.

Those political divisions are relatively recent.

The ancestral relationships are much older.

The First Longhouses

Among the most distinctive architectural traditions of Coast Salish communities were the great cedar-plank longhouses.

These structures were far more than simple shelters.

Built with substantial timber frameworks and cedar planks, longhouses could accommodate extended families and multiple households. Some were exceptionally large, reflecting the importance and resources of the families who occupied them.

Within their walls, generations lived together, prepared food, worked, exchanged knowledge, and maintained family and community relationships.

Longhouses were places where stories were told, skills were taught, and traditions were passed from one generation to another.

The arrangement of space within a longhouse reflected the social organization of its occupants.

The buildings were physical expressions of family relationships, community responsibilities, and cultural identity.

Archaeological and historical evidence documents traditional longhouses at several locations in the San Juan Islands.

At English Camp on San Juan Island, the site of a Coast Salish village, a substantial longhouse remained in use during the nineteenth century. The village itself had a history extending back many centuries before the arrival of British military forces.

It is important to recognize that Coast Salish longhouses belonged to distinct Indigenous architectural and cultural traditions. They were not simply early versions of modern communal housing.

Nevertheless, their history provides an interesting context for the name eventually given to the Orcas Longhouse.

The modern building was not constructed as a traditional Coast Salish longhouse, and the historical record must establish whether its founders deliberately intended the name to evoke Indigenous communal housing.

Even without assuming such a connection, the name invites reflection.

The traditional longhouse provided shelter within a framework of extended family and community. The modern Orcas Longhouse would eventually provide modest, independent homes for older islanders and people with disabilities, allowing them to remain connected to the community they knew.

The histories are different, but both remind us that a home is more than a roof and four walls.

It is also a place of belonging.

The Arrival of a New Order

The arrival of European and American explorers, traders, settlers, and government authorities brought profound changes to the San Juan Islands.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century and accelerating during the nineteenth, the region became increasingly connected to the expanding colonial economies and political ambitions of Britain and the United States.

For Indigenous communities, the consequences were often devastating.

Epidemics introduced through colonial contact caused enormous loss of life. Traditional economies and patterns of land use were disrupted. Settlement, land claims, and government policies increasingly restricted Indigenous access to ancestral places and resources.

The establishment of the international boundary through the Salish Sea divided territories and communities whose relationships had developed long before the existence of either nation.

The San Juan Islands became the subject of a prolonged territorial dispute between Britain and the United States, culminating in the peaceful resolution of the boundary question in 1872.

As American settlement expanded, land was surveyed, divided into parcels, and transferred under a system of private ownership.

The emerging settlements of Orcas Island were built within a landscape that had already supported Indigenous life for thousands of years.

The development of Eastsound was part of that transformation.

The new village would eventually become the commercial and social center of Orcas Island, but its history represented only the most recent chapter in a much older story.

The Orchards of Eastsound

By the late nineteenth century, Eastsound was developing into a small agricultural and commercial settlement.

The village bore little resemblance to the busy community of shops, restaurants, offices, and residences familiar today.

Homes and businesses stood among fields, gardens, and orchards.

Agriculture played an important role in the local economy, and fruit growing became one of the defining activities of early Eastsound.

Apples, pears, and Italian prunes were cultivated in the fertile lowlands surrounding the village.

One road acquired its name from the orchards through which it passed.

Prune Alley.

The name survives today as an unassuming reminder of the agricultural landscape that once occupied much of central Eastsound.

It is a particularly appropriate detail in the history of the Longhouse, whose address would eventually become 236 Prune Alley.

The street name preserves a fragment of the village's early economic history, even as the orchards themselves have largely disappeared.

Among the prominent early landowners associated with Eastsound was Charles Shattuck.

Shattuck played a role in the development of the village, including donating land for religious institutions that became important parts of community life.

Land for the Episcopal and Methodist churches was among his contributions.

These donations helped establish institutions that served not only religious purposes but also the social needs of the developing settlement.

The Shattuck family's association with the property that would eventually become the Longhouse forms an important part of its recorded history.

The precise chronology of ownership and the relationship between individual Shattuck family members and the Longhouse parcel require careful examination of the surviving deeds and property records.

Nevertheless, the family's presence connects the property to the formative decades of Eastsound.

It was a time when private homes, small businesses, farms, churches, and shared infrastructure gradually established the character of the village.

The Water Tower

One of the most distinctive features of the property before construction of the Longhouse was a wooden water tower.

The tower served three nearby homes, providing a shared water supply in an era when modern utility systems could not be taken for granted.

Its existence tells us something about the practical realities of life in early Eastsound.

Water had to be collected, stored, and distributed. Pipes and equipment required maintenance, and freezing weather could create serious problems.

Ellen and Buyral Madan recalled the work involved in maintaining the tower, including the difficulties caused by ice.

Such details might seem ordinary, but they provide an unusually intimate view of everyday life in the village.

The tower represented more than a piece of equipment.

It was part of a small network of households that depended upon shared resources.

The system required attention and cooperation, reflecting the practical arrangements common in isolated rural communities.

By the early 1980s, the tower had become a reminder of an earlier era.

Modern infrastructure had long since changed the way water was supplied to homes and businesses.

Yet the old structure remained as a physical connection to Eastsound's past.

In 1984, as preparations for construction of the Longhouse proceeded, the water tower was relocated to the Orcas Island Historical Museum.

Its preservation ensured that an important piece of local history would survive the redevelopment of the property.

The relocation also marked a symbolic transition.

A structure that had once supplied water to a handful of homes was removed to make way for a building that would provide housing for sixteen households.

The uses were different, but both served fundamental human needs.

A Village at a Turning Point

By the 1970s, Eastsound had changed considerably from the agricultural village of its early years.

Tourism, recreation, and residential development had become increasingly important parts of the island economy. Improved transportation and growing interest in the San Juan Islands brought new residents and visitors, while the value of land and housing gradually increased.

The village remained small, and much of its character was preserved through locally operated businesses and close personal relationships. But the economic circumstances of living on Orcas Island were changing.

For some residents, increasing property values represented opportunity.

For others, particularly people living on fixed incomes, they created uncertainty.

Older islanders who had spent much of their lives on Orcas sometimes found themselves living in homes that had become expensive or physically difficult to maintain. Others faced limited rental options or increasing housing costs.

The island's geography complicated the problem.

Living outside Eastsound generally required reliable transportation, and driving could become difficult with advancing age or disability.

Moving to the mainland might offer more housing choices, but it could also mean leaving behind friends, family, familiar places, and decades of personal history.

These pressures were becoming increasingly visible within the community.

They raised a question that would eventually lead to the creation of the Orcas Longhouse.

Could older islanders continue to live independently on Orcas, even when their financial or physical circumstances changed?

The answer would depend upon more than individual determination.

It would require the community to recognize a shared problem and organize a practical response.

The Land and Its Future

By the beginning of the 1980s, the property on Prune Alley had passed through several distinct periods of Eastsound's history.

Its earliest story belonged to the Indigenous landscape of the San Juan Islands, inhabited for thousands of years before the establishment of the modern village.

Its later recorded history reflected the development of Eastsound through family residences, small businesses, and the practical infrastructure of a rural community.

The old water tower stood as a reminder of a time when neighboring households depended upon shared facilities.

The shops that occupied the property reflected the growth of Eastsound as a commercial center.

Now, as the village confronted the growing need for affordable housing, the land was approaching another turning point.

The next use of the property would be different from those that had come before.

It would not be devoted to a private family home or a commercial enterprise.

Instead, it would become the site of a building intended to help older residents and people with disabilities remain part of the island community.

That transformation would require the efforts of many individuals, including organizers, volunteers, donors, and local residents who believed that the community had a responsibility to provide suitable housing for its aging population.

The story of those efforts belongs to the next section.

For now, it is enough to recognize that the land itself had a history reaching far beyond the eventual construction of the Longhouse.

A Community Recognizes a Need

The Beginnings of the Orcas Longhouse, 1978–1979

By the late 1970s, Orcas Island was confronting a problem that had developed gradually, almost imperceptibly, over several decades. The island was changing, and for some of its longtime residents, those changes threatened something they had once taken for granted: the ability to grow old in the community they called home.

For much of their lives, these islanders had been accustomed to looking after themselves. They had worked in local businesses, maintained homes and farms, raised families, and contributed to the organizations that made island life possible. Many belonged to a generation that had endured the Great Depression and World War II, and they had learned the value of thrift, independence, and mutual assistance.

They were not necessarily looking for someone to take care of them.

They wanted to continue taking care of themselves.

But independence could become increasingly difficult to maintain on an island where housing was expensive, transportation was limited, and many homes had been built without consideration for the needs of aging residents.

The solution that eventually emerged was deceptively simple: a small development of affordable apartments, located in Eastsound, where older islanders could live independently while remaining close to the services, friendships, and familiar surroundings that had shaped their lives.

Turning that idea into reality would prove considerably more complicated.

It would require an organization that did not yet exist, land that had not yet been secured, financing that was far from certain, and the persistence of islanders who were willing to undertake a project unlike anything their community had previously attempted.

The Orcas Longhouse began not as a building, but as a conversation.

Growing Older on Orcas Island

For elderly islanders in the 1970s, the challenges of remaining independent were often practical rather than medical.

A person might be perfectly capable of cooking meals, managing finances, maintaining friendships, and making decisions, yet find that the house in which they had lived for decades no longer suited their circumstances.

Many older homes on Orcas Island required considerable maintenance. Heating systems, roofs, plumbing, and exterior structures demanded regular attention. Large yards and gardens could become difficult to manage, while steps, narrow doorways, and steep driveways presented obstacles to people with limited mobility.

Even routine household expenses could strain a fixed income.

A modest pension or Social Security payment might cover ordinary living costs, but a major repair could become a financial crisis.

For renters, the problem was different but equally serious. Suitable apartments were scarce, and the island's increasingly desirable real estate market offered few guarantees that modest accommodations would remain affordable.

Transportation added another complication.

Outside Eastsound, daily life generally required an automobile. A resident living several miles from the village might need to drive for groceries, banking, medical appointments, church services, or social activities.

When driving became difficult, dependence upon others could increase rapidly.

Friends and relatives frequently provided assistance, but such arrangements were not always reliable or sustainable. The loss of a spouse, a change in health, or the departure of family members could leave an older person increasingly isolated.

For someone who had spent a lifetime living independently, these circumstances could be especially frustrating.

The alternatives were limited.

Moving into a smaller home might help, but affordable houses were difficult to find. Institutional care was unnecessary for many residents and, in any event, was not the kind of life they wanted.

Moving to the mainland could provide access to more housing and services, but at a substantial personal cost.

It meant leaving Orcas Island.

That prospect was particularly painful for people whose lives were deeply connected to the community. Their friends, memories, and daily routines were rooted in familiar places. The island was not merely where they lived. It was where they belonged.

What many needed was neither a nursing home nor an elaborate retirement facility.

They needed a modest apartment, affordable on a limited income, in a location where ordinary life could continue without constant dependence upon an automobile.

The distinction would become central to the Longhouse project.

A Different Kind of Housing

During the twentieth century, public discussion of housing for older Americans increasingly distinguished between institutional care and independent living.

Not every elderly person required medical supervision or assistance with daily activities. Many needed only housing that was smaller, less expensive, easier to maintain, and better situated for their changing circumstances.

For Orcas Island, this approach offered an appealing possibility.

A small apartment building in Eastsound could address several problems at once.

Residents would no longer be responsible for maintaining large houses or extensive properties. Predictable rents could make financial planning easier. A central location would reduce dependence upon automobiles, while neighboring apartments could provide opportunities for companionship.

Most importantly, residents would retain control over their daily lives.

They could prepare their own meals, entertain visitors, maintain personal schedules, and continue participating in the activities of the larger community.

The proposed arrangement was not intended to replace independence with supervision.

It was intended to make independence possible for longer.

Eastsound was the logical place to consider such a development.

The village contained many of the businesses, churches, professional services, and community institutions that older residents used regularly. Living near those facilities could make a considerable difference in a person's ability to manage everyday affairs.

The Orcas Island Senior Center also provided an important gathering place for older islanders. Its activities and social connections reflected a growing awareness that the needs of an aging population deserved organized community attention.

Affordable apartments near the center of the village could complement those existing services.

But recognizing the advantages of such housing was only the beginning.

Someone would have to determine whether enough people wanted it, how it might be financed, and who would be willing to organize the effort.

The Meeting of August 17, 1978

The first clearly documented milestone in the creation of the Orcas Longhouse occurred on August 17, 1978.

On that date, twenty-six older island residents gathered for a meeting concerning the possibility of developing senior housing on Orcas Island.

The meeting was chaired by Dr. William Conway, who would become one of the important figures in the project's early organization.

Although the surviving record does not provide a complete account of every discussion, it preserves an essential detail about the wishes of those who attended.

The participants expressed a preference for private living accommodations, including the ability to prepare their own meals.

This was a significant statement.

The people who might eventually occupy the proposed housing were helping define what it should be.

They were not asking for an institution where their lives would be organized around communal meals, medical supervision, or rigid schedules.

They wanted homes.

The ability to prepare one's own meals might seem a small matter, but it represented something much larger.

Cooking is part of daily independence. It allows a person to maintain familiar habits, accommodate personal preferences, and exercise control over an ordinary but important part of life.

A private kitchen also distinguishes an apartment from a room in an institution.

The preference expressed at the meeting revealed that prospective residents valued autonomy as much as affordability.

They wanted the security of suitable housing without surrendering the routines and decisions that made their lives their own.

The gathering also demonstrated that the need was not confined to one or two individuals.

Twenty-six residents had come together to discuss a shared concern. Their attendance gave the idea a degree of credibility that an informal conversation among a handful of neighbors might not have achieved.

The meeting did not produce a completed plan.

There was no building, no confirmed financing, and no guarantee that the proposal would succeed.

But something important had happened.

A problem that many people had experienced privately was now being discussed publicly.

The possibility of affordable senior housing had become a community undertaking.

Dr. William Conway and the Early Initiative

Dr. William Conway's role in chairing the August meeting placed him among the earliest documented leaders of the Longhouse effort.

His involvement helped give the discussion direction at a moment when the idea remained largely undefined.

The challenges facing the prospective organizers were substantial.

They would need to determine the number of people who required housing, the types of accommodations they preferred, and the rents they could reasonably afford.

They would also need to investigate potential sources of financial assistance.

Affordable housing development was not simply a matter of collecting donations and hiring a contractor.

It involved questions of ownership, eligibility, government programs, long-term management, construction costs, and the legal responsibilities of whatever organization ultimately operated the property.

For a small island community, the process could be intimidating.

The organizers were considering a permanent residential development, not a temporary charitable program.

Any building they constructed would need to remain financially and physically viable for decades.

The residents who moved into it would depend upon the organization for safe housing, reasonable maintenance, and responsible management.

These obligations demanded careful planning.

Conway and the other early participants therefore faced a task that combined community organizing with the technical requirements of housing development.

Their first responsibility was to determine whether the idea was practical.

The Senior Housing Survey

By February 1979, the effort had advanced sufficiently for a Senior Housing Committee to undertake a survey of local housing needs.

The survey represented an important transition from general concern to organized investigation.

It was one thing to recognize that elderly islanders were having difficulty finding suitable homes.

It was another to establish how many people needed assistance, what they could afford, and what type of housing would best meet their circumstances.

Those questions were essential to the success of the project.

A development that was too large could create financial difficulties. One that was too small might fail to address the demonstrated need.

Rents had to be affordable to prospective residents while still providing sufficient income to operate and maintain the building.

The organizers also needed to consider whether public financing could bridge the gap between construction costs and the limited incomes of the people they hoped to serve.

The survey helped establish a factual basis for these discussions.

Rather than relying entirely upon personal impressions, the committee was attempting to document the community's housing needs.

This would become particularly important when approaching government agencies and other potential funding sources.

Public financing programs generally required evidence that a proposed development served an identifiable population and could operate within the applicable financial requirements.

The committee was therefore beginning to translate the wishes expressed at the August meeting into the language of housing policy, budgets, and development proposals.

It was not glamorous work.

Surveys, meetings, applications, and financial calculations rarely attract the attention given to groundbreaking ceremonies or ribbon cuttings.

Yet without such preparation, the Longhouse would have remained little more than an appealing idea.

A Community Effort Takes Shape

During the spring of 1979, the initiative developed into a more clearly organized effort.

By May, a group of individuals had emerged as the principal early organizers.

The names associated with this founding effort included Dr. William Conway, Gene Knapp, Marian Berdan, Dorothy Abbenhouse, Father Jonson West, Ben Goodenough, David Leighton, and Stan Williams.

Their participation reflected the kind of volunteer leadership upon which many Orcas Island institutions depended.

The group was not undertaking a project that promised personal financial reward.

Its objective was to create housing for people whose incomes or circumstances made conventional housing difficult to obtain.

The undertaking would require a considerable investment of time and energy.

Meetings had to be arranged. Information had to be gathered. Potential supporters had to be contacted. Financing possibilities had to be investigated, and the proposed development had to be explained to the community.

There was also the question of organizational structure.

A group of concerned residents could hold meetings and advocate for senior housing, but developing and operating an apartment building required a more formal institution.

The organizers would eventually need a legal entity capable of owning property, entering contracts, borrowing money, receiving grants and donations, and accepting responsibility for the completed development.

These were unfamiliar obligations for many volunteer groups.

The original organizers were moving toward a commitment that could extend far beyond their own years of involvement.

They were attempting to establish something permanent.

Finding a Path Through the Housing System

The early Longhouse effort benefited from technical assistance provided by HOPE, an organization involved in helping communities pursue housing opportunities.

Such assistance was particularly valuable because affordable housing programs were governed by financial and regulatory requirements that could be difficult for local volunteers to navigate.

Federal housing initiatives had expanded during the decades following World War II, offering various forms of assistance for elderly residents and people with limited incomes.

But access to those programs was neither automatic nor simple.

Applicants generally had to demonstrate a legitimate housing need, develop a financially workable proposal, satisfy eligibility requirements, and establish an organization capable of managing the resulting property.

Construction costs had to be estimated.

Potential sites had to be evaluated.

Architectural and engineering requirements had to be considered.

The organizers also needed to understand how rents, operating expenses, maintenance reserves, and debt obligations would interact over the life of the project.

A building might be affordable to construct but financially impossible to operate if its rental income could not support necessary expenses.

Conversely, rents sufficient to cover every cost might be beyond the means of the very people the development was intended to serve.

Public assistance could help reconcile those competing requirements, but it introduced additional responsibilities.

The organizers would have to learn a specialized system while continuing to build local support.

The availability of technical guidance did not eliminate these challenges.

It made them more manageable.

The Longhouse effort was gradually becoming a partnership between local initiative and the larger network of housing programs and institutions capable of supporting affordable development.

The Importance of Local Leadership

The emerging project depended upon an unusual combination of qualities.

Its organizers needed patience, practical judgment, and the ability to work with people whose interests and perspectives were not always identical.

They had to remain focused on the needs of prospective residents while confronting the financial realities of construction and property management.

They also had to sustain public interest.

In a small community, enthusiasm for a worthy cause could be considerable, but enthusiasm alone did not pay construction bills or satisfy government requirements.

The project needed individuals willing to attend repeated meetings, review documents, ask difficult questions, and continue working when progress seemed slow.

Such efforts are often described simply as volunteer work.

The phrase can obscure the extent of the responsibility involved.

The early Longhouse organizers were effectively preparing to establish a nonprofit housing enterprise.

They were doing so in a community with limited financial resources, a relatively small population, and the logistical complications associated with island construction.

Every major expense would have to be considered carefully.

Building materials and specialized labor often required transportation by ferry. Contractors had to account for the cost and inconvenience of working on an island.

Even routine development activities could be more complicated than comparable work on the mainland.

These difficulties did not make the project impossible.

They did mean that the organizers would need persistence and resourcefulness.

The Longhouse would eventually become a physical expression of those qualities.

A Name for the Idea

By September 1979, the name Orcas Longhouse appeared in the surviving documentary record.

The choice of name gave the developing project a recognizable identity.

Until then, the effort had largely been described in practical terms as senior housing or a housing committee.

The name Longhouse suggested something more enduring.

It identified the proposed development not simply as an apartment building but as a place intended to support a community of residents.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the word also has deep historical associations with the Indigenous peoples of the Salish Sea.

Whether the founders consciously selected the name because of those associations remains a question for the original organizational records.

Whatever its origin, the name would become closely identified with the effort to provide affordable homes for older islanders.

It was distinctive, memorable, and appropriate to a project built around the idea of maintaining community connections.

The name also marked a psychological step forward.

The proposal was no longer merely a discussion about something that might be useful.

It was becoming a specific undertaking with an identity of its own.

The Difference Between Charity and Housing

One of the most important characteristics of the early Longhouse effort was its emphasis on providing genuine homes rather than temporary assistance.

Charitable organizations had long played important roles in helping islanders experiencing financial or personal hardship.

Food, clothing, emergency assistance, and volunteer services could address immediate needs.

Housing, however, presented a different challenge.

A person might require an affordable home not for a few weeks or months, but for the remainder of their life.

The solution therefore had to be sustainable.

Residents needed the security of knowing that their homes would remain available and properly maintained.

The organization responsible for the property needed sufficient resources to operate it without repeatedly depending upon emergency fundraising.

The proposed development also needed to preserve the dignity of its residents.

Affordable housing was not intended to be a reward for dependency or an acknowledgment that older people could no longer contribute to society.

It was a practical response to the reality that people with limited incomes still needed safe, appropriate places to live.

Many prospective residents had spent decades contributing to Orcas Island.

Some had worked in jobs that provided modest wages but little opportunity to accumulate substantial retirement savings.

Others had devoted much of their lives to raising families, caring for relatives, or participating in community organizations.

Their circumstances did not diminish their value to the community.

The Longhouse concept recognized that suitable housing could allow these individuals to continue living independently and participating in island life.

It was not simply a matter of providing inexpensive apartments.

It was a matter of preserving choices.

The Challenge of Permanence

As the organizers moved forward, they faced a question that would influence the Longhouse throughout its history.

How could a small community create affordable housing that would remain affordable?

Constructing a building was only the beginning.

Roofs would eventually need replacement. Plumbing and electrical systems would require repairs. Appliances would wear out. Exterior surfaces would need painting, and the grounds would require maintenance.

Over time, building codes, safety standards, and accessibility expectations would change.

The organization responsible for the property would have to respond to those changes while maintaining rents within the means of its residents.

A successful housing development therefore required more than an initial source of construction money.

It required a durable financial and organizational structure.

The early organizers could not have predicted every challenge the Longhouse would face over the following decades.

But the permanence of the undertaking was already implicit in their plans.

They were not creating a temporary program intended to disappear when its first group of volunteers retired.

They were establishing a housing resource for future generations of Orcas Islanders.

That ambition would shape the decisions that followed.

From Discussion to Determination

By the close of 1979, the Longhouse initiative had progressed considerably.

What began as a gathering of twenty-six older islanders had developed into an organized effort with identifiable leadership, a housing survey, technical assistance, and a name.

The project was still far from construction.

There was no completed building, no certainty that financing could be obtained, and no guarantee that the necessary land would become available.

The organizers faced years of work before anyone could move into an apartment.

But the essential purpose of the project had been established.

Older islanders wanted affordable homes where they could maintain their independence.

They wanted to remain near friends, services, and the familiar surroundings of Eastsound.

They did not want age or limited income to determine whether they could continue living in the community to which they belonged.

The early organizers understood that meeting this need would require cooperation extending beyond the people who might eventually occupy the building.

It would require support from property owners, donors, public agencies, contractors, and the larger island community.

The Longhouse was becoming more than a proposal for senior apartments.

It was becoming a test of what Orcas Islanders could accomplish together.

A Promise Takes Shape

The history of community institutions is often told through the names of founders, the dates of incorporation, and the completion of buildings.

Those details are important, but they can obscure the quieter circumstances that give such institutions their purpose.

The Orcas Longhouse began because older residents faced a problem that individual effort could not always solve.

They had spent their lives making homes on Orcas Island, but the circumstances of aging threatened their ability to remain.

The community's response did not begin with an elaborate architectural design or a major financial contribution.

It began with people gathering to discuss what they needed.

The twenty-six residents who attended the August 1978 meeting could not have known precisely what their conversation would produce.

They could not have known how long the effort would take, what obstacles would arise, or which individuals would eventually make the project possible.

They knew only that suitable housing was needed and that something should be done.

By the following year, others had accepted the challenge.

Dr. William Conway and the early organizers had begun transforming a shared concern into a practical undertaking.

Their work would require years of planning, negotiation, and fundraising.

There would be setbacks and difficult decisions.

But the central idea would remain remarkably consistent.

The Longhouse was intended to provide homes, not institutional beds. Its residents would be neighbors, not patients. Its purpose was to preserve independence rather than replace it.

The project also expressed a belief about the responsibilities of a small community.

Orcas Island had always depended upon the contributions of its residents. Its churches, schools, volunteer organizations, businesses, and public institutions had been built and sustained through generations of local effort.

The people growing older in the 1970s had participated in that history.

Now the community had an opportunity to make certain that they could remain part of its future.

From Vision to Reality

The Making of the Orcas Longhouse, 1979–1984

By the autumn of 1979, the Orcas Longhouse had a name, a group of committed organizers, and a purpose that was becoming increasingly clear. What had begun as a conversation among older islanders concerned about their housing options was developing into a serious community undertaking.

The first steps had been encouraging. Residents had expressed a desire for modest, affordable apartments where they could continue living independently. A housing committee had begun investigating the need, and a group of local volunteers had accepted responsibility for moving the idea forward.

But the distance between recognizing a problem and constructing a building remained considerable.

The organizers faced an undertaking that was unusually ambitious for a small island community. They needed to establish a permanent organization, obtain suitable land, develop architectural plans, secure financing, and satisfy the requirements of public agencies. They also had to create a system for operating and maintaining the completed building long after the original volunteers had finished their work.

There were few shortcuts.

A project intended to provide affordable housing could not simply pass its development costs along to future residents. The people it was designed to serve had limited incomes, and keeping rents within their means was central to the mission.

The organizers therefore needed more than money. They needed a financial and organizational arrangement capable of sustaining the Longhouse for decades.

The years that followed would test the patience and resourcefulness of everyone involved.

Building an Organization

The first challenge was to transform the informal organizing effort into an institution capable of developing and operating housing.

A committee could conduct surveys, hold meetings, and encourage community support. But acquiring property, entering contracts, accepting loans or grants, and managing an apartment building required a legally established organization with defined responsibilities.

The nonprofit model offered a practical solution.

The Longhouse was not intended to be a conventional commercial apartment development. Its purpose was to provide affordable housing rather than generate profits for private investors.

Any financial resources remaining after operating expenses would need to support the property and its continuing mission.

This approach also helped protect the development's long-term purpose.

As Orcas Island property values increased, a privately owned apartment building might eventually be sold or converted to more profitable uses. A nonprofit organization dedicated to affordable housing could instead make the preservation of that housing its central responsibility.

The organizers had to establish a governing structure capable of making decisions, maintaining financial accountability, and meeting the obligations associated with owning residential property.

They also needed to demonstrate credibility.

Potential donors wanted assurance that their contributions would be used responsibly. Public agencies required evidence that the organization could manage financing and comply with applicable regulations. Prospective residents needed confidence that the proposed apartments would become a reality.

The Longhouse's early leadership was therefore building an institution as well as planning a building.

The organization had to be strong enough to survive changes in leadership, financial difficulties, and the ordinary challenges that accompany the operation of residential property.

Its founders were creating something intended to outlast them.

The Financial Puzzle

The financial challenge facing the Longhouse was fundamental to nearly every affordable housing development.

Construction costs were largely determined by the price of land, materials, labor, utilities, and regulatory requirements. Those expenses did not decrease simply because the intended residents had modest incomes.

Yet the rents required to support conventional financing could easily exceed what older islanders living on Social Security or limited pensions could afford.

The organizers needed to reconcile those competing realities.

Federal housing programs offered potential assistance.

One important source of affordable senior housing financing during this period was Section 202 of the Housing Act of 1959, administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The program was designed to help nonprofit organizations develop housing for elderly people, using financing arrangements intended to make rents more affordable than those of conventional market-rate developments.

The rules and financial structure of Section 202 changed over time, and the precise federal assistance used by the Orcas Longhouse must be established from its original records.

Nevertheless, programs of this kind offered small communities a means of undertaking developments that would otherwise have been financially impractical.

The opportunity came with substantial obligations.

Applications required detailed information about the proposed development, the population it would serve, estimated costs, and the organization's ability to operate the property.

Architectural plans and financial projections had to satisfy program requirements.

Funding approvals could involve lengthy reviews, revisions, and negotiations.

For a volunteer organization with limited administrative resources, the process demanded considerable patience.

The Longhouse organizers had already sought technical assistance during their earliest planning efforts. As the project developed, that guidance became increasingly important.

The work required knowledge of financing, construction, nonprofit administration, and government regulations.

The volunteers were learning to navigate a system normally encountered by professional housing developers.

And they were doing so while attempting to keep the project small enough to meet the needs of their island community.

Finding the Right Land

Even with a workable financing arrangement, the Longhouse could not proceed without a suitable site.

The location was particularly important because the project was intended to preserve residents' independence.

An inexpensive parcel several miles from Eastsound might reduce the initial cost of development, but it could leave residents dependent upon automobiles or other people for everyday transportation.

That would defeat one of the central purposes of the project.

The organizers needed land within the village, close enough to businesses and community facilities that residents could continue participating in ordinary island life.

Such property was not necessarily easy to obtain.

Central Eastsound land had value for residential and commercial development, and purchasing a suitable parcel could consume a substantial portion of the funds available for construction.

The site also had to accommodate the proposed building and meet practical requirements involving utilities, access, drainage, and construction.

For a project operating within narrow financial limits, a seemingly minor site problem could become a major expense.

The organizers needed a location that was both appropriate and affordable.

Their search would ultimately be resolved through the generosity of Steve and Tricia Trainer.

The Trainers' Gift

Steve and Tricia Trainer made one of the most consequential contributions to the Longhouse by donating the property along Prune Alley upon which the building would be constructed.

The land was valued at more than $95,000, a substantial gift at the time.

But the contribution was important for reasons extending well beyond its monetary value.

It provided the project with a centrally located site without requiring the organization to devote an equivalent amount of scarce development funding to purchasing land.

The property also offered the practical advantages the organizers had sought.

Situated within Eastsound, it placed prospective residents near businesses, community institutions, and the familiar activities of village life.

The nearby Senior Center was particularly valuable. Residents could remain connected with programs and social opportunities intended for older islanders without traveling long distances.

The donation therefore addressed two essential requirements at once.

It reduced the financial burden of development and provided a location well suited to the needs of future residents.

For the organizers, the gift represented a major turning point.

The Longhouse was no longer simply an idea in search of a place to exist.

It had a home.

The Trainers' contribution also demonstrated the importance of private generosity in making public-spirited projects possible.

Government financing and nonprofit organization could provide much of the framework for affordable housing, but local contributions often made the difference between a project that was theoretically feasible and one that could actually be constructed.

The gift of land was one of those contributions.

It transformed a valuable piece of Eastsound property into a resource intended to benefit the community for generations.

Designing a Place to Live

With a site available, the organizers could turn their attention more fully toward the building itself.

The proposed Longhouse was modest in scale.

It would contain sixteen one-bedroom apartments, each approximately 540 square feet, arranged within a two-story structure.

The apartments were designed for independent living, with private kitchens, bathrooms, and living spaces.

Residents would be able to prepare their own meals, entertain visitors, and maintain personal routines without the restrictions associated with institutional care.

The building would also provide shared facilities.

A community room offered a place for residents to gather, socialize, and participate in activities. Laundry facilities would make an essential household task more convenient.

Two apartments were planned with accessibility features for residents with disabilities.

The design reflected the priorities established during the earliest discussions of senior housing.

The organizers were not attempting to construct an elaborate retirement complex.

They wanted practical, comfortable apartments that could be operated at rents within the means of eligible residents.

The relatively compact units helped limit construction costs while reducing the amount of space residents would need to maintain.

Shared facilities provided convenience and opportunities for social interaction without eliminating the privacy of individual households.

The building was intended to strike a careful balance between personal independence and community connection.

That balance would remain an important part of the Longhouse's identity.

The Long Road to Construction

The years between the initial organizing efforts and construction were occupied by work that would be largely invisible once the building was completed.

There were applications, meetings, correspondence, budgets, and revisions.

The organizers had to coordinate with financial institutions, public agencies, professional advisers, and the individuals involved in planning the development.

Each decision affected others.

The building's size influenced its cost. The cost affected financing requirements. Financing conditions could influence the design, eligibility rules, and operating arrangements.

The project was a collection of interdependent decisions, and progress in one area did not always mean that every other issue had been resolved.

The island location added further complications.

Construction materials often had to be transported by ferry. Specialized equipment and labor were not always readily available locally.

Contractors working on Orcas had to account for transportation, scheduling, and the additional costs associated with island construction.

These practical realities could complicate an already demanding development process.

The organizers also needed to maintain community support.

A project that remains in planning for several years can become vulnerable to doubt.

Supporters may begin to wonder whether it will ever be built. Prospective residents may hesitate to place their hopes in housing that has not yet received final approval.

Volunteers can become discouraged when progress is measured in paperwork rather than visible results.

The Longhouse effort required determination through that period.

The need for affordable housing had not disappeared while the organizers worked through the development process.

The original purpose remained compelling, even when the practical obstacles seemed formidable.

What had begun as a community conversation in 1978 was becoming a lesson in persistence.

The Old Water Tower Finds a New Home

As preparations for construction advanced, the Prune Alley property underwent another transformation.

The land still carried physical reminders of its earlier uses, including the wooden water tower that had once supplied three nearby homes.

By the early 1980s, the tower was an artifact of an earlier period in Eastsound's development.

Its practical purpose had long since been overtaken by modern water infrastructure, but it remained an important reminder of the village's history.

Rather than allowing the structure to disappear during redevelopment, arrangements were made to preserve it.

In 1984, the water tower was relocated to the Orcas Island Historical Museum.

The move was significant because it allowed the property to serve a new purpose without entirely erasing its past.

The old tower became part of the museum's collection of historic structures, while the site it had occupied was prepared for the Longhouse.

It was an appropriate transition.

The tower had once helped sustain a small group of households.

The new building would provide homes for sixteen households.

Both belonged to different periods of Eastsound's history, yet each reflected the practical needs of the people who lived there.

Construction Begins

In 1984, after years of preparation, construction of the Orcas Longhouse began.

The project that had existed for so long in meeting minutes, surveys, financial applications, and architectural drawings finally became visible.

The arrival of construction workers and materials marked the beginning of a new phase.

For the organizers, it was a milestone that must have carried considerable satisfaction.

The difficulties of securing land, organizing financing, and navigating the development process had not disappeared from memory, but they had produced a tangible result.

The building was rising.

Construction also brought the project into the everyday awareness of the larger Eastsound community.

A new residential development was taking shape along Prune Alley, transforming a property whose earlier uses had been familiar to generations of islanders.

The work represented a significant investment in the village.

Although sixteen apartments might seem a modest undertaking by mainland standards, the project was substantial for a small community.

It required coordinated planning, financing, and construction, and it would create a permanent housing resource where none had previously existed.

For the people who had first discussed the need for senior housing six years earlier, the sight of the building under construction must have made the possibility of remaining on Orcas feel considerably more real.

The Longhouse was no longer a proposal.

It was becoming a place where people could live.

Sixteen Apartments, Sixteen Opportunities

The number sixteen may seem unremarkable in the context of modern housing development.

But on Orcas Island, each apartment represented an opportunity that had previously been unavailable.

For one resident, the Longhouse might mean leaving a large, difficult-to-maintain house for a smaller home requiring less physical effort.

For another, it might provide relief from uncertain rental arrangements or housing costs that consumed too much of a limited income.

For someone whose ability to drive had diminished, the central Eastsound location could make ordinary errands and social activities more manageable.

The apartments offered practical benefits, but their significance was also personal.

A home provides privacy, security, and a place from which to participate in the larger world.

For older residents, suitable housing could help preserve the independence they had spent their lives exercising.

The Longhouse was designed to offer that possibility.

It would not eliminate every difficulty associated with aging, nor would it replace the support of friends, family, and community organizations.

But it could remove one of the most serious obstacles facing older islanders: the lack of affordable housing appropriate to their circumstances.

The project also demonstrated what could be accomplished when private generosity, volunteer effort, and public assistance were brought together around a clearly defined purpose.

The land donation alone could not have produced the building.

Government financing alone could not have created the local organization needed to develop and operate it.

Volunteer enthusiasm alone could not have paid construction costs.

The Longhouse required all of these elements.

Its creation was a cooperative achievement.

Preparing for the Years Ahead

As the building took shape, the organization faced a transition that would prove as important as construction itself.

The Longhouse was intended to remain affordable for decades.

That meant the work of its organizers would not end when the last construction worker left the property.

The completed building would require regular maintenance, financial oversight, compliance with applicable housing requirements, and attention to the needs of residents.

Apartments would need repairs. Appliances would eventually fail. Roofs, plumbing, electrical systems, and exterior surfaces would require maintenance and replacement.

The organization would also need to manage occupancy, collect rents, pay operating expenses, and plan for future capital improvements.

These responsibilities would continue year after year.

The Longhouse's governing board was therefore assuming an obligation extending far beyond the original development campaign.

Its members were becoming stewards of a permanent community asset.

The distinction was important.

A successful fundraising campaign could be celebrated and concluded.

A housing development could not.

Its success would be measured over decades, through the continued availability of safe, affordable homes and the ability of the organization to maintain the property responsibly.

The Longhouse would eventually outlast many of the people who had helped create it.

That was part of the achievement.

The founders were building something intended to serve people they would never meet.

The Achievement of a Small Community

The creation of the Orcas Longhouse illustrates how much can be accomplished when a small community organizes around a practical need.

The project began with older islanders who wanted to remain independent.

It advanced through the efforts of volunteers willing to undertake unfamiliar financial and organizational responsibilities.

It benefited from technical guidance, public financing opportunities, and the generosity of private donors.

Most importantly, it survived the years of preparation required to bring the idea to construction.

The organizers did not set out to transform the entire housing market of Orcas Island.

They focused upon a specific problem affecting a particular group of residents.

Their solution was modest, but it was permanent.

Sixteen apartments would not solve every housing difficulty on the island.

They would, however, provide sixteen households with an opportunity to remain in a community they might otherwise have been forced to leave.

That was no small accomplishment.

The Longhouse also represented a belief that the people who had contributed to island life should not become strangers to their own community simply because their circumstances had changed.

The building was a practical expression of that belief.

A Building Becomes a Home

By the time construction began in 1984, the Orcas Longhouse had already been nearly six years in the making.

The original meeting of older islanders had led to surveys, committees, organizational development, financial planning, and the acquisition of land.

What had once been an uncertain proposal was becoming a permanent part of Eastsound.

But the true purpose of the Longhouse would not be realized through construction alone.

A building becomes a home through the people who live within it.

The apartments would acquire the familiar routines of daily life. Residents would prepare meals, welcome visitors, read newspapers, listen to radios, and look out their windows upon the changing village.

Neighbors would become acquainted.

The community room would provide opportunities for conversation and shared activities.

For the residents, the Longhouse would not primarily be a development project or a financial accomplishment.

It would simply be home.

That was what the organizers had worked to create.

The building on Prune Alley represented the successful conclusion of years of planning, but it also marked the beginning of a much longer responsibility.

The community had brought the Longhouse into existence.

Now it would have to sustain it.

And the people who moved into its apartments would begin giving the building something that no architect, contractor, or financing agency could provide.

A life of its own.

A Place to Call Home

The Opening and Early Years of the Orcas Longhouse

By 1984, the long effort to establish affordable housing for older Orcas Islanders had produced something tangible. On Prune Alley, in the heart of Eastsound, a new apartment building stood on land that had previously served a succession of village homes and businesses.

For the people who had spent years organizing, securing financing, and overseeing construction, the Longhouse represented a remarkable accomplishment. What began in 1978 as a discussion among twenty-six older islanders had become a permanent residential development.

But the completion of the building was only the beginning.

The founders had created sixteen apartments. The people who moved into them would turn those apartments into homes.

The First Residents

The arrival of the first residents marked a fundamental change in the Longhouse's history.

Until then, the project had been measured in meetings, applications, financial commitments, and construction plans. Now its success would be measured by something less easily recorded: the daily lives of the people who lived there.

The building contained sixteen one-bedroom apartments, each approximately 540 square feet. Every apartment included a private kitchen, bathroom, and living area, allowing residents to maintain their own households.

The accommodations were modest, but they offered something that had become increasingly difficult to find on Orcas Island: affordable, manageable housing in a convenient location.

For some residents, moving into the Longhouse may have meant leaving a larger home that had become physically demanding or expensive to maintain. Others may have been seeking stability after years of uncertain rental arrangements.

The individual stories of the earliest residents remain to be recovered from historical records and personal recollections. Their names and experiences deserve a place in the history of the building.

Whatever their circumstances, the new residents shared an important opportunity. They could establish homes in Eastsound while retaining control over their daily lives.

The Longhouse was not a nursing home or an institution providing supervised care.

It was an apartment building.

Residents could furnish their homes with familiar belongings, prepare their own meals, welcome visitors, and arrange their routines according to their preferences.

That independence had been central to the project from its earliest planning stages.

Now it was becoming a reality.

Sixteen Homes Under One Roof

Although the apartments shared a common design, each became a distinct household.

Residents brought furniture, photographs, books, keepsakes, and possessions accumulated over years of living elsewhere. Within the compact floor plans, these belongings gave each apartment an individual character.

For someone leaving a longtime family home, moving into a smaller space could require difficult decisions about what to keep and what to leave behind.

Yet a manageable apartment also offered relief from the responsibilities of maintaining a larger property.

The Longhouse provided a setting in which residents could simplify their living arrangements without surrendering their privacy or personal identity.

Beyond the individual apartments, the building offered shared facilities.

Laundry equipment was available on the property, eliminating the need to travel elsewhere for an essential household task.

A community room provided space for residents to gather, visit, and participate in activities.

The common areas created opportunities for companionship, but the building did not require its occupants to function as a single household.

Some residents would naturally enjoy frequent conversation and social activities. Others would prefer quieter routines.

The Longhouse had to accommodate both.

As people settled in, ordinary encounters in hallways, laundry areas, and shared spaces provided opportunities for neighbors to become acquainted.

Over time, these relationships would contribute to the building's character.

The Longhouse was a collection of private homes, but it was also a small residential community.

Part of Eastsound

One of the Longhouse's greatest advantages was its location.

Situated on Prune Alley, the building stood within the village rather than several miles away in a rural part of the island.

Residents were close to businesses, churches, public facilities, and other familiar places.

The original Orcas Island Senior Center, located across the street, was particularly convenient. It provided an established gathering place where older islanders could participate in activities and maintain social connections.

For residents who no longer drove regularly, proximity to village services could make an important difference.

A trip to a shop, an appointment, or a community activity did not necessarily require arranging transportation over several miles of island roads.

The Longhouse did not provide every service its residents might need. Instead, it allowed them to remain close to the institutions and activities already woven into the life of Eastsound.

The distinction was important.

The founders had not intended to create a separate community for older people, removed from the rest of the village.

They wanted residents to remain part of Orcas Island.

The location helped make that possible.

As the years passed, the Longhouse became an ordinary feature of Eastsound's residential landscape.

Residents came and went. Visitors arrived. Familiar routines developed behind the apartment doors.

The building gradually ceased to be something new.

It became a neighborhood address, recognized not for the effort required to construct it but for the people who lived there.

The Work of Keeping It Going

Once the Longhouse was occupied, the organization that had created it faced a different responsibility.

The years of planning and construction had involved securing land, financing, approvals, and professional services. Operating the completed building required continuous attention to more ordinary matters.

Rent had to be collected, bills paid, and financial records maintained.

Apartments and common areas required repairs and upkeep. Heating, plumbing, electrical equipment, and appliances needed regular attention.

Residents had questions and concerns. Contractors had to be contacted, maintenance scheduled, and decisions made about the use of limited resources.

These tasks rarely attracted public attention, but they were essential to the Longhouse's success.

The organization's responsibility was not simply to provide inexpensive apartments. It had to provide safe, functional housing that residents could depend upon.

That required careful financial management.

Affordable rents limited the income available to operate the property, while many expenses continued to rise with inflation and the aging of the building.

Insurance, utilities, maintenance, and eventual major repairs all had to be considered.

A roof that was new in 1984 would eventually require replacement. Appliances would wear out, exterior surfaces would deteriorate, and building systems would need attention.

The governing board had to anticipate those expenses while preserving the Longhouse's affordability.

This was the less visible side of the founders' achievement.

They had not simply constructed sixteen apartments. They had established an organization responsible for maintaining those apartments over many decades.

Its success would depend upon decisions made long after the excitement of construction had faded.

The People Behind the Property

The continued operation of the Longhouse required individuals willing to accept responsibility for its welfare.

Board members provided oversight and made decisions about finances, maintenance, and organizational policy.

Property managers and maintenance personnel handled the practical work of keeping the building functioning.

Community supporters contributed time, professional knowledge, and other resources when needed.

Some of these efforts involved major decisions. Much of the work consisted of small tasks that were easy to overlook.

A leaking faucet needed repair. A heating problem required attention. A resident had a question about the building.

Each issue might seem minor when considered separately, but together they represented the daily responsibilities of providing housing.

The Longhouse was a financial and physical asset, but it was also someone's home.

A repair delayed for weeks could be more than an inconvenience to an older resident. Problems involving lighting, access, heating, or building security could affect comfort and peace of mind.

Good management therefore required attention to both the property and the people who lived there.

Over time, certain individuals would become especially important to the Longhouse through years of board service, management, and personal commitment.

Their contributions would help determine whether the building remained a place where residents felt comfortable and secure.

The history of those individuals belongs to the next stage of the Longhouse story.

The Years Begin to Accumulate

The earliest years of the Longhouse gradually gave way to the ordinary passage of time.

Residents settled into their apartments. Management routines became established. The building began to experience the wear that accompanies daily use.

As years passed, some residents remained for long periods while others moved away or died.

New occupants took their places, bringing different personalities, belongings, and personal histories.

An apartment that had been home to one person became home to another.

The walls and floor plans remained largely unchanged, but the lives unfolding within them were continually different.

This succession is an essential part of the history of residential housing.

Unlike a museum or monument, an apartment building is not preserved at a single moment in time.

It remains in use.

Its history accumulates through the people who occupy it, the work required to maintain it, and the changes made to meet new needs.

The Longhouse was intended to serve successive generations of residents, many of whom would have no personal memory of the original organizing meetings or the construction campaign.

For them, the building would simply be an established part of Eastsound.

They would benefit from decisions made years before they arrived.

That continuity was one of the most significant achievements of the founders.

A Lasting Responsibility

The opening of the Orcas Longhouse transformed a community aspiration into everyday reality.

The first residents occupied apartments that had taken years of organizing, generosity, and persistence to create.

The nonprofit organization moved from development into property management, and the building became part of the familiar landscape of Eastsound.

The achievement was substantial, but it was not final.

The Longhouse would continue to require responsible leadership, careful financial planning, maintenance, and a commitment to the needs of its residents.

The island around it would change. Construction costs and property values would rise. Expectations for building safety, accessibility, and comfort would evolve.

The Longhouse would have to respond to those changes while remaining faithful to its original purpose.

That responsibility would pass through successive generations of board members, managers, and community supporters.

The founders had provided the building.

The first residents had given it life.

The people who followed would determine how well it endured.

And in the decades ahead, the Longhouse would become more than the accomplishment of those who created it.

It would become a lasting part of Orcas Island's social history.

The People Who Kept the Promise

Leadership and the Continuing Life of the Orcas Longhouse

By the time the Orcas Longhouse had become an established part of Eastsound, the extraordinary effort required to create it had given way to the quieter responsibilities of keeping it operating.

The building was occupied. Its sixteen apartments were providing homes, and the organization that had brought the project into existence had settled into the ongoing work of managing residential property.

The first years had established the Longhouse as a place to live. The decades that followed would reveal how much its future depended upon the people responsible for it.

Among those individuals was Warren Westad, whose personal concern for the Longhouse and its residents left a lasting impression on those who knew him.

A New Generation of Responsibility

The original organizers had worked toward a clear objective: constructing affordable housing for older islanders and people with disabilities.

Once the building was completed, the organization's responsibilities changed.

Its governing board now had to oversee an operating property, maintain financial accountability, and make decisions about repairs, management, and the building's future.

The work was seldom dramatic.

Budgets needed review. Maintenance projects required approval. Financial records had to be kept, and the requirements associated with affordable housing had to be observed.

Board members also had to plan for expenses that might not arise for years.

The Longhouse had been built to last, but lasting required attention.

Even a well-constructed building would eventually need new equipment, repairs to exterior surfaces, and replacement of worn components.

The organization could not wait until every problem became an emergency.

It needed people willing to make practical decisions, sometimes with limited resources and no easy solutions.

As board membership changed over time, experience and institutional knowledge had to be passed from one person to another.

The founders had created the Longhouse. Those who followed assumed responsibility for its continued operation.

Warren Westad

Warren Westad was one of the people whose involvement gave the Longhouse continuity beyond its founding years.

He served on its board and was associated with the organization from an early period, although the precise dates and positions of his service still need to be established through surviving records.

His contribution is remembered not simply through organizational responsibilities but through his personal relationship with the building and its residents.

The author worked for Westad approximately twenty years ago and recalls how deeply he cared about the Longhouse.

He knew the residents personally. He was familiar with their circumstances and concerned about their well-being.

The Longhouse was not, to him, merely a property to be administered.

It was a place where people lived, and those people mattered.

The author remembers Westad approaching the building and its residents with something resembling the concern he would have shown for his own family.

That recollection offers a glimpse of the Longhouse's character during those years.

For Westad, service on the board was not confined to attending meetings or reviewing financial information.

His interest extended to the daily experience of the people who depended upon the apartments.

Such personal involvement was especially meaningful in a small residential community.

The Longhouse had only sixteen households. Its residents were not anonymous occupants of a large development.

They were neighbors, acquaintances, and members of the wider Orcas Island community.

Westad's familiarity with them helped keep the organization's work connected to the individuals it served.

More Than a Property

The difference between maintaining a building and caring about its residents can be subtle, but it is important.

A property manager may see a broken heater as a repair order. A resident experiences it as a cold apartment.

An exterior light may appear as an item in a maintenance budget, but for someone with limited mobility or impaired vision, adequate lighting can make a significant difference in feeling safe.

A door that has become difficult to open may be a minor mechanical problem for one person and a daily obstacle for another.

These are ordinary issues in residential property management.

They also illustrate why the people responsible for housing need to understand how residents experience their homes.

Westad's involvement is remembered in that spirit.

He took an interest in the people behind the apartment doors.

His concern did not eliminate the need for rules, financial oversight, or professional management. Those responsibilities remained essential.

But his example demonstrated that sound administration and personal consideration could reinforce one another.

The Longhouse had been founded because a group of islanders recognized that housing circumstances could threaten older residents' ability to remain in their community.

Westad's attention to the people living there reflected the same underlying concern.

The Work That Rarely Made the News

Westad was part of a broader network of people whose contributions helped keep the Longhouse operating.

Board members, property managers, maintenance workers, and community supporters all played roles.

Much of their work consisted of ordinary tasks.

A plumbing problem needed attention. An appliance required replacement. A bill had to be reviewed, or a contractor contacted.

Individually, these matters might seem unremarkable.

Together, they determined the condition of the building and the quality of life it offered.

The Longhouse's modest size did not eliminate the complexities of residential management.

Sixteen apartments still required reliable utilities, functioning equipment, safe common areas, and regular maintenance.

Residents had individual needs and expectations. The organization had financial obligations and operating requirements.

Balancing these responsibilities demanded consistency.

The people who performed this work were not necessarily prominent in the public history of Orcas Island.

Yet their contributions were essential to the continued usefulness of the Longhouse.

The building's existence was the achievement of its founders.

Its continued operation reflected the efforts of many others.

An Aging Building

As the Longhouse passed through its first and second decades, the building began to show the ordinary effects of time.

Materials and equipment installed in 1984 accumulated years of use.

Exterior surfaces faced the damp maritime climate. Plumbing fixtures, appliances, doors, windows, and shared facilities required periodic attention.

Some components could be repaired. Others eventually needed replacement.

These were predictable challenges, but they were not always inexpensive.

The cost of labor and building materials continued to rise, and island construction presented additional practical difficulties.

Specialized workers and materials sometimes had to be brought to Orcas by ferry, adding expense and complicating schedules.

The Longhouse also had to maintain affordable rents for eligible residents.

That limited the organization's ability to respond to rising costs simply by increasing rental income.

Maintenance and financial planning therefore became closely connected.

A necessary repair could consume funds intended for another project. Delaying work might preserve money in the short term but create larger expenses later.

The board had to consider both the condition of the building and the resources available to maintain it.

These decisions became increasingly important as the property aged.

Orcas Island Changes

While the Longhouse was growing older, the community around it was changing.

Eastsound continued to develop, and the San Juan Islands became increasingly desirable places to live, visit, and own property.

Rising real estate values and construction costs placed additional pressure on the island's housing market.

For residents with limited incomes, finding suitable housing became an increasingly difficult challenge.

The Longhouse's original purpose remained relevant.

The founders had created sixteen apartments in response to the needs of older islanders during the late 1970s.

They could not have predicted every change that would occur over the following decades, but their decision to establish permanent affordable housing had lasting consequences.

The property was not simply another apartment building whose future would be determined by market rents or the potential value of its land.

It belonged to an organization established for a particular community purpose.

As housing pressures increased, that distinction became more significant.

The Longhouse continued providing an option for eligible residents who might otherwise find it difficult to remain in Eastsound.

The value of those apartments could not be measured solely by the market price of the property.

Their importance lay in the homes they provided.

Continuity Through Change

No organization remains unchanged over several decades.

Board members retire or move away. New people assume leadership. Management arrangements evolve, and financial circumstances shift.

The Longhouse experienced the same need for continuity that confronts other long-established community institutions.

New leaders had to understand the organization's history while responding to contemporary circumstances.

The building could not remain frozen in the condition in which it had been completed.

Safety expectations changed. Equipment became outdated. Residents' needs and standards of comfort evolved.

The organization had to adapt.

This did not mean abandoning the original mission.

The purpose of the Longhouse was to provide suitable, affordable homes, not to preserve every feature of its 1984 construction.

Maintaining that purpose sometimes required changes to the building and its operation.

The people responsible for those decisions had to balance respect for the founders' intentions with the practical needs of the present.

That task became more demanding as the Longhouse entered the twenty-first century.

A Personal Legacy

Warren Westad's involvement illustrates an important part of the Longhouse's history that cannot be fully understood through construction records or financial statements.

His contribution was rooted in personal commitment.

He cared about the building, but he also cared about the residents.

The author's recollections suggest that Westad saw the Longhouse as a community responsibility rather than simply an administrative obligation.

That distinction shaped the way he approached his involvement.

The precise projects, decisions, and years associated with his service remain subjects for documentary research. Those details will help establish a fuller account of his contribution.

But the personal recollection is valuable in its own right.

Historical records can establish who served on a board and when particular decisions were made.

They do not always reveal how individuals approached their responsibilities or why their involvement mattered to the people around them.

Westad is remembered for the seriousness and personal concern he brought to the Longhouse.

His example belongs alongside the contributions of the other individuals who helped maintain the property through the years.

Looking Toward a New Century

By the time the Longhouse entered the twenty-first century, it had become a familiar and lasting part of Eastsound.

The original residents had been succeeded by others, and the building had accumulated decades of use.

The island's housing market had changed substantially, making the availability of affordable apartments increasingly important.

At the same time, the Longhouse faced the challenges common to aging residential properties.

Maintaining its condition would require careful planning, professional expertise, and eventually more extensive improvements.

The organization could no longer rely upon the advantages of a relatively new building.

Its future would depend upon adapting to changing needs and finding the resources to make necessary repairs and upgrades.

The work of people such as Warren Westad had helped carry the Longhouse through its earlier decades.

The next period would bring new challenges and new individuals into its history.

The question was no longer whether Orcas Island could create affordable housing.

The Longhouse had already answered that.

The question was how to preserve and improve what the community had built as the island, the residents, and the building itself continued to change.

Changing Times, Changing Needs

The Orcas Longhouse in the Twenty-First Century

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Orcas Longhouse had become a familiar part of Eastsound. Its sixteen apartments had been occupied by successive generations of residents, and the building on Prune Alley had settled into the ordinary life of the village.

The people who had organized the Longhouse in the late 1970s had created something intended to endure. Now, more than fifteen years after construction, that intention was being tested in a different way.

The question was no longer whether the community could build affordable housing.

It was whether the Longhouse could remain affordable, comfortable, and well maintained as the years passed.

The property was approaching an age when its original equipment and building materials would increasingly require attention. At the same time, Orcas Island was becoming a more expensive place to live.

These changes did not alter the Longhouse's purpose. They made the work of preserving it more important.

The Longhouse at Twenty

Around 2004, the Longhouse was approaching its twentieth year.

The building remained modest in scale: sixteen one-bedroom apartments at 236 Prune Alley, with shared laundry facilities and a central location convenient to the businesses and services of Eastsound.

The arrangement that had been established in the 1980s continued to serve its intended population.

Residents maintained private households in apartments designed for independent living. The building provided an affordable rental option for older people and eligible individuals with disabilities.

By this point, however, the property was no longer new.

Appliances, plumbing fixtures, doors, windows, and other components had accumulated years of daily use. The building's exterior had been exposed to two decades of island weather.

These changes were ordinary, but their consequences could become expensive.

An apartment building does not wear out all at once. Its individual parts age at different rates. Some can be repaired repeatedly, while others eventually reach the point where replacement becomes more practical.

For the Longhouse, every maintenance decision had to be considered in relation to a relatively small building and a limited operating budget.

Sixteen apartments provided sixteen homes, but they also represented the property's entire rental income.

A major repair could therefore have a substantial effect on the organization's finances.

The challenge was to address the building's needs without placing its affordability at risk.

What the 2018 Records Reveal

A useful glimpse of the Longhouse during this period appears in a housing market study prepared for OPAL Community Land Trust's April's Grove development.

The study, dated 2018, included the Orcas Longhouse among existing rental properties examined on the island.

Its description was brief but revealing.

The Longhouse was identified as a sixteen-unit property containing one-bedroom apartments with one bathroom each. The report noted on-site laundry, open parking, and the inclusion of water, sewer, and garbage service in the rent.

It also identified the property as serving seniors aged sixty-two and older and eligible people with disabilities.

Most significantly, the report described the Longhouse as participating in a USDA Rural Development housing program.

That detail helps clarify the property's operating framework and provides a more specific direction for researching its original financing and subsequent rental assistance.

The study also reported that the Longhouse had no vacancies at the time of the survey.

A single observation cannot establish how often the building was fully occupied, how long its waiting list might have been, or how frequently apartments became available.

But it does document that, when surveyed, all sixteen apartments were occupied.

More than three decades after its creation, the Longhouse was still functioning as affordable rental housing for the population it had been established to serve.

The study contains another detail that deserves attention.

It lists the Longhouse as having been built in 1985, whereas the earlier historical material associates construction with 1984.

Those dates may refer to different milestones, such as the beginning of construction, completion, or initial occupancy. Until original construction and occupancy records are examined, the distinction should remain open.

The discrepancy is small in the life of a forty-year-old building, but it matters in a history intended to establish a reliable chronology.

Sixteen Apartments in a Changing Village

The Longhouse's address had not changed, but Eastsound around it had.

By the early 2000s, affordable housing was a prominent concern on Orcas Island. Rising property values and the cost of construction made it difficult for many people with modest incomes to find suitable homes.

The Longhouse was not large enough to solve that problem.

Its importance lay in the fact that its apartments already existed.

The property occupied centrally located land that would have been increasingly expensive to acquire for a new development.

The building also had the benefit of an established operating history.

Rather than assembling a new project from the beginning, the organization responsible for the Longhouse could concentrate on preserving the housing already in place.

This distinction became increasingly significant.

The loss of even one affordable apartment would reduce the building's capacity by more than six percent.

Losing the entire property would mean losing sixteen homes in the center of Eastsound, along with decades of community investment.

The Longhouse therefore represented more than an aging residential building.

It was an existing housing resource that would be difficult to replace.

The Apartments Behind the Numbers

A housing study can describe a property in terms of units, bedrooms, rents, and vacancies.

Those figures are useful, but they reveal little about the condition of the individual apartments.

By the time the Longhouse reached its third decade, residents were living in a building whose basic design dated to the early 1980s.

Even when maintained in working order, older kitchens and bathrooms can gradually become less convenient.

Cabinets, countertops, flooring, fixtures, and appliances wear through daily use.

Door hardware becomes loose or difficult to operate. Lighting that once seemed adequate may no longer provide the visibility residents need.

For older people and residents with disabilities, these details can have an importance beyond appearance.

A secure handrail, a reliable exterior light, or a door that opens easily can make everyday activities more comfortable.

The Longhouse's small apartments also meant that renovation work had to be planned carefully.

Replacing a kitchen or bathroom in an occupied apartment could temporarily interfere with essential household activities.

When an apartment became vacant, however, there was an opportunity to undertake more substantial work before the next resident moved in.

This approach would become an important feature of the property's later improvements.

Rather than treating every repair as an isolated problem, the building could be improved gradually as opportunities arose.

The result was a practical way to modernize apartments while limiting disruption to residents.

An Established Federal Housing Property

The Longhouse's participation in a USDA Rural Development program is an important part of its history.

It indicates that the property operated within a federal affordable-housing framework, with requirements affecting such matters as eligibility, rents, and administration.

The precise financing and rental-assistance arrangements need to be established from the Longhouse's original loan documents, regulatory agreements, and subsequent program records.

Those details are essential because they help explain how the building continued providing affordable apartments over several decades.

The Longhouse was not simply an ordinary rental property whose owner voluntarily charged below-market rents.

Its operation was connected to a structured housing program.

That relationship brought obligations as well as benefits.

Management had to maintain appropriate records, follow program requirements, and ensure that the property continued serving eligible residents.

The federal program also formed part of the financial environment in which maintenance and improvement decisions were made.

Understanding those arrangements will be particularly important when reconstructing the Longhouse's later renovation projects and funding history.

OPAL and the Wider Housing Community

During the Longhouse's early decades, another Orcas Island housing organization was growing into a significant community institution.

OPAL Community Land Trust was incorporated in May 1989, several years after the Longhouse was established.

Its earliest work focused on creating permanently affordable homeownership opportunities. Over time, OPAL expanded into rental housing, property acquisition, and the renovation of existing homes.

By the 2000s, OPAL was demonstrating that preserving older affordable housing could be as important as building new developments.

In late 2007, OPAL entered into an agreement to purchase Lavender Hollow, an existing Eastsound apartment complex. The acquisition was completed in 2011, followed by substantial renovations in 2012.

That history provides useful context for the Longhouse.

Both properties were part of the island's limited stock of affordable rental housing, but they had distinct organizational histories.

Lavender Hollow's purchase and renovation should not be confused with events at the Longhouse.

The significance of OPAL's expanding work was that Orcas Island was developing greater local experience in acquiring, financing, renovating, and operating affordable rental properties.

That expertise would become increasingly valuable as older buildings required attention.

Their histories increasingly belonged to the same local network of housing preservation.

The Move Toward Professional Management

Professional management could provide access to systems and expertise that a small volunteer board might find difficult to maintain on its own.

But it did not eliminate the importance of local oversight.

The Longhouse remained a small residential community, and decisions about the property had direct consequences for its occupants.

The relationship between the governing organization and professional management would become particularly important as renovation and improvement projects advanced.

Jeremy King and a Changing Approach to Improvements

One of the people associated with the Longhouse's more recent improvement efforts was Jeremy King.

King, who worked in a senior management role with Ad-West, became involved in efforts to improve conditions at the Longhouse and at Lavender Hollow.

His work included seeking resources for property improvements and coordinating changes intended to make the apartments and grounds more comfortable and secure.

At the Longhouse, the improvements associated with this period included remodeling apartments as they became vacant, rebuilding fencing, and upgrading lighting and hardware.

These were practical changes rather than an attempt to transform the property into something entirely different.

An apartment could receive attention between residents, allowing worn interiors to be renewed without displacing an existing household for an extended renovation.

Exterior improvements addressed the condition and usability of shared areas.

Better lighting and hardware could improve the daily experience of residents while reducing some of the maintenance difficulties associated with aging equipment.

The importance of this work lay partly in its cumulative effect.

A single replaced fixture or remodeled apartment might not attract much attention.

Across a small building, however, a series of carefully planned improvements could make a substantial difference.

King's involvement also illustrates the changing demands of affordable-housing management.

By this period, preserving a property such as the Longhouse required more than routine repairs.

It required identifying funding opportunities, setting priorities, coordinating contractors, and making improvements in ways that respected the building's continuing occupancy.

The dates, funding sources, and full scope of King's Longhouse projects should be established from project records and contemporary reporting. Those details deserve a fuller treatment in the chapter devoted to the renovation period.

The Longhouse in the 2020s

As the Longhouse approached its fortieth anniversary, it remained a small but important part of Eastsound's housing supply.

The building still contained sixteen one-bedroom apartments, and its location continued to offer residents convenient access to the village.

The property's longevity was an accomplishment, but age brought practical demands.

By the 2020s, a building constructed in the mid-1980s required continuing attention to its interiors, equipment, exterior features, and common spaces.

The task was no longer simply to maintain the original construction.

It was to adapt the property for continued use.

The changes undertaken at the Longhouse reflected that necessity.

Apartment renovations, improved lighting, renewed fencing, and updated hardware were ways of extending the building's usefulness.

They also reflected an understanding that affordable housing should remain comfortable and well cared for.

The Longhouse's residents were not being served merely by keeping the apartments available.

They were being served by keeping those apartments in good condition.

Preparing the Longhouse for Another Generation

The Longhouse entered the twenty-first century with advantages its founders had worked hard to establish.

It had a central location, a permanent residential purpose, and sixteen apartments designed for people who needed affordable housing.

But the building also carried the accumulated demands of decades of use.

The period brought new management arrangements, greater attention to capital improvements, and the involvement of people with professional experience in affordable-housing operations.

These developments marked an important change in the Longhouse's history.

The original organizers had concentrated on creating the property.

Later generations had kept it operating.

Now the emphasis was increasingly on renewing it.

The building on Prune Alley did not need to become larger or more elaborate to remain valuable.

It needed to continue doing what it had done for decades, while adapting to the practical requirements of a changing time.

That work would depend upon the people and organizations willing to invest in its future.

The next chapter follows those relationships more closely, particularly the roles of OPAL, Ad-West, and the individuals involved in maintaining and improving the Longhouse.

Their efforts would help determine how a building created in the 1980s could continue providing homes well into the twenty-first century.

The Longhouse at a Crossroads

Management, Financial Realities, and the Future of an Orcas Island Institution

In October 2026, the Orcas Longhouse stands more than four decades removed from the community effort that created it.

The sixteen apartments on Prune Alley remain an important source of affordable housing for older islanders and eligible people with disabilities. The building continues to serve the purpose envisioned by its founders, but the circumstances surrounding its operation have changed considerably.

The Longhouse is no longer a new development supported by the enthusiasm of a recently organized group of volunteers. It is an aging residential property operating within an increasingly complex system of affordable-housing regulations, financial obligations, professional management, and building maintenance.

Its continued success depends upon more than keeping its apartments occupied.

The organization must maintain its property, meet its financial and regulatory obligations, provide reliable services to residents, and plan for the eventual replacement of aging building components.

In recent years, Ad-West has supplied professional property-management services, while individuals associated with the company have helped secure improvements to the building and its grounds.

That relationship has become an important part of the Longhouse's modern history.

It also raises a question that may prove increasingly consequential.

What happens if the Longhouse can no longer afford professional management, or if Ad-West eventually decides that continuing its services is no longer practical?

The answer may help determine the future of one of Orcas Island's earliest affordable-housing developments.

An Independent Nonprofit with a Long History

The Orcas Longhouse occupies a distinctive place in the history of affordable housing on Orcas Island.

Its origins predate OPAL Community Land Trust and several other housing initiatives that would eventually become familiar parts of the island's nonprofit community.

The Longhouse was established through the efforts of local residents who recognized the need for affordable housing for older islanders in the late 1970s.

Federal nonprofit records identify Orcas Longhouse as a separate tax-exempt organization, with recognition dating to September 1981.

Its federal employer identification number is 91-1145647.

That independent organizational identity remains important.

The Longhouse is not simply an apartment building managed as one property among many. It has its own corporate history, governing board, financial records, and legal responsibilities.

Its federal tax filings provide a continuing record of the organization long after the original fundraising and construction campaigns ended.

Those records also help distinguish the Longhouse from other affordable-housing properties on Orcas Island.

Although OPAL Community Land Trust has become a major local housing organization, the Longhouse has a separate history and should not be assumed to be owned by OPAL merely because the organizations work within the same housing community.

Any substantial change would need to account for the Longhouse's independent obligations, governing documents, and affordable-housing requirements.

The Retirement of Warren Westad

For many years, Warren Westad was one of the individuals most closely associated with the Longhouse.

His involvement extended across a substantial portion of the property's history.

As discussed earlier, the author personally worked for Westad approximately twenty years ago and recalls his unusually strong commitment to the Longhouse and its residents.

Westad knew the people living there. They knew him.

He approached the property with a degree of personal concern that went beyond the ordinary responsibilities of property management.

The author recalls that Westad treated the Longhouse as though members of his own family lived there.

That attitude helped establish a close relationship between the building's administration and the people whose homes it contained.

Recent nonprofit filings continued to identify Westad in a property-management role, although the records do not necessarily establish the extent of his actual duties during those reporting periods.

Westad is no longer actively involved with the Longhouse following his retirement from Ad-West.

His departure marked the end of an important period in the property's history.

The Longhouse had benefited from the involvement of someone who combined administrative responsibility with longstanding personal familiarity with the building and its residents.

Such relationships are difficult to reproduce through organizational procedures alone.

His retirement did not end the Longhouse's ability to provide good management, but it changed the nature of its connection to an individual who had been part of its history for many years.

Responsibility for maintaining that connection between management and residents passed to others.

Ad-West and the Professional Management of the Longhouse

A property such as the Longhouse requires much more than occasional maintenance and rent collection.

Management responsibilities can include tenant applications, income certifications, lease administration, financial accounting, maintenance coordination, inspections, resident communications, and compliance with applicable housing-program requirements.

The Longhouse's participation in a USDA Rural Development housing program adds another layer of responsibility.

Federally assisted housing operates under rules governing eligibility, rents, documentation, and property administration.

These requirements demand specialized knowledge and consistent recordkeeping.

For a small nonprofit organization, maintaining that expertise independently can be difficult.

A professional management company can provide trained personnel, established administrative procedures, and access to systems that would be expensive to develop for a single sixteen-unit property.

Ad-West's role therefore represents more than a contractual convenience.

It provides an administrative structure upon which the Longhouse has come to rely.

Those details are essential to understanding the property's financial and organizational future.

The Financial Position of the Longhouse

The Longhouse's recent federal tax filings provide a useful, although incomplete, picture of its financial circumstances.

For the three years ending in 2024, the organization reported the following revenues and expenses:

Year	Revenue	Expenses	Reported surplus
2022	$121,467	$103,176	$18,291
2023	$121,976	$114,561	$7,415
2024	$143,647	$115,811	$27,836

These figures indicate that the organization reported positive annual operating results during each of those years.

However, annual revenue exceeding expenses does not necessarily mean that a housing organization has sufficient resources for all its future needs.

At the end of 2024, the Longhouse reported approximately $135,038 in assets and $407,864 in liabilities, resulting in negative net assets of approximately $272,826.

These figures require careful interpretation.

Long-term affordable-housing financing may include debt and accounting arrangements that cannot be fully understood from summary tax records.

The filings do not establish the organization's available cash, restricted reserves, debt repayment terms, or the amount needed for future building improvements.

They also do not establish the current cost of Ad-West's management services.

Nevertheless, they illustrate the relatively small financial scale on which the Longhouse operates.

The organization must support sixteen apartments, maintain an aging building, satisfy its financial obligations, and pay for professional services from a limited revenue base.

An unexpected major repair or significant increase in operating expenses could require difficult decisions.

The Longhouse's financial future therefore depends not simply upon annual surpluses, but upon the relationship among its income, operating costs, debt obligations, available reserves, and long-term capital needs.

The Economics of a Sixteen-Unit Property

The Longhouse's size is both one of its defining characteristics and one of its principal financial limitations.

Sixteen apartments create a relatively small residential community.

They also provide a limited base over which operating expenses can be distributed.

Many of the administrative responsibilities associated with affordable housing do not decrease proportionately with the number of apartments.

A sixteen-unit property may require many of the same regulatory reports, accounting procedures, inspections, and management systems as a substantially larger development.

Yet it has far fewer units generating revenue.

A management expense of $16,000 per year, for example, would represent $1,000 annually for each apartment.

An expense of $32,000 would represent $2,000 per apartment.

These are illustrations, not the actual fees charged to the Longhouse.

They demonstrate the sensitivity of a small development to changes in management costs.

The property also cannot necessarily increase rents to compensate for rising expenses.

Its affordable-housing program imposes requirements that distinguish it from an unrestricted private rental property.

The Longhouse must therefore balance the cost of professional services against its limited financial resources.

As management expenses, insurance, utilities, and building maintenance costs increase, that balance may become more difficult to maintain.

What Happens if Ad-West Withdraws?

One of the most consequential questions facing the Longhouse is what would happen if Ad-West eventually discontinued its management services.

There is no verified evidence that Ad-West has announced an intention to withdraw.

The concern is a potential future development rather than an established decision.

Nevertheless, it is a reasonable question for the Longhouse's governing board to consider.

Property-management companies must determine whether their contracts remain financially and operationally practical.

A small property on an island presents particular challenges.

Staff, contractors, supplies, and specialized services may be more difficult or expensive to obtain than in a mainland community.

An aging building can require substantial maintenance coordination.

Federal affordable-housing requirements add administrative responsibilities that cannot be ignored.

If the cost of providing these services were to exceed what the Longhouse could reasonably pay, Ad-West might seek a different contractual arrangement, increase its fees, or decide not to renew the agreement.

Even if the company remained willing to provide services, the Longhouse might eventually find the cost difficult to sustain.

Either situation would require a response from the governing board.

The concern is not that professional management has failed.

It is that the Longhouse should be prepared for the possibility that its present management arrangement may not continue indefinitely.

The Consequences of Losing Professional Management

If Ad-West were to discontinue its services, the Longhouse would need to replace more than a rent-collection system.

A management transition could affect tenant records, financial reporting, maintenance requests, vendor relationships, inspections, and compliance with federal housing requirements.

Residents would need clear instructions about rent payments, emergency contacts, and routine maintenance.

Existing leases and confidential records would need to be transferred appropriately.

Outstanding repairs and scheduled work would require continued oversight.

The governing board would also need to ensure that any change complied with applicable USDA Rural Development requirements.

Depending upon the property's specific regulatory agreements, a new management arrangement could require agency review or approval.

The consequences of an unplanned transition could be particularly difficult for residents who depend upon predictable routines and reliable access to assistance.

For this reason, management continuity should be treated as a long-term responsibility rather than an issue to be addressed only when a contract is about to expire.

The Longhouse's residents should not be placed in a position where uncertainty about management interferes with the ordinary security of their homes.

Could the Longhouse Manage Itself?

One possible response to rising management costs would be for the Longhouse to assume more direct responsibility for its operations.

The organization might employ an individual manager or contract separately for accounting, compliance, and maintenance services.

Such an arrangement could appear less expensive than a comprehensive professional management contract.

However, the apparent savings would need to be examined carefully.

The Longhouse's federal housing requirements demand specialized knowledge.

Tenant eligibility, income certification, rent calculations, inspections, reporting, and recordkeeping must be handled correctly.

A local manager with general rental experience might not possess the necessary program expertise.

The organization would also need reliable backup arrangements.

If a single employee became unavailable, the Longhouse would still need someone capable of responding to emergencies, processing payments, and meeting regulatory deadlines.

A return to independent management might be possible, but it would require planning, training, and financial analysis.

It should not be assumed to be simpler or less expensive merely because fewer services were purchased from a single company.

Could OPAL Become More Involved?

Another possibility would involve cooperation with OPAL Community Land Trust.

By 2026, OPAL had accumulated extensive experience with affordable housing on Orcas Island.

Its activities included rental housing, property maintenance, resident services, and the renovation of existing buildings.

These capabilities make OPAL an organization worth considering in any discussion of the Longhouse's future.

However, the two organizations have distinct histories and responsibilities.

OPAL has its own housing developments, staffing requirements, financial commitments, and operational priorities.

It should not be assumed that OPAL could simply absorb the Longhouse's management responsibilities without additional resources.

Any expanded relationship would need to be evaluated by both organizations.

Possible arrangements might include limited administrative assistance, maintenance coordination, shared services, or a more comprehensive management agreement.

A transfer of ownership would be a separate and substantially more complicated matter.

Such a proposal would require examination of the Longhouse's corporate documents, debt obligations, federal housing agreements, and applicable approval requirements.

The goal of any partnership would need to be preserving the apartments and protecting the residents.

The Longhouse's independent history should be respected while considering what organizational structure would best support its continued operation.

The Board's Role in the Modern Longhouse

The Longhouse's governing board remains responsible for the organization's direction and oversight.

That responsibility is distinct from the day-to-day services provided by a professional management company.

As of October 2026, the author is unaware of any Longhouse board meetings held at the property during the preceding three years.

It is possible that meetings have taken place remotely or at another location.

The frequency, location, and format of recent meetings have not yet been verified.

Board President Derek Mann would be an appropriate source for clarifying those matters.

The distinction is important.

A board does not need to meet physically at the property to provide effective oversight.

Financial reports, management updates, regulatory matters, and capital planning can be reviewed through remote meetings or other arrangements.

Nevertheless, the Longhouse is a small residential community, and direct familiarity with the building remains valuable.

The absence of meetings at the property raises questions worth exploring, rather than conclusions about the board's activity.

How frequently do board members visit the Longhouse?

How do they receive information about building conditions and residents' concerns?

What reports are provided by Ad-West?

How does the board evaluate future maintenance needs and the cost of management?

These questions become especially important when considering a possible change in professional services.

The board must be capable of making decisions independently, even when it relies upon outside management expertise.

The Question for Derek Mann

Board President Derek Mann occupies an important position in the Longhouse's present history.

An interview with Mann could clarify several questions that cannot be answered from the available public records.

The first concerns the board's present operations.

How frequently does it meet, and are those meetings conducted remotely?

How does the board maintain direct knowledge of the property's condition and communicate with residents?

The second concerns the Longhouse's financial position.

What are its available operating and replacement reserves?

How much does the organization currently pay for professional management?

What major repairs or capital improvements are anticipated during the next five to ten years?

The third concerns management continuity.

Has the board discussed the possibility that Ad-West might eventually withdraw or become unaffordable?

Does the organization have a contingency plan?

Have alternative management arrangements or partnerships been considered?

Answers to these questions would provide a much clearer understanding of the Longhouse's ability to continue operating under its present structure.

They would also help distinguish between concerns arising from the building's age and finances and problems that the organization may already be addressing.

Until those questions are answered, the Longhouse's future management arrangements remain an important area of uncertainty.

The Larger Challenge of an Aging Building

Management costs are only part of the Longhouse's long-term financial obligations.

The building is now more than forty years old.

Its continued usefulness depends upon ongoing repairs and periodic replacement of equipment and building components.

Some improvements can be undertaken as apartments become vacant.

Others, particularly those involving major building systems or exterior structures, may require larger expenditures.

Aging roofs, plumbing, electrical equipment, heating systems, and other components can eventually demand substantial investment.

The exact condition of these systems at the Longhouse should be established through maintenance records and a current property assessment.

It would be inappropriate to assume that a particular component requires replacement solely because of the building's age.

Nevertheless, capital planning is essential for any residential property of this vintage.

The Longhouse must maintain adequate financial resources to address future needs without compromising its operating responsibilities.

That is particularly challenging when rental income is limited and management expenses continue.

The organization must balance three essential requirements: preserving the physical building, providing competent administration, and maintaining affordability.

Neglecting any one of them could eventually threaten the others.

A Changing Relationship Between Leadership and Residents

The Longhouse's history includes a tradition of close personal involvement by individuals responsible for the property.

Warren Westad's longstanding connection to residents is one example.

His retirement from Ad-West marked the end of that particular relationship.

The Longhouse now operates in a more formal professional-management environment.

That change is not necessarily undesirable.

Professional procedures can improve consistency, recordkeeping, accountability, and compliance.

But administrative efficiency does not eliminate the importance of personal familiarity with residents.

The Longhouse was created for people, not simply as a collection of rental units.

Its residents benefit when those responsible for the property understand their practical needs and remain accessible.

The governing board has a role in maintaining that connection, even when professional management handles routine operations.

The question is not whether the Longhouse should return to the informal arrangements of its early decades.

It is how the organization can combine modern professional management with the local involvement that helped sustain it for so many years.

The Need for a Plan Beyond Ad-West

The Longhouse's present management arrangement may continue for many years.

Ad-West has experience with affordable housing on Orcas Island, and its involvement has supported important improvements to the property.

There is no reason to treat a change in management as inevitable.

Nevertheless, the Longhouse would benefit from having a clearly defined plan for such a possibility.

That plan would begin with an understanding of the existing management agreement, including its cost, renewal provisions, termination requirements, and the services provided.

The organization would then need to identify which responsibilities could be performed locally and which would require specialized outside assistance.

Any alternative should be evaluated against the full cost of administration, maintenance coordination, accounting, and federal program compliance.

The board would also need to consider whether the Longhouse's financial resources could support a transition.

A contingency plan would not represent criticism of Ad-West.

It would recognize that the long-term future of a nonprofit housing organization should not depend entirely upon the continued availability of one service provider.

The Longhouse's founders created a permanent housing resource.

Protecting that resource requires preparation for changes that may occur long after the original organizers and managers have retired.

The Longhouse in October 2026

As the Longhouse enters the final months of 2026, its history presents both an accomplishment and an unresolved challenge.

The accomplishment is visible on Prune Alley.

Sixteen apartments continue to provide housing more than four decades after the community first organized to create them.

The building has benefited from years of personal involvement, nonprofit oversight, professional management, and more recent improvements.

Warren Westad's long association with the property helped sustain a close relationship with residents.

Jeremy King and Ad-West have contributed to the modernization and continued usefulness of the building.

The governing board remains responsible for the organization's future.

The unresolved challenge concerns how the Longhouse will continue meeting those responsibilities as its building ages and the cost of professional services changes.

The available financial records do not establish an immediate crisis.

Nor is there verified evidence that Ad-West intends to withdraw.

But the Longhouse's modest financial scale, significant reported liabilities, and dependence upon specialized management make long-term planning essential.

The board's present activities, the condition of the property's reserves, and the existence of any management contingency plan remain matters for further investigation.

Those questions deserve attention precisely because the Longhouse has succeeded for so long.

A building that has served its community for more than forty years should not have its future determined by an avoidable administrative or financial emergency.

The original organizers understood that affordable housing required cooperation.

They secured land, organized a nonprofit, obtained financing, and created a residential building that the private market had not provided.

Future leaders may need to demonstrate a similar willingness to find practical solutions.

Those solutions may involve continued professional management, new partnerships, different administrative arrangements, or additional financial support.

The appropriate course will depend upon facts that must be established by the people responsible for the property.

What remains unchanged is the value of the housing itself.

The Longhouse is not merely an old building that has survived in the center of Eastsound.

It is sixteen homes whose continued availability matters to the people living there and to the island community.

The question facing the Longhouse in 2026 is whether its governing and financial arrangements can remain as durable as the building its founders created.

The answer will shape the next chapter of its history.

Epilogue: The Next Forty Years

An Invitation to Secure the Future of the Orcas Longhouse

When I began researching the history of the Orcas Longhouse, my intention was to tell the story of how a small group of islanders recognized a need and decided to do something about it.

In August 1978, twenty-six older island residents gathered to discuss the possibility of creating affordable housing that would allow them to remain independent and continue living in their community.

What followed was an extraordinary example of local determination.

People organized, committees formed, land was donated, financing was pursued, and a building eventually rose on Prune Alley.

The result was sixteen apartments.

Sixteen apartments may not seem like a particularly impressive achievement today, especially when compared with some of the larger affordable-housing developments that have followed. But those sixteen apartments represented an enormous accomplishment for a small island community.

More than forty years later, they still do.

As I worked through the Longhouse's history, however, I found myself becoming increasingly concerned with its future.

The original organizers faced the challenge of creating affordable housing where none existed. Today, we face the challenge of preserving what they built.

And I believe that challenge deserves the same seriousness, creativity, and community involvement that brought the Longhouse into existence.

A Building Worth Saving

I have spent much of my working life maintaining buildings, managing facilities, and dealing with the practical problems that arise as properties grow older.

One thing I have learned is that buildings seldom fail all at once.

They deteriorate a little at a time.

A roof begins to leak. A plumbing system develops problems. Electrical equipment becomes obsolete. Doors and windows wear out. Repairs that were once relatively inexpensive become increasingly difficult as replacement parts disappear and labor costs rise.

Eventually, a property can reach a point where the accumulated cost of deferred maintenance becomes overwhelming.

The Longhouse is now more than forty years old.

That does not mean it is in poor condition. In fact, a considerable amount of work has been done to improve it.

Under the management of Ad-West, Jeremy King has helped secure funding and coordinate improvements that have made the apartments more comfortable, functional, and secure. All sixteen apartments have received varying degrees of remodeling as they became vacant. Fencing has been rebuilt, lighting improved, and hardware upgraded.

These are important accomplishments.

But a building does not stop aging because it has been well maintained.

Its continued usefulness requires planning, investment, and an understanding of what will need attention five, ten, and twenty years from now.

And that is where I believe the Longhouse needs to begin looking ahead.

The Management Question

One of my greatest concerns involves the future of professional property management.

Ad-West currently provides management services for the Longhouse. Its experience with affordable housing and the administrative requirements of federally assisted properties is valuable.

But I wonder how sustainable that arrangement will be over the long term.

The Longhouse has only sixteen apartments.

It must support the costs of administration, regulatory compliance, accounting, maintenance coordination, insurance, utilities, and building repairs from a relatively small financial base.

A larger apartment complex can distribute many of these expenses among dozens or hundreds of units.

The Longhouse cannot.

What happens if Ad-West eventually determines that managing such a small property is no longer economically practical?

What happens if the cost of professional management increases beyond what the Longhouse can reasonably afford?

I want to emphasize that I am not aware of any decision by Ad-West to discontinue its services.

My concern is not about an announced departure. It is about the absence of a clearly established alternative that I have been able to identify.

Perhaps the Longhouse board already has a contingency plan. If so, I would be pleased to learn about it.

But if no such plan exists, I believe developing one should be a priority.

It would be unfortunate if a housing development that has survived for more than forty years found itself facing an avoidable crisis because its management arrangements changed unexpectedly.

The People Who Carried the Longhouse Forward

Throughout this history, I have been struck by the importance of individuals who took a personal interest in the property.

I think particularly of Warren Westad.

I worked for Warren approximately twenty years ago and remember how deeply he cared about the Longhouse.

He knew the residents personally, and they knew him.

He treated the property as though members of his own family lived there.

Warren has since retired from Ad-West and is no longer actively involved with the Longhouse. His departure marked the end of a long period of personal involvement with the property.

More recently, Jeremy King has contributed substantially to its improvement and continued operation.

The Longhouse has benefited from people who understood that affordable housing involves more than collecting rent and responding to maintenance requests.

It involves protecting people's homes.

But no institution should depend indefinitely upon the availability of particular individuals.

People retire. Organizations change. Contracts end. Priorities shift.

The Longhouse needs a structure capable of continuing its work through those inevitable changes.

That responsibility ultimately rests with its governing board.

I am unaware of any Longhouse board meetings held at the property during the past three years. I assume meetings may have taken place remotely or elsewhere, although I have not verified that.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the board's present activities and long-term planning with its president, Derek Mann.

My interest is not in criticizing the board.

It is in understanding what plans exist and whether the broader community might be able to help.

My Proposal: A Longhouse Steering Committee

I believe the time has come to consider forming a Longhouse Steering Committee.

I envision an advisory group working cooperatively with the Longhouse board to examine the property's circumstances and develop recommendations for its long-term future.

This would not be a replacement for the board of directors.

It would not assume management of the property.

And it would not begin with a predetermined conclusion about ownership, management, or organizational structure.

Instead, it would bring together people with relevant knowledge, experience, and community connections.

The committee's first task would be to establish a clear picture of the Longhouse's present circumstances.

What is the actual financial position of the organization?

How much money is available in operating and replacement reserves?

What are its remaining debt obligations?

What does professional management cost?

What major building repairs and improvements should be anticipated?

What financial assistance might be available?

And what alternatives exist if the current management arrangement becomes unsustainable?

These are practical questions.

They require information, expertise, and careful consideration.

I believe Orcas Island has people who could help answer them.

The People I Would Like to Bring Together if I Were Asked for My Opinion

If such a committee were established, there are several people I would particularly like to see invited.

Steve and Trish Trainer would be among the first.

The Trainers' donation of the land on which the Longhouse was built was fundamental to the original project's success.

Without that contribution, the history of the Longhouse might have been very different.

Their participation would create a direct connection between the community effort that established the property and a new effort to preserve it.

I would also like to invite **Chris and Vicki Brems**.

Their experience with community involvement, fundraising, and local relationships could be especially valuable if preserving the Longhouse eventually requires additional financial support.

One of the lessons of the original development is that community resources can accomplish things that appear impossible when viewed strictly through an operating budget.

Lisa Byers, executive director of OPAL Community Land Trust, would bring extensive experience in affordable housing, nonprofit administration, financing, and long-term property stewardship.

OPAL has become one of Orcas Island's most important housing organizations.

Its experience could help the committee evaluate possible partnerships, administrative arrangements, and sources of assistance.

I would also like to invite **Ryan Page**, whose work in affordable housing at the county level could provide insight into available programs, regulatory requirements, and potential funding opportunities.

Jamie Mitchell could contribute a perspective on the needs of older residents and the county-level services available to support them.

The Longhouse was created specifically to provide suitable housing for older islanders and eligible people with disabilities. Those needs should remain central to any discussion of its future.

Justin Paulsen, a contractor and county commissioner, could offer practical knowledge of construction, property maintenance, local government, and the challenges associated with improving aging buildings on Orcas Island.

I would certainly want **Jeremy King** involved.

His knowledge of the Longhouse, its management requirements, previous improvements, and available funding mechanisms would be particularly useful.

He has firsthand experience with the practical difficulties of maintaining affordable rental housing on the island.

I would also hope that **Derek Mann**, as president of the Longhouse board, would participate or designate another board member to represent the organization.

The committee would be most effective if it worked with the board from the beginning.

And I would very much like to see **representation from the residents themselves**.

The people living in the Longhouse know things about the property that may never appear in a financial statement or maintenance report.

They understand how the building functions in everyday life.

Their perspectives on safety, accessibility, comfort, and maintenance should be part of any discussion about its future.

These are people I would like to invite, not individuals who have agreed to participate. The committee remains a proposal.

I would also welcome someone with specific expertise in USDA Rural Development housing requirements and affordable-housing finance.

The Longhouse's federal program obligations will influence which management and organizational alternatives are legally and financially possible.

The committee should be small enough to accomplish meaningful work but broad enough to bring different perspectives to the discussion.

What I Would Like the Committee to Accomplish

I would not want a steering committee that simply held occasional meetings and discussed the same problems indefinitely.

I would like to see it produce something useful.

My hope would be for a written long-term preservation plan for the Longhouse.

That plan should begin with a realistic assessment of the building's physical condition and anticipated maintenance requirements.

It should identify major capital improvements likely to be necessary during the next ten to twenty years.

It should also include a review of the organization's finances, including available reserves, operating expenses, debt obligations, and potential sources of additional funding.

Perhaps most importantly, it should address management continuity.

If Ad-West remains willing and able to provide services at an affordable cost, continuing that relationship may be the best option.

If circumstances change, the Longhouse should already understand its alternatives.

Those might include another professional management company, a different division of administrative responsibilities, cooperation with OPAL or another nonprofit, or some form of independent management supported by specialized outside services.

I do not know which approach would be most practical.

That is precisely why I believe a committee would be useful.

Its purpose would be to examine the evidence and develop recommendations rather than begin with a preferred outcome.

I would hope the committee could complete its initial assessment and present recommendations to the Longhouse board within a reasonable period, perhaps six to twelve months.

The result should be a practical document that can guide decisions, support funding applications, and help future board members understand the property's long-term needs.

The Value of Community Involvement

One of the things that makes the Longhouse's history remarkable is how much was accomplished by people who simply decided that something needed to be done.

The original organizers did not have a large housing department or a professional development corporation.

They had a problem, a community, and the determination to find a solution.

They brought together people with different abilities.

Some understood financing.

Some understood construction.

Some had experience with nonprofit organizations.

Others had community connections or the ability to raise money.

Together, they accomplished something none of them could have done alone.

I believe that approach remains valuable.

Orcas Island has an extraordinary collection of people with experience in construction, engineering, finance, nonprofit administration, property management, fundraising, and community service.

Some have lived here for decades.

Others have arrived more recently and brought valuable professional experience with them.

I would like to see a portion of that knowledge directed toward preserving the Longhouse.

Not because the property is necessarily in crisis.

But because the time to preserve an institution is before it reaches one.

The Residents Must Come First

It is easy to become absorbed in the financial and administrative details of affordable housing.

Budgets, contracts, regulations, reserves, and capital improvements are all necessary subjects.

But they are not the reason the Longhouse exists.

The building exists because people need homes.

For the residents, the Longhouse is not an organizational problem to be solved.

It is where they live.

It is where they prepare meals, visit neighbors, read, watch television, entertain friends, and carry on the ordinary activities of life.

A decision about property management may appear to be an administrative matter, but it can affect the people who depend upon reliable maintenance, predictable communication, and stable housing costs.

A major renovation may improve the building, but it can also temporarily disrupt someone's home.

A financial decision may strengthen the organization, but its effect upon residents must always be considered.

I would hope that any steering committee would approach its work with that understanding.

The objective should not simply be to preserve a building or a nonprofit corporation.

It should be to preserve the homes that the building provides.

A Responsibility to the Founders

As I researched the Longhouse, I found myself thinking about the people who attended those first meetings in 1978.

They were looking ahead.

They were thinking about what older islanders would need in the coming years.

They recognized a problem and began working toward a solution that would benefit people they might never meet.

Many of the residents who eventually lived in the Longhouse had no personal connection to the original organizers.

That did not matter.

The founders were creating something intended to outlast their own involvement.

And it has.

More than forty years later, their work continues to benefit the community.

I believe we owe them more than appreciation for what they accomplished.

We owe them a serious effort to ensure that their work continues.

The people who donated land, raised money, served on committees, managed the property, and maintained the building made an investment in the future of Orcas Island.

That investment deserves protection.

The Next Forty Years

I do not know exactly what the Longhouse will look like forty years from now.

Perhaps the building will have undergone extensive renovations.

Perhaps new technology will make it more efficient and less expensive to operate.

Perhaps its management structure will be different.

Perhaps it will become part of a broader partnership among local housing organizations.

Or perhaps it will continue operating much as it does today, with gradual improvements and careful financial planning.

I am less concerned about the particular organizational arrangement than I am about the outcome.

I want the Longhouse to remain affordable.

I want it to remain safe and comfortable.

I want its residents to be treated with dignity and consideration.

And I want the people responsible for it to have the resources and plans necessary to keep it operating for another generation.

Those goals are achievable, but they will not accomplish themselves.

The original organizers understood that.

They did not wait for someone else to create the housing their community needed.

They brought people together and began working.

I believe it is time to consider doing that again.

Not to rebuild the Longhouse.

Not to replace the people currently responsible for it.

But to make certain that the work begun in 1978 continues well into the future.

The original community effort gave Orcas Island sixteen homes.

Those homes have now served the island for more than four decades.

I would like to see us make certain they are still here forty years from now.

And perhaps the most fitting way to honor the people who created the Longhouse would be to follow their example.

Gather a few people around a table.

Ask the difficult questions.

Find the resources.

Develop a plan.

And get to work.

Thomas Tillman

Orcas Island, Washington

October 2026