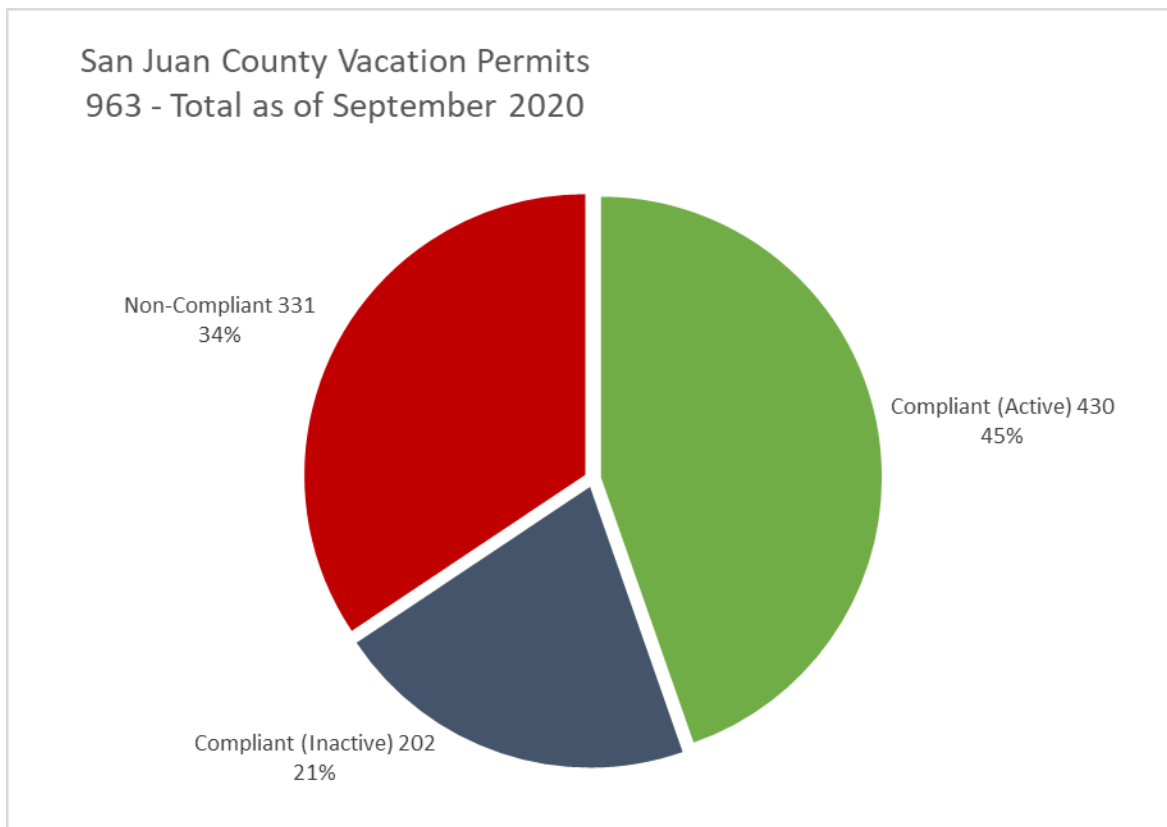


Vacation Rentals, Tourism & COVID-19 in San Juan County

In direct response to extensive public conversations about vacation rentals and tourism in San Juan County, there has been a great deal of research, planning and enforcement carried out by our local government over the past few years. Then, COVID-19 entered our lives and added an entirely new layer to each and every consideration. There have been many questions around how many vacation rental permits there are, which are in compliance, if they are expected to follow the same COVID protocols, how/if it's all being enforced, and what the County will do to manage the situation going forward. I want to take some time to address these concerns, since I know they are important as we all consider the different ways we can help to keep our islands safe and our community thriving.



Vacation Rental Non-Compliance and Enforcement

Of the 963 total Vacation Rental Permits in San Juan County, 331 permits are flagged as non-compliant per SJC code. All of these are currently in the Code Enforcement Process, which is managed by a dedicated Code Enforcement Officer whose primary focus is monitoring existing permit holders and pursuing enforcement on unpermitted rentals.

- It's anticipated that most of the non-compliant permits currently under review will fail to prove compliance by the required date (Dec 2020), which will result in their permits being revoked. This would bring the total of active permits in the county down to approximately 450.
- San Juan County has already shut down 41 unpermitted vacation rentals and levied over \$100,000 in fines. The County is committed to strict enforcement of adopted codes; ongoing monitoring of the broader impact of vacation rentals on our community; and regular updates of regulations and code to ensure vacation rentals provide a net benefit going forward.
- The fine for operating a vacation rental without a permit is \$2,300. The County relies heavily on the public to report such violations, as they are much less visible to our enforcement bodies. If you are aware of someone operating a rental without a permit, please contact the Planning Department at 360 378 2354.

- Another revision of the Vacation Rental Code is about to be presented to the Planning Commission. It will include even stronger regulations and require Vacation Rental Permit holders to contribute to our community through annual fees.

Responding swiftly and strongly to COVID-19

When COVID-19 landed in the PNW earlier this year, this local conversation around vacation rentals and their impact on our community gained a whole new meaning. With a third of our population aged 65 and older, the County Council was well aware that our county - with one of the most vulnerable populations in the region - required fast, dramatic action to ensure everyone's safety.

This is why the County Council, who are the operators of the Public Health Department and members of the SJC Board of Health, in consultation with the Public Health Officer - enacted some of the most rigid and, ultimately, effective recommendations and regulations seen on the entire West Coast:

- In March, we were the first - and, I believe, the only - county to close all transient lodging.
- We authorized \$40,000 out of the Council budget to run advertising, asking that people NOT visit our community. This campaign was ultimately so successful that it gained attention from the Governor himself, who noted its effectiveness during a phone meeting soon thereafter.
- Also - and I believe most importantly - we were also **the first county on the West Coast** to pass a strict mask order. I believe this decision alone played a huge role in keeping our community transmission rate to zero since the very beginning.

Throughout the entire process, we monitored the situation closely and committed ourselves to following the most current and scientific data. Ultimately, through the cooperation of our residents, small businesses, and even our visitors (for the most part), we are widely considered to be not only one of the safest counties in the State but also in the entire Country!! I can't tell you how proud I am of everyone involved - from our local government and our first responders to both our residents and visitors alike. This really does say a lot about our community. We take care of each other!

Vacation Rentals and Tourism in 2020 and beyond

After effectively curbing the initial COVID spread in our region, the County Council cautiously moved the county to Phase 2. When we did, vacation rental properties were technically allowed to operate at 50% of capacity. Given the recommended downtime before cleaning and time between guests, however, most rentals were operating below this capacity. Some (such as single-day rentals) were running at a capacity of 25% or lower. It should be said that, at the request of the County, many of our residents who rely upon such income shouldered a huge financial burden to help keep our community safe and healthy. My appreciation for this cooperation is hard to put into words, but I can assure you it is felt by all of us at the County who worked together to make these difficult decisions.

There were certainly some who didn't comply. In weekly meetings with our Sheriff's Department, I discussed the many, many calls made to report such violations. Even with the limited law enforcement resources in the county, I was assured that each and every call was investigated. These follow-ups revealed a large majority of law-abiding citizens and a few who definitely were at fault. Those in noncompliance are being held to task at the County's request.

The primary takeaway from these calls, however - and something observed throughout the islands since this spring - is a considerable downturn in truly transient, tourist activity and a large increase in the long-term occupancy of vacation homes by their owners and their families. This is an interesting - and, I think, promising - trend when considering the challenge of how we can find a more balanced relationship with tourism going forward.

Fascinatingly, without the construction of new homes, our year-round population is in the process of a small surge of remote workers. As vacation homes are occupied or sold, these low-impact residents - many with children now supporting our schools - are quietly flattening the curve of our empirically summer-heavy population load. Should this trend continue (which most believe it will), it could allow small businesses to stay open longer, other small industries (small manufacturing, agriculture) to find a footing in our economy and, ultimately, for us to be less dependent on tourism in general.

I am proud of our community of islanders. Not because of what we've done to address, devise, enact and enforce regulations with a challenging issue like vacation rentals - but because we did it together. Not because we became leaders and innovators in our fight against COVID - but because we did it together. I'm proud of our residents because we all care so much about where we live that we can disagree, have difficult conversations and make difficult decisions while continuing to evolve together as a community. Thank you for all of your input, persistence, ideas, and cooperation to get through these challenging times. I wouldn't want to do it with or for anyone else. Island Strong!