

## **OUR VIEW | String of Pearls Too Precious to Lose by Delay**

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It's understandable these days to make contingency plans of all types, and be prepared for whatever economic waves will come in the near future.

That's why Olympic Property Group, owners of 8,000 wooded acres in North Kitsap, can't be blamed for dividing some of its holdings into 20-acre parcels that could be sold for development. A publicly held company must respect its shareholders, and prudently plan for the future.

But the sale of land critical to a preservation and trails plan, at least at this point, is not the company's intent. President Jon Rose has said the commitment to creating a 'String of Pearls' trail system and open space area remains intact. The division of land is to open up options for the company — which we hope, like Rose, that OPG does not feel forced to use. If piecemeal sales are allowed to begin, hope for a coordinated effort to preserve wildlife habitats and recreational connections become much more difficult, and a potentially significant economic development near Port Gamble becomes impossible.

The project would be done, in part, by using a zoning program approved by county commissioners just over a year ago. The "rural wooded incentive program" would allow for a clustered development near Port Gamble, at a higher density than currently allowed, in exchange for keeping larger swaths of land, estimated as 75 percent of the 8,000 acres, as open space. That open space would preserve habitats and open up recreational areas with trails that could connect through North Kitsap.

There currently is a moratorium on using the year-old rural wooded incentive, as county planners evaluate it and research the pros and cons further. A county planner has said public meetings could occur this spring on the incentive program — essentially the OPG open space proposal — if county commissioners agree to move forward.

As we've stated in this forum previously, the trails plan would have a profound impact on the region. The division of lots by OPG shouldn't be taken as a threat, but should serve as a reminder to county commissioners of the importance of moving ahead with the project's vetting. After a year of moratorium in the rear-view mirror, the time to move forward should come sooner rather than later.

Allow the public process to proceed, and allow county planners and North Kitsap residents or property owners to weigh the benefits.

To tempt today's evolving economic realities any longer than necessary puts a potentially historic partnership in jeopardy.



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