

Property Owners Applaud Action on Open Space Provisions

By Christopher Dunagan
Wednesday, February 13, 2008

Port Orchard

Large forestland owners in Kitsap County say they are encouraged by a decision Wednesday on a "rural wooded incentive program" that affects 50,000 acres of rural wooded lands.

Representatives of the four largest property owners say they are thankful that the county commissioners adjusted their thinking on a new ordinance in light of testimony during a hearing Monday. The two newest commissioners seemed to gain insight into the importance of the county's timber industry, they said.

Commissioners Josh Brown and Steve Bauer Wednesday approved the proposed incentive program, which allows four times as many homes on property zoned "rural wooded" — provided that the houses are clustered together and that 75 percent of the total property is kept in open space.

Gone from the final version of the ordinance is a provision that would have taken the open space out of private hands and given it to a public entity. The new version allows the owner to manage the land for timber.

The commissioners also imposed a moratorium on the use of the new program until details can be worked out. Specifically, they called for more discussion about:

- The future use of the open space;
- The minimum and maximum size of open space parcels;
- The connections among open space areas and trails;
- Additional protections for designated "critical areas;"
- Possible requirements for "low-impact" stormwater management;
- Criteria that could allow open space to be developed at some future date.

Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group, said the commissioners' decision will keep his plans to create interconnected open spaces and an extensive trail system in North Kitsap "on track". The plan, called a "string of pearls," would involve much of the company's 8,000 acres in North Kitsap.

The plan seems to have broad public support.

Rose noted that Brown and Bauer are just getting up to speed on the rural wooded issues, which have been discussed by other commissioners over the past 15 years.

"It is easy to be cynical about the public process, and you tend to think that decisions have already been made," Rose said. "But this is very restorative to me ... to think that they really listened."

Rod Reid, president of Alpine Evergreen, called the commissioners' actions "a positive turn for the future." While his "family business" is focused on long-term forestry, he said wildlife corridors and trails can be provided through reasonable management of large blocks of land.

David Overton, whose family owns extensive holdings in South Kitsap, said the commissioners need to consider that community needs and the land itself varies from place to place.

"I thought the hearing the other night was one of the more composed and civil hearings we have had," Overton said. "It sounded like there was middle ground. It was refreshing to see Steve Bauer listening thoughtfully."

Overton said some sensitive lands probably should come under long-term protection, perhaps using a permanent conservation easement, but other lands may be destined for other uses.

While the "string of pearls" concept may be appropriate for North Kitsap, he said, it probably would not work in South Kitsap.

"It is important to understand that the real estate economics for the north county is different from the south county," Overton said. "I think there is an opportunity for a successful program if we are allowed to go forward and discuss rural lands in a reasonable way."

Holly Manke White of Manke Lumber Company said the county is making progress, but she would like the company's shoreline property along Hood Canal be part of the discussion. The company goal is to protect the shorelines, which are highly valued for their natural functions.

Unfortunately, she said, the rural wooded incentive program does not provide shoreline owners with enough financial benefit to preclude development in the long run. White said

she would like further discussions about incentives that could lead to protections for some of Hood Canal's most pristine areas.

Commissioner Brown said such discussions may be possible in the coming weeks.

Tom Donnelly of Kitsap Citizens for Rural Preservation said he finds it hard to support the rural wooded incentive program as it stands. The number of houses that could be created doesn't fit with the goals of rural protection.

The program would allow an average four houses on every 20 acres, instead of just one under current zoning.

Donnelly said he would like to see a program that would help shift "development rights" from rural to urban areas. For example, when an urban growth area is expanded to allow higher density, owners benefiting from that density should be required to purchase development rights from rural land owners.

Under that idea, the owner of rural wooded lands could build an average of two houses on every 20 acres and sell the rights to develop two houses to urban owners.

The timing of further discussions and decisions on rural lands will depend on the workload of county planners, Brown said.

For a discussion about this and other environmental issues, check out the blog [Watching Our Water Ways](#) at kitsapsun.com.



© 2007 Kitsap Sun