

Rural Open Space Incentive Program Still in Play

By Christopher Dunagan
Tuesday, February 12, 2008

PORT ORCHARD

The size and shape of open space areas created under a "rural wooded incentive program" need to be resolved before putting the program into action, Kitsap County officials say.

That's why a moratorium should be imposed on the use of the new zoning provisions, said County Commissioner Josh Brown. The moratorium would allow planners time to work out important details.

Wednesday morning, Brown and Commissioner Steve Bauer are expected to approve an ordinance that addresses shortcomings identified in previous versions of the ordinance putting the incentive program into place. Commissioner Jan Angel is out of town, but she indicated Monday night that she would prefer to repeal the ordinance and start over.

But because of the shortcomings, the commissioners are expected to put a moratorium on the program so they can work out details they think are important. The board faced a Feb. 11 deadline to pass the ordinance by the Central Puget Sound Growth Management Hearings Board.

In a ruling last year, the hearings board endorsed the concept of the incentive program, which involves clustering houses together while protecting significant open space.

The hearings board questioned a provision that would allow some of the open space to be developed after a 40-year waiting period. The open space should be off-limits to development to meet goals of the state's Growth Management Act, the board said.

Brown and Bauer appear ready to approve the ordinance without the 40-year clause, but each have concerns about other details. Neither commissioner was in office when the program was approved as part of a comprehensive plan revision in 2006.

As it stands, the ordinance would allow an average density of one house per five acres (instead of one per 20 acres), provided that 75 percent of the property is maintained in open space.

Both commissioners agreed to remove a provision that would place the open space into public ownership.

Bauer said his eyes were opened by Monday night's public testimony about the ordinance.

"I think this has been one of the most instructive evenings I've heard," Bauer said. "I appreciate the comments from the large property owners."

Several of Kitsap County's forest owners testified in previous hearings that the rural wooded program did not appear beneficial to them. Bauer was under the impression that anyone using the program would not be interested in maintaining forestry uses. Most of the large land owners now say they would like to see a program that keeps some land in forestry.

Bauer said it troubles him that the program, as written, could lead to "hopscotch" open space parcels with no connection to each other.

The largest land owner, Olympic Property Group, has proposed a plan that includes connected open space and an extensive trail network throughout North Kitsap. Bauer said he likes the plan and sees the need for an incentive program.

Brown agreed, saying the ordinance specifies a maximum development size of 500 acres, which could constrain a plan like that of Olympic Property Group, which owns 8,000 acres in North Kitsap.

On the other hand, Brown said, the ordinance contains no minimum size, so someone with 20 acres could develop four houses instead of one, while leaving just 15 acres in open space. Public ownership of such tracts would only compound the problem, because county staffing levels are inadequate to manage the land.

Brown said a moratorium would provide an opportunity to discuss potential development standards and even forest practices. These rural developments might be candidates for stormwater controls known as low-impact development, he said, and perhaps the open space areas should be precluded from widespread clearcutting.

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



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