

# Creating North Kitsap Version of Central Park Hinges on Money

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A proposal from the county's largest landowner has North Kitsap mountain bikers, hikers and horseback riders hopeful about protecting thousands of acres of brush, trails and trees.

But the project's future likely hinges on that other type of greenery: money.

Olympic Property Group floated a tantalizing proposal Wednesday to 500 packed in the Kingston Junior High School gym: a permanent, protected network of recreational trails that could conceivably stretch from Hood Canal to Puget Sound.

"It's something on the order of Central Park in its impact, vision and longevity," Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group, said at the meeting.

Explaining how his family had to go to Seattle for a decent bike ride, Rose asked the crowd, "Can we not do better?"

The audience roared back its approval with cheers and applause.

The plan that got the audience so excited involves clustering homes and exceeding normal density limits to leave much of the rest of the area for trails and wildlife.

The company's alternative, Rose said, is selling its land wholesale or in 20-acre lots, which would cause existing trails to fragment and disappear.

The company now owns about 8,000 acres of land around Port Gamble, Hansville and Kingston that anyone can use for recreation.

"It's so obviously the right choice," Suquamish resident Jay Robertson said of the trails option. He regularly hikes and bikes on the existing trails.

Facing Olympic Property Group and the community are questions about how different groups might use the trails and the environmental impact of logging on those lands. But the biggest obstacle is cost.

Rose told the audience that business considerations are key for making the project work for the company and the shareholders of Pope Resources, which owns Olympic Property Group.

Selling lots would be quick and easy, Rose said. "That's the story we have to beat."

Cost should be the top concern for any trails project, said Jay Lucas, executive director for the Methow Valley Sports Trails Association, which maintains about 125 miles of trails just east of Lake Chelan.

"It's 'How do you pay?'" Lucas said.

Tree and brush removal, surfacing, snow clearing and signs cost the Methow association a lot of money, Lucas said.

The group sells cross-country skiing passes to recoup most of it. At the meeting, Rose pointed out Methow Valley as a good example of a private-public collaboration to build and maintain a large trail network.

Investing in the trails has paid off for the valley. On the best days, tens of thousands of skiers visit the area, Lucas said. Earlier this year, The New York Times hailed the area as a "cross-country ski heaven."

Because it's so early on, Olympic Property Group hasn't figured out costs or funding for their proposal, Rose said.

The cost of even doing that research was one reason for Wednesday's meeting. It showed Rose he has plenty of public support to keep investigating the project.

"We got more than we dreamed for," he said Thursday.

The county's so-called Rural Wooded Incentive Program, approved last November, makes Rose's proposal financially conceivable.

The program allows developers to increase density from one home per 20 acres up to an average of four clustered homes, saving development costs. In return, 75 percent of the land can be kept as permanent open space, which is seen to help wildlife.

Rose championed the program last year in testimony to the county commissioners. Several other landowners said the program wouldn't profit them, at least in its current form.

With the program and public support in place, Rose said the company will study possible layouts and trails first, looking at the needs of hikers, bikers and horse riders.

It'll then determine a cost and research funding options. Possibilities include a tax district, user fees and grants, he said. The company still wants to do logging on the land, Rose said.

He and others noted the failure of the recent library levy. But when asked, most of the people at Wednesday's meeting said they would be happy to pay for trails, whatever the method.

"Absolutely," said Chuck Holland, who lives on Gamble Bay and hikes on the trails at least once a week.

Poulsbo resident Devin Trueman called the trails south of Port Gamble "phenomenal" and rides his mountain bike on them two or three times a week.

He said he'd put his money where his mouth is. "As a community, if we can't figure out a way to preserve this land, then what are we doing here?"