

OPINION

EDITORIAL

NK Trail System Is a Development Worth Pursuing

On a weekend in Kitsap County — with its abundant woodlands, waterways and sweeping views — many outdoorsy residents will pack a lunch and water bottle, grab hiking boots or a trail bike and then head out for a weekend day hike or bike ride — somewhere else.

“Can we not do better?” Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group, asked rhetorically last week in the Kingston Junior High gym.

It’s his goal to do so — and likewise for the crowd of 500, judging by the cheers and applause with which they greeted Rose’s comments.

Olympic Property Group now owns about 8,000 mostly wooded acres around Port Gamble, Hansville and Kingston. Right now, it’s open for public recreational use, and crisscrossed by trails used by hikers, bikers and horseback riders.

The question is, what will they do with it next?

Rose said that by far the easiest plan would be to sell the land wholesale or in 20-acre lots, with one home per lot in keeping with Kitsap County’s land-use rules for rural zoning.

But there’s a better option — one with positive, long-term impacts on outdoor recreation for Kitsap residents. By using the county’s Rural Wooded Incentive Program, Olympic Property Group could increase density from one home per 20 acres to an average of up to four homes per 20 acres.

Under that alternative, 75 percent of the land would be left as dedicated open space, benefiting wildlife and, of course, thousands of visitors who’d use its trails for nonmotorized outdoor recreation.

But that’s only if — and it’s a critical “if” — the plan somehow pencils out financially for OPG and the shareholders of its parent corporation, Pope Resources.

How could that happen? Some logging on the land would generate revenues, said Rose. Grants are another possibility and, if the voters are supportive, another option might be a public tax district.

User fees also might be used. That’s a funding source successfully used by the Methow Valley Sports Trails Association in Eastern Washington. Speaking at last week’s meeting, association director Jay Lucas said user fees cover most of costs of maintaining the group’s 125 miles of hiking and cross-country trails.

Lucas said it’s a public-private endeavor that recently was described as a “cross-country ski heaven” by the New York Times. On a good day in winter, tens of thousands of visitors hit the trails.

There wouldn’t be any cross-country skiing here because of our mild winters. But it’s a sure bet that — particularly if gasoline prices remain high — numerous hikers and bikers would be willing to pay a modest user fee for a day’s worth of outdoor recreation on their doorstep.

If it comes to fruition, a North Kitsap trail system which might cross the Kitsap Peninsula from Puget Sound to Hood Canal. It also might eventually serve as a link in the Mosquito Fleet Trail network that’s planned to run throughout Kitsap County.

We applaud Rose and Olympic Property Group for introducing the trails proposal. At this point it’s little more than a concept — an ideal — with countless details to be explored and researched to determine if it can become a reality.

We hope it can. If there’s community will for it, there can be a way.

It not, the existing trails and recreational lands would become housing lots, hikers and bikers will keep going to King County or the Olympic Peninsula for decent trails — and a golden opportunity would be lost forever.



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