



OPG preparing to strap on hiking boots

By Annie Tietje

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KINGSTON — Olympic Property Group (OPG) put together a think tank of sorts last Thursday afternoon, encompassing experts of all kinds to get to work on an all-expansive trail vision, the String of Pearls, OPG presented last summer.

The system, which would make use of the Rural Wooded pilot program launching in Kitsap County, would essentially have miles of trails spread out over the 8,000 acres the company owns in North Kitsap. Not to be left out, roughly 65 representatives from all of the North Kitsap communities — including Bainbridge Island — and many individuals from outdoor groups attended to help with the next phase of the project. Each community has been given the nickname Pearl and OPG is hoping to thread the neighborhood together in a proverbial sparkling necklace for Puget Sound.

“When you walk in the woods with (local tree expert Jim Trainer) the whole trail comes alive,” said OPG President Jon Rose during the introductions. “It has been a decade since we used the land for tree farming, and it’s time for us to think about transitioning out of ownership over time. We thought, ‘How could we be innovative in creating a business plan there?’ One thing we thought we could do to make the community more valuable is add trails.”

In early 2007, OPG began to play with the Rural Wooded program, where essentially an organization can say it will dedicate 75 percent of its property to open space for a set amount of time, and the other 25 percent can be used for cluster housing. In June 2007, when Rose and his team first presented the idea to a public group of more than 500 people, he said OPG would sign the 75 percent over indefinitely. The announcement and idea were met with cheers.

Thursday’s meeting followed up with community leaders in the different areas involved in this open-space effort. Rose and his team broke the project into different facets attendees could sign up to help with, such as technical assistance or financial planning. Everyone agreed a plan such as this, in its far-reaching scope, needs both private and public support, from volunteers to maintenance. This gathering laid the groundwork for that further in the String of Pearls’ future.

“I think at this time you need to put a finer point on fundraising,” said Kingston resident Walt Elliott, who is also a member of the Kingston Citizens Advisory Council parks, trails and open space sub-committee. “I think the earlier on collaborating and getting a park district together, the better. I don’t think we can wait too long on that. If we move fairly quickly we can get a ballot measure next year and get the funding the year after that.”

John Willett, who was instrumental in a similar trail network in Methow Valley, said the Thursday meeting was a “call to arms,” and community leaders should move quickly to drum up support and enlist residents to help with maintenance once the trails have been blazed. OPG reported more than 1,500 people signed up to help with the trails.

Attendees, coming away from the meeting with new energy and blank maps of each of their Pearls to help in the planning process, agreed to meet during the next quarter and return with more ideas, assistance and organization.