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Kitsap Sun

EDITORIAL: County Should Enable Trails Plan

At a hearing Monday evening, Kitsap County commissioners will be facing choices that can profoundly affect recreational opportunities for Kitsap residents, and the ecology of thousands of acres of forestland.

Olympic Property Group owns about 8,000 mostly wooded acres in North Kitsap. It's largely open for public recreational use, with trails used by hikers, bikers and horseback riders. Historically it's been used for forestry, but because property values have outpaced timber prices, the company must make use of its more lucrative development potential.

Company president Jon Rose said the easiest plan would be to sell the land wholesale, or in 20-acre parcels with one home per lot. But he's proposing a better option. By using the county's Rural Wooded Incentive Program, Olympic Property Group could increase development density on some of the land in exchange for leaving most of it undeveloped.

Specifically, 75 percent of the land would remain open space, benefiting wildlife and thousands of visitors who'd use its trails. On the remaining 25 percent, higher-density development would be allowed, averaging one home per five acres.

However, portions of Kitsap's Rural Wooded Incentive Program were rejected last month by the Central Puget Sound Growth Management Hearings Board. The board endorsed the program's concept, but balked at a stipulation allowing development on some of the open space after 40 years.

In response, the county now is proposing that the land be left undeveloped in perpetuity — but also that forestry be prohibited on it, and the land be given over to public ownership.

Those last two restrictions are potential deal-killers for the trail system plan. And they're unnecessary.

Some property owners, including Olympic Property Group, might well agree to leave the land undeveloped permanently. But it's unreasonable to demand they also turn their property over to public ownership which, incidentally, could remove it from the tax rolls with a subsequent loss of revenues for the county.

Likewise, it doesn't make any sense to prohibit forestry activities on land which already is being used for that purpose, as for well recreational trails and woodlands open to the public. It's also a

well-demonstrated fact that forestry and recreational access can coexist on the same land; our state and national forests come to mind.

Clustering residential development in 25 percent of the total property around Port Gamble would be of major benefit to the ecosystems, since construction of homes, roads, septic systems and other infrastructure would be contained within a relatively small area, rather than spread across thousands of acres in a patchwork of 20-acre parcels. And at an average of one home per 5 acres, the density still would meet "rural" standards.

The Growth Management Hearings Board has agreed to the Rural Wooded Incentive Program concept, and also approved most of the rules for implementing it. It rejected the 40-year limit on development, but likely would accept a permanent prohibition.

Olympic Property Group has proposed an innovative plan that could be of value to the company and its shareholders — but of even greater benefit to Kitsap County's residents and its environment.

With the hearings board favorably disposed toward the plan, and the company anxious to bring it to fulfillment, it remains for the county to come up with more reasonable conditions that will satisfy both these willing parties. If that doesn't happen, the forestland could be sold off to another party or divided into numerous smaller parcels under private ownership, with a loss of trails and open space for the public and a broader impact on the environment.

This is a unique and golden opportunity for Kitsap County. Its loss would be our loss. Its gain would benefit our generations to come.



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