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WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
Special County Council

March 22, 2005

Council Chair Laurie Caskey-Schreiber called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers, 311 Grand Avenue, Bellingham, Washington.

Present:

Barbara Brenner
Sharon Roy
L. Ward Nelson
Dan McShane
Sam Crawford

Absent:

Seth Fleetwood

1. DISCUSSION REGARDING PARKS DEPARTMENT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Mike McFarlane, Parks and Recreation Department Director, stated the public information gathering phase is closing. They've held a number of meetings with various interest groups throughout the county. He submitted information (*on file*). They gathered comments during the workshop. He's also working on the capital development and maintenance elements of the plan and the implication on staffing levels due to future development.

General trends, priorities, and recurring themes that have come from the public include:

- Providing more saltwater beach access and sheltered areas, specifically at Cherry Point, Lily Point, Portage Island, the Birch Bay tidelands, Semiahmoo Spit, and Legoe Bay;
- developing and improving existing park properties, specifically at Lake Samish, properties at the north and south ends of Lake Whatcom, the South Fork areas, Bay Horizon, and Semiahmoo;
- trail recreation, restoration, and access, including connecting communities and facilities with multiuse trails and preserving existing trails through easements on private and public lands;
- maintaining connections to neighboring jurisdictions,
- improving existing trail facilities through better signage, better trail treads, and improved campgrounds and rest areas;
- developing water trails for canoe and kayaking, primarily on the Nooksack River and Lake Whatcom;
- preserving county landscapes and viewpoints, including the forested Interstate 5 corridor from Skagit County to Whatcom County, rural landscapes, scenic viewpoints, and wildlife viewing areas, which will require an inventory through interdepartmental cooperation;

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- 1 • providing additional public access to all rivers and lakes, specifically new
2 large regional parks in Lynden along the Nooksack River, the South Fork
3 area near Van Zandt, the Mosquito/Jorgenson Lake area, and the Birch
4 Bay dike for fishing and boating, including better access for the disabled;
- 5 • protecting and preserving natural and historic cultural sites, including
6 archaeological and wildlife viewing areas;
- 7 • purchasing the Plantation Rifle Range property to preserve the County's
8 considerable investment;
- 9 • developing Bay Horizon Park as a community facility;
- 10 • developing a beach restroom at Birch Bay, which requires land
11 acquisition;
- 12 • identifying and better signing County park properties;
- 13 • supporting local communities' subarea park planning efforts and projects;
14 and
- 15 • handling traffic and trespass concerns around community park facilities in
16 unincorporated areas.

17
18 Caskey-Schreiber asked for a list of the priorities just described. McFarlane
19 stated he would do that soon, in another format. He would like to get input from
20 the Council on other priorities.

21
22 Brenner asked how the meetings were advertised. McFarlane stated the
23 meetings were announced through the media and posted at senior and community
24 centers. No one came to the Samish Park workshop or the Acme/Van Zandt
25 workshop. They received letters and phone calls regarding certain issues.

26
27 Roy stated she received feedback from people in her community. She heard
28 that a lot of time was spent at the meeting on countywide issues, not issues specific
29 to the community. However, it's good people were asked to look at countywide
30 issues. McFarlane stated that happened a number of times. Since, they've been
31 working with the local community committee planning efforts.

32
33 Nelson stated people want to discuss issues in their areas, but their activities
34 are countywide.

35
36 Brenner asked if the councilmembers could have their own copies of the color
37 maps. McFarlane stated he could provide copies. On May 3, he will address the
38 Council on budgeting and financial strategies.

39
40 Tom Beckwith, Beckwith Consulting, stated a principal they used is called
41 rural-by-design. He took the whole system apart, looked at the various pieces, and
42 mapped them to look at particular elements individually. During that process, they
43 recorded countywide and local ideas. Chapter nine of the plan is for regional issues
44 and chapter eleven of the plan is for local issues. The local versions reflect what
45 the local population wants to do. The local versions may be different from each
46 other. Regional efforts will be funded countywide, and local efforts will be funded
47 locally, within the region.

1
2 Specific facilities will be included in the plan. Look at whether the plan is
3 complete, look whether the regional plans are truly regional, and identify the hot
4 projects they will fund in the next six years.
5

6 He indicated maps that show areas in public ownership; habitat areas that
7 are protected by federal, state, and local legislation, and; forest and agricultural
8 lands. He looked at areas currently being used for pasture, farmlands, and crops
9 that complement the agricultural preservation programs to see what areas will be
10 left open so they can incorporate trails.

11
12 Nelson asked if Mr. Beckwith used the forestlands in rural forestry. Beckwith
13 stated he did.
14

15 He looked at actual use, not just zoning. The importance of forestland and
16 trees varies in different regions. Countywide, he looked at the prime, highest
17 quality forest. Locally, he looked at where the wooded sites and farms are located.
18 The scenic value of both farms and forests provides value in terms of locating parks
19 and trails.
20

21 He also mapped historic conservation features. Much of this information
22 came from local anecdotal information. The public wants these historic features
23 incorporated and featured in park facilities. The saltwater trail system was one of
24 the top five public priorities. Also, interest in freshwater trail systems on the forks
25 of the Nooksack River showed up more than the main stem. People know where
26 those access sites are located and should be preserved. Now, there are no regional
27 major access points along the Nooksack River. In the Cherry Point area, the county
28 does not have a major, regional, pronounced saltwater access point where they can
29 do multiuse things.
30

31 The regional multiuse parks are to fish, swim, camp, picnic, and do all things
32 related to the outdoors except athletics. It is a number one objective of almost all
33 communities. The amount of state and national parks is not going to increase, but
34 the need for these parks is going to increase. They don't have things along the
35 Nooksack River, in saltwater areas, or around Lake Whatcom, even though the
36 County has begun to acquire properties.
37

38 For trail corridors, people desire to walk as much of the beach as possible,
39 including from Birch Bay going south, from Bellingham going north, and around the
40 Lummi reservation to Lummi Island. Now, there is a mix of public and private
41 tidelands. Preserve the current, backdoor routes through those areas.
42

43 The hiking trail system is extensive. Many advocacy groups want different
44 trails to be connected. Connect the trails in sections. They can't do all at once.
45 The same is true for horse trail systems. Set up key destination points for the
46 horse trail systems. Corral sites can be used to train and ride. The trail system is
47 shrinking down to only areas where there is a compatible use and an interest in

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1 riding. As Bellingham has urbanized the past ten years, viable trail areas have
2 shrunk to the outskirts of the city.

3
4 Caskey-Schreiber stated it is difficult to ride a horse on a high-traffic trail.
5 Riders try to go where other people don't go. Beckwith stated there is value for
6 that on Sumas Mountain, Sunset Farm, and in other areas.

7
8 The off-road recreational mountain bike system is growing as much as the
9 horse trails shrink. Generally, the rider wants to transition from urban areas to
10 rural areas.

11
12 The on-road bicycle system he's looking at is for recreation, not
13 transportation. Most of the areas are on rural roads and the riders are going for
14 the scenic rides. These areas are for scenic rides, but people ride at their own risk.
15 There are rides all over the place.

16
17 The multipurpose trail system incorporates all the other trail opportunities,
18 where the highest volumes will be, and where they most want to conserve
19 resources. The key issue is to start developing the system in sections. Get those
20 within the six-year plan to begin development soon.

21
22 Off-road and cross-country uses are shrinking because they are not
23 environmentally suitable and they are not compatible with other uses. People don't
24 want them in their neighborhood. The use is shrunk to areas where they exist now
25 and where there are existing facilities and use patterns. A private park is used for
26 occasional seasonal rides for a motorcycle use. Basically, the intent was benign
27 neglect. The County will support program activities in one location, with the hope
28 that it will prevent use in other areas as long as the riders mind their behavior
29 elsewhere. If they don't mind their manners, the County will retract its support.

30
31 Caskey-Schreiber stated she's glad Hannegan Speedway is there because it
32 is in high demand. Keep it going without having to commit other areas. Beckwith
33 stated that is the strategy. Keep the strategy viable to discourage the activity in
34 other areas.

35
36 Crawford stated a large segment of the population uses off-road vehicles.
37 Hannegan Speedway is a racing, not recreational, course. Roads off Mosquito Lake
38 Road is an example. De facto use areas are already there. Another question is
39 where they direct snowmobile riders. Beckwith stated this is a very diverse
40 activity. Those who use the speedway are motorcycles, not all-terrain vehicle
41 (ATV) and four-wheel riders. Those are different activities. Those riders use
42 backcountry and logging roads. It works as long as they're dispersed. It works as
43 long as the riders don't begin to concentrate.

44
45 Crawford stated that if the County says, as a part of the plan, that this is it, a
46 large segment of the County will create a backlash because they feel left behind.
47 The irresponsible users exist, but wait and see if irresponsible use occurs.

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1 McFarlane stated the information provided today comes from the workshops, but
2 isn't necessarily what will be proposed. Also, the State indicated it wants the
3 County to find an off-road vehicle solution the State may close its lands to off-road
4 vehicles. The County needs to spend time on this issue and talk to the State. That
5 informal recreation now is occurring on State property.

6
7 Caskey-Schreiber stated horse riders use State property, also.

8
9 Brenner stated the issue with North Fork Road was about people driving up
10 there for the scenic views. On Mosquito Lake Road and other places, this issue is
11 about people going onto private lands. That's not okay. If people get hurt on those
12 lands, the owner is liable. The County can't force private landowners to be
13 responsible for those people.

14
15 Nelson stated make sure the off-road vehicle (ORV) users are included in the
16 planning process. More emergency room visits are from horseback riders than ORV
17 riders.

18
19 *(Clerk's Note: End of tape one, side A.)*

20
21 Nelson continued to state that if they are going to assume liability, the
22 County must talk about liability in all recreational activities. None are perfectly
23 safe. They must discuss what approach to take.

24
25 Beckwith stated sponsoring an event is not the same as assuming liability for
26 an event. One could indirectly sponsor an event.

27
28 Nelson asked if the County assumes liability for horseback riding trails.
29 Beckwith stated it does to a certain extent.

30
31 McFarlane stated there are trail development and maintenance standards for
32 trails on County property. Meeting those standards reduces liability.

33
34 McShane stated that no matter what the County does, the proposed ORV
35 map will create a backlash.

36
37 Brenner stated trail standards doesn't reduce liability. It may reduce the
38 potential for problems and accidents. The liability is there on County property.

39
40 Caskey-Schreiber stated all horse riders assume that riding is risky, and
41 accept that level of risk. No court would say that a trail is too dangerous for an
42 activity that is already high risk.

43
44 Beckwith stated there is a difference between a developed and maintained
45 trail and a trail used by user groups. The County is liable for anything on the map
46 that is maintained. For areas that are not officially on the trail map, don't assume
47 liability.

1
2 Facilities available for cross-country, snowboarding, and snowmobiles are
3 multiple use trailheads.
4

5 A desire to preserve scenic road corridors is a higher priority expressed
6 during the workshops. This system is latticed all across the county. A key issue is
7 not over-improving the corridors and preserving the view from the road. This is
8 complicated. The County can preserve and buy areas for trailheads. Preserving
9 scenic views is different. It may be done through design standards, not acquisition.
10

11 Local recreation areas addressed needs for local athletic fields near
12 elementary schools. A second need is investing in middle and high school athletic
13 fields. Make those fields useable all year long. The facility at Smith and Northwest
14 roads is highly organized and solely dedicated to soccer. Find other suitable places
15 for similar facilities to meet the demand. The concern is the Smith and Northwest
16 facility won't be enough given the population growth. User groups will develop and
17 maintain these types of facilities, subject to a public access policy. The County
18 doesn't want to run and operate these facilities. Don't get in the way of private
19 groups creating these facilities. Do find out where such uses should go, or they will
20 create a terrible land use conflict.
21

22 Brenner asked why they would create a land use conflict. Beckwith stated
23 they conflict with agricultural zoning and open space. They create a tremendous
24 amount of traffic. Other counties are having to take out similar existing facilities.
25

26 Hal Hart, Planning and Development Services Director, stated these facilities
27 require a lot of time from County staff because they generate lots of complaints.
28 Neighbors who move to rural areas don't want to live next to such busy facilities.
29

30 Beckwith stated community centers are found in every community. They
31 serve a variety of age groups. These are local facilities that depend on the County
32 deciding what to fund. The County can provide landlord assistant services to get a
33 facility, subject to a community's ability to pay. These aren't regional facilities that
34 service everyone across the county. These are tremendously expensive.
35

36 Nelson asked if they looked at other types of community centers, such as
37 granges and fairgrounds. Beckwith stated they are in another category. They are
38 local facilities.
39

40 Enterprise facilities include things like a gun club and park facilities that can
41 be rented out. They are revenue- and user-driven facilities. In some cases, sites
42 have an opportunity for rental use built in, but the County is not going out to look
43 for these facilities. Some of them could be user-driven, with an entrepreneur to run
44 it. If there is not enough countywide support to fund a program or facility, a user
45 group may step in and assume the service.
46

1 McShane stated Newhalem is in Whatcom County. He's been hearing
2 discussion about moving most of those people out of there and what should be
3 done with that community. Beckwith stated he's working on another project for
4 that area. That area provides an opportunity for a private facility and a visitor
5 center.
6

7 Beckwith stated classify regional and local facilities. Shrink out six-year
8 targets. Look for what is threatened and needs to be preserved, look at what
9 balances out population centers, and look at what engages other players as much
10 as possible.
11

12 Roy asked if the Parks Department will have a focused effort on getting
13 grants once the plan is done. McFarlane stated he's just started discussions on how
14 to pull critical areas and shorelines into this plan. When they are done with
15 information gathering from the public, the next step is to have that discussion. The
16 consultant contract required that issue be in the plan.
17

18 Beckwith stated the public grant well is unhealthy, but the private grant well
19 is growing.
20

21 Crawford stated the plan is more comprehensive than he imagined. There is
22 a lot more than is not on the lists, such as the Black Mountain Forestry Center.
23

24 Beckwith stated the rural-by-design concept to look at scenic corridors is
25 significant.
26

27 Terry Reckford, Beckwith Consulting Landscape Architect, stated scenic
28 qualities of the corridor is very important to people. Eighty percent of someone's
29 experience of a place is from the road. Recognizing that fact in the plan is
30 important. Figure out tools to preserve the scenic areas.
31

32 Scenic corridors degrade over time. There are tools available to preserve
33 views. The tools have to do with clustering buildings in a particular area instead of
34 spreading them out, sharing driveways, building in a style consistent with the
35 corridor, and keeping building off the ridgelines. Vegetation management has to do
36 with preserving trees and buffers along the roadways, replanting, and using native
37 materials. The roadway and utilities tool has to do with how the infrastructure is
38 developed. Create a land use map overlay for scenic corridors. Offer incentives for
39 following the design preferences. The County can manage its own utilities when
40 developing infrastructure.
41

42 Brenner asked if the County could allow tax incentives. Reckford stated it is
43 a tool used elsewhere, and they will explore what tools are available in this county.
44

45 Reckford showed sketches of other areas of the country that have used
46 development tools to create rural-by-design.
47

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1 Caskey-Schreiber stated one "before" sketch is exactly what's happening on
2 East Smith Road and all over the county. It's ugly, sprawling buildout that takes
3 away from the feeling that that one is in a beautiful county with open space.
4

5 Brenner asked how soon the Council can expect to finalize something to
6 preserve scenic roads.
7

8 Troy Holbrook, Senior Planner, stated this plan is scheduled to come to the
9 Council in May or June this year. The work plan is to implement these plans
10 through development regulations.
11

12 Brenner stated they should begin as soon as possible.
13

14 Roy asked if design standards along the view corridors are a component of
15 the plan. Reckford stated he would call it performance standards instead of design
16 standards.
17

18 McShane stated there are a variety of approaches to get there. As a
19 councilmember, he's received the most calls about individual home construction on
20 a ridge near Interstate 5, south of Bellingham. There is a value to how people view
21 their community. Reckford stated it's important to document this kind of thing as a
22 component of the plan, and to take proactive steps to implement the standards.
23 They're trying to document and formalize it in a way to pursue implementation.
24

25 McShane stated the gateway into Whatcom County, the hills above the
26 Skagit Flats, means a lot to people. Many people were upset to see houses built
27 along the ridgelines. Beckwith stated the County needs to identify where these
28 corridors are. Next, the County will have performance-based tools to use that will
29 only require the County to manage how development occurs, which are effective
30 and cheap. If the County doesn't give the public effective tools, builders won't
31 achieve what they want. People will get frustrated. If the same amount of money
32 is used more effectively, they could build the trails and viewpoints while still
33 preserving this. The good property development examples are more valuable than
34 the bad property development examples. The Council needs to act quickly,
35 because the opportunity will go away.
36

37 Caskey-Schreiber stated it won't be an easy sell. Getting people to cluster
38 lots in the rural, one unit per five acres (R5A) zone will be difficult.
39

40 McFarlane stated he will continue to take comments on the draft document.
41

42 Roy stated she was glad to see the Planning Director and Planning
43 Department staff present for the meeting. She wished the Public Works
44 Department staff had been here.
45

46 Caskey-Schreiber stated this visioning process for the Parks Department is
47 very timely.

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ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 2:55 p.m.

Jill Nixon, Minutes Transcription

The Council approved these minutes on April 12, 2005.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

Dana Brown-Davis, Council Clerk

Laurie Caskey-Schreiber, Council Chair