

SQUALICUM VALLEY COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

Dear ABN members,

You have probably heard or read about the efforts to promote large-scale development on Squalicum Mountain. The Squalicum Valley Community Association believe we share a common interest in Squalicum Mountain with all of the Bellingham Neighborhoods whose watershed begins at the top of that beautiful mountain.

Building some 60 residences in a gated sub-urban community in the forest atop Squalicum Mountain, if allowed, will do more harm to the forest, designated resource land, the mountain ecosystem, and Lake Whatcom watershed than would holding the developers to the current zoning, and properly enforcing the existing restrictions on building in the rural forestry zone.

Their rhetoric notwithstanding, if allowed to cluster, the number of residences in the watershed will immediately be double what they might otherwise be able to develop. And with the extension of water and sewer planned by the developers, this project will inevitably lead to many hundreds of new residences on adjacent land. And we know that the current county code will not protect the so called "reserve tract" from future development. After the introduction of this cluster and extension of urban services, development pressure in and around the reserve will be unstoppable.

The gated subdivision will generate hundreds of additional trips up & down the mountain for car-dependent homeowners, straining the roadways around the lake and through your neighborhoods. And such a development will destroy the buffer between Bellingham and rural Whatcom County, while impairing Squalicum Mountain's ability to recharge Lake Whatcom with clean water.

Although the underlying zoning is one dwelling unit per twenty acres, intended to allow for small-scale forestry and related resource dependent activities, geologists, hydrologists and others familiar with the mountain believe that very limited development could actually take place because the natural environment just won't allow it. Wells have been largely unsuccessful, and large areas of the mountain are steep unstable slopes that can't be built on.

Clustering on forest resource land merely allows the developer to maximize the number of residences by placing them on the level top of the mountain making an end-run around the Growth Management Act which would otherwise not allow such large-lot development if the land were within the city or UGA.

The County Council has passed a six-month interim Ordinance to remove clustering in designated rural forest lands. During this time, they will work to correct the zoning code by permanently removing the clustering option on forest resource lands and bring the zoning code into compliance with state law and numerous court rulings that generally recognize that counties may create ordinances that are more restrictive than state law, but not less restrictive, which unfortunately in this case they did.

The Squalicum Valley Community Association's board met with the would be developer, and in continuing discussions has come to an understanding and a plan that would benefit him, protect Bellingham's watershed and green view-shed, the Squalicum Valley and its groundwater resources, maintain habitat for fish and other animals, and conserve the forest land.

The land owner is willing to sell his development rights and retain and manage the land in long-term sustainable forestry with possible passive trail system. This idea has received initial support from the county executive, city and county council members, the mayor and citizen groups.

As the cost of land within the City and Urban Growth Areas reaches astronomical levels, it will be this kind of forward thinking, securing development rights before development pressures make it financially impossible for communities, that will conserve and protect the forests and other critical areas around our urban centers from permanent conversion.

The 700 acres at risk would augment the conservation easements on 330 acres already owned by the city, conservation easements held on adjoining property by the Whatcom Land Trust, and an approximately 100 acre conservation easement given to the city by a member of our association to make a greenbelt in Bellingham's watershed of over 1100 acres.

One might think that this is just one mountain, just a thousand acres, and we have so much. It is this thinking that is behind the continued deforestation here and everywhere by those who we will some day understand have stolen our future.

You may not be able to do much to save the Amazon rain forest, or even the conifers of California or Canada. But you can help save Squalicum Mountain and all the other forest lands that surround us.

We hope those involved in the various Bellingham Neighborhood Associations will write their city council and encourage and support them in the effort to save this 700 acres of forest in the Lake Whatcom Watershed by acquiring the development rights and conserving the land for sustainable forestry.

And we all need to appreciate the importance of the county ordinance under consideration that will remove cluster development as an option in our rural forests, thereby decreasing development pressure on these important resource lands. All of our county council members need to know you support their correcting the zoning code now.

Clean drinking water is priceless, please help make this first step toward negotiations happen.