



Review of King County Proposed Ordinance No. 2007-0353 (Transfer 30 acres of Soaring Eagle Park to the City of Sammamish)

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Note: This document is a subsection of the larger PRKC Review of King County Proposed Ordinance No. 2007-0353 of the same date. Please refer to the larger document for comprehensive background.

PRKC Analysis and Recommendations

Proposed Ordinance No. 2007-0353

On September 4, 2007, King County Councilmember Kathy Lambert proposed Ordinance 2007-0353 to the King County Growth Management Committee to transfer 29.9 acres of the southwest corner of Soaring Eagle Park to the City of Sammamish. The ordinance would allow the City of Sammamish to assume ownership and operation to develop additional recreational opportunities and facilities on the site in order to increase its value to the public. Under the agreement, the County would transfer ownership of the 29.9 acres within 30 days of execution of the proposed interlocal agreement.

If the ordinance is adopted, the City will propose a change to the Comprehensive Plan Update of 2008 to incorporate the transferred 29.9 acres.

PRKC Analysis and Recommendations

The public is very supportive of open space, regional parks and trail connectivity as demonstrated in the August 2007 public votes supporting King County Propositions 1 & 2 and the overwhelming support of the recent Issaquah Parks levy. While suitable and schedulable active recreation facilities are greatly needed in our communities, it is the opinion of the PRKC Board and leadership that Soaring Eagle Park is not the best location for these facilities for the issues detailed below and supported in our formal review.

Thirty out of 640 acres may seem a trivial amount of land to provide to the City of Sammamish for active recreation but the truth is that development of active recreation facilities will change the nature of the Park. PRKC's primary concern is the setting of precedent and lack of clear



County policies and guidelines. It is not a sustainable model to assume that regional County parks and natural areas are an inexpensive alternative for developing active recreation facilities to serve local communities.

The County and City are spending millions of dollars on regional habitat restoration projects, including downstream from Soaring Eagle at Patterson Creek and the Evans Creek Preserve. We need to ask: Why are we giving up irreplaceable habitat when we are already well aware of the costs required to repair the damage done by development? And why would we eliminate habitat in favor of sports fields when the cost in terms of both dollars and environmental impact would be much lower to bring existing fields to a level that would satisfy the needs of the City's residents? On the surface this transfer makes sense – it is thirty acres of “free” land. But it is the opinion of the PRKC Board that the City of Sammamish's gain would be a net loss for regional park users, for the environment and for the health and vitality of the region in the future. The proposed ordinance, in PRKC's opinion, is not wise use of public dollars or natural resource stewardship.

It is PRKC's opinion that the King County Council should not approve Proposed Ordinance 2007-0353 due to the following:

- It sets a precedent for future transfers and/or development of natural lands;
- There is no shortage of playgrounds in the area;
- It does not solve the active recreation field issues for the City of Sammamish;
- It would significantly alter park character and current user experience in the park;
- The ecological impact of development on the surrounding area is not yet understood;
- There has been no provision for gathering and considering regional input on this ordinance;
- It does not make good use of public funding;
- There are potential legal issues with the development.

Regional Park.

Setting of Precedent

Pressure on remaining open space, natural areas, and regional park land is increased dramatically as available land is converted to residential and commercial development. PRKC has concerns that a trend for active recreation development of regional open space/parks could develop. The 30 acre transfer of Soaring Eagle regional park will set a precedent for other incorporated areas to leverage regional parkland as an inexpensive and easy opportunity for development into active recreation.

Recommendation:

- 1) The King County Growth Management and Natural Resources Committee should look at including strong language in the King County Comprehensive Plan Update to secure the future of this and other regional parks and ensure no trend of active recreation development on natural park lands develops. Addressing the larger picture ties in to the global warming crisis and subsequent initiatives – removing forested land should always be a measure of last resort.

- 2) As funding for most of our open space and regional parks was granted with conditions of use and development, it is critical that King County Parks keep restrictions imposed by funders of public land readily on file for perpetuity. Currently King County Parks does not keep budget information for perpetuity.
- 3) The Proposed Ordinance should not be passed without including strong language that this transfer is unique and identify specified reasons why it is unique.

Regional Use

Soaring Eagle is currently used as a regional park. PRKC is deeply concerned that the public meetings that were held were not broadly publicized to allow for regional comment nor was input solicited from the regional community groups that regularly use the park.

There appears to be an assumption in the proposed ordinance that the park is not a popular destination because is not developed. Our review found that many local users enjoy Soaring Eagle Park for its hiking, jogging, and wildlife opportunities but, that the majority of mountain bike users are regional, coming from places such as Bellevue, Seattle, Kent, and even Everett. We found equestrian users are predominately from Sammamish, Fall City, Issaquah, and Maple Valley areas. There is surely some benefit to serving these communities of users to the local economy and this benefit can be further enhanced by increasing park visibility at the state level.

The City of Sammamish has done a fabulous job taking former King County parks and improving them. Pine Lake Park and Beaver Lake Park are excellent examples of park renewal under City leadership. While there is no doubt that the City of Sammamish would do the same at Soaring Eagle, consideration must be given to the fact that they would be turning what is currently a regional park into facilities that are limited to local interests and uses. Mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers from the area including Fall City, Bellevue and Greater Seattle would not have use of those fields. Should the City develop an active recreation park at Soaring Eagle, Soaring Eagle's value to regional users would diminish. Mountain bikers and equestrians have made it clear that the park is barely big enough for their activities as it is (less than 1 hour on mountain bike to ride the outer trail).

Recommendation:

- 1) Before any transfer takes place, King County Parks should request feedback from current regional users and organizations that have events in the Park. If public meetings are held, they should be located in Seattle, Bellevue, Redmond and Fall City and at convenient times (such as weekdays 7pm) for regional users to attend.

Community Value

As noted above, many of the users of Soaring Eagle Park are regional users with specialized activities and interests. Mountain biking is continuing to grow in popularity; there have been studies on the equestrian impact on the local rural economy.¹ Since King County Parks has not had money to develop the Park, Soaring Eagle has evolved to serve the uses it is best suited for by the regional community. It occurs to us that the City of Sammamish and the local rural areas are in a position to reap economic rewards from the further development of the park as the premier mountain biking park of the region. Developing such a park at Soaring Eagle would

¹ See www.metrokc.gov/exec/bred/business/Projects/Appendix.pdf.



save the County tax payers dollars on developing a new trail system and park as planned less than 2 miles down the road in Duthie Hill Park . Should the County investigate the offer from a neighboring land owner to provide a free public easement for equestrian access to the property, Soaring Eagle will become more of an equestrian destination for Plateau and regional equestrians. PRKC feels there are significant economic incentives to developing this park as a Special-Use trails park.

Public comment from local park users was clear on the need for a formal parking lot and permanent restrooms but no more. It is not clear if, in order for the City to develop the Park in such a minimal manner, City ownership is required.

Recommendation:

- 1) The City of Sammamish should explore the financial opportunity and local economic impact of turning Soaring Eagle into a quick and minimally developed “Special Use” regional trails park focused on serving trail-use activities; develop a plan with affected user groups to assess traffic, parking and other needs.
- 2) King County Parks should review the opportunity presented by a neighboring landowner to provide a permanent public equestrian access easement at no cost to the County.

Ecological Value

There is often a misconception that the value of forest land is measured in its suitability to human recreation and activities. As population density increases and surrounding development intensifies, the pure value of forest open space for cleaning air, absorbing water run-off, for fish and wildlife and for aesthetic value are amplified.

The Sammamish Plateau is developing at an incredibly rapid rate; Soaring Eagle is the last remaining large tract of forest land on the Plateau. The County and the City are spending millions of dollars on downstream Patterson and Evans Creeks. We have concerns that development of upstream Soaring Eagle will compromise, to some degree, the success of those projects.

There are various economic evaluations of ecological services. For forestland some of the most accepted numbers are based on work by American Forests. Earth Economics (http://www.eartheconomics.org/resources/resources_publications.html) did an economic evaluation of King County ecologic services based on cover type last year for King Conservation District. They used American Forest numbers: they assess the ecological services value of forestland per acre per year at from \$16,403 to \$60,454 (depending on many variables). Utilizing a conservative \$37,000 per acre per year loss in ecological services, conversion of 30 acres to developed active park would amount to at least a per year loss of \$1,110,000 in ecological services.

Recommendation:

- 1) Before the transfer is completed, King County must fully understand the value of ecological services the proposed ordinance affects and determine how those services will be replaced.

- 2) The City of Sammamish must include in any development proposal the cost and design of infrastructure to replace those ecological services which can be replaced; those that cannot be replaced should be acknowledged and accounted for.

Active Recreation.

The active use development that the City of Sammamish proposes to build at Soaring Eagle Park includes playgrounds and sports fields in addition to parking and restrooms. The City is eager to provide these services to a section of Sammamish (the neighborhood of Trossachs, and if they are annexed in the future the neighborhoods of Aldarra and Montaine) that is currently somewhat removed from existing City owned playgrounds and sports fields.

Neighborhood Amenities

As noted in our review, there is no shortage of neighborhood playgrounds on the Sammamish Plateau. As developments have been built, so have playgrounds, sometimes within blocks of each other. In the neighborhood bordering the proposed transfer site, Trossachs, there are over 14 small neighborhood playgrounds, two large community playgrounds, and four playfields suitable for youth soccer. Five additional recreation tracts are currently under development. Seven of the playgrounds and two of the playfields are within a 15 minute walk from the actual location of the 30 acres proposed for transfer and development

Fields Shortages

Soaring Eagle provides an attractive opportunity to develop a park for the City of Sammamish. The community is demanding more and better sports fields and it is clear that those in favor of developing a section of the park want to develop primarily for additional fields. It is for this reason that a large portion of PRKC's review focuses on sports field availability and need.

As a result of recent incorporation and land prices, the City is significantly below the per capita national standards for active parks at 5.5 acres per thousand citizens.² This calculation, however, does not take into consideration the considerable number of facilities within the city limits that are available to the public in the form of school and neighborhood amenities.

The City of Sammamish Parks, Recreation and Open Space Comprehensive Plan (the Plan) recognizes this is an issue for near and long term. Consequently the Plan identifies partnerships with local schools, developers and community participants as essential to addressing the shortfall with partnered development of playgrounds, sports fields and other facilities. In 2004 the City entered into interlocal agreements with the Lake Washington School District and the Issaquah School District for joint-use, development, maintenance and scheduling of school fields. The City should be commended on its serious approach to acquiring park land since 2004 and the partnerships it lead to create the first-class community sports fields at Eastlake High School and Skyline High School.

² The national standard for active parks is 10 acres per thousand residents. Calculation provided by Sammamish Parks is 220 acres of developed park land = 5.5 acres per 1,000 (based on a population of 40,000) and does not include school or neighborhood facilities.

PRKC reviewed data provided by the Friends of Soaring Eagle Park on observed field use over a two week period at peak times of use (weekdays 5:30pm and Saturdays 10am). The data, including photographs and team usage, did not support the conclusion that there is a field deficit in our area. Indeed the new fields, located a few blocks away from the proposed transfer site at Cascade Ridge Elementary, were not in use, nor was the brand new state-of-the-art facilities 10 minutes away at Pacific Cascade Freshman Campus during the observation period. Across Sammamish, observations of available baseball fields show fields at only 20% capacity, and of soccer fields at only 50-60% capacity. Upon looking deeper, PRKC's Review found that the field shortage is caused by under use of existing fields due to the following reasons:

- 1) Poor field quality including drainage issues and inadequate facilities (lighting, restrooms, etc);
- 2) Scheduling challenges for private/community clubs and teams.

Sammamish is not the only city in our region experiencing difficulty meeting active recreation demand. This shortage of quality schedulable fields is felt all over the region by organized clubs and leagues.

Recommendation:

- 1) The City of Sammamish should conduct a through review of the public suggestions for alternatives described in the PRKC Review.
- 2) The City of Sammamish, because of its interest in this issue, should take a leadership role and spearhead a regional comprehensive plan for active recreation. This could include creation of a task force comprised of representatives from Issaquah School District, Lake Washington School District, the cities of Sammamish, Issaquah, Bellevue and representatives of the clubs, leagues and teams most affected. The goal of such a plan would be to:
 - a. Jointly develop a vision for active recreation in the region;
 - b. Identify short term and long term objectives to meeting demand;
 - c. Figure out the role active sports clubs, leagues and teams can play as a partner in field development, maintenance and scheduling.
 - d. Streamline scheduling for clubs and organizations and develop a centralized scheduling solution that makes the best use of the fields;
 - e. Provide clear scheduling guidance and fair, reliable, predictable rules for scheduling prioritization;
 - f. Ensure the fields available are being used to maximum capacity (for example allow scheduling of school fields before 5:15pm, enforcement of cancellation policy and assurance that available fields due to cancellation are easily and centrally identified);
 - g. Prioritize and coordinate field upgrading to the level that the public demands;
 - h. Update the Interlocal Agreements with the School Districts.
- 3) The City of Sammamish should work out agreements for public schedulable access to existing and planned neighborhood facilities.

Lack of Policy/Vision

King County Parks has no clear policy or vision regarding park development and uses. Funding for King County Parks has been a constant problem and funding priorities and issues have placed parks within incorporated areas into city ownership. Although there has been clear priority on regional trails, it is unclear what the County's goals for its regional parks, particularly in the unincorporated areas, are. There is a significant difference between active and passive recreation uses. Ecologically fields are not much better than parking lots yet there is not clear guidance for decision making regarding potential development of public forested land for active recreation purposes.

Washington State Parks recently underwent a policy review to establish what uses and services should be State provided and which uses and services are local responsibilities. It is our opinion that the County would benefit from a similar exercise.

Recommendations:

- 1) King County Parks must develop a vision for its regional parks to ensure the incredible assets acquired the last two decades are well-understood and well-managed and to ensure a legacy from our generation to the generations of the future.
- 2) King County Parks should immediately develop clear guidelines for the conversion of passive to active recreation and use conversion only as a last resort.
- 3) King County must find ways to ensure the original intent of the purchase of open space remains intact for perpetuity.

Ecological Assessment

Through various programs such as Greenprint mapping and Public Benefit Rating System, King County has recognized the valuable contribution forested lands make to the sustainability of our region. In many cases the value of the ecosystem services (such as purification of air and water, storm water control, generation and renewal of soils, biodiversity, etc.) provided by forest lands far exceeds the value of ecosystem goods such as timber, fish and water. The quality, quantity, reliability, and combination of goods and services provided by the ecosystems within a watershed depend highly on the structure and health of the ecosystems within the watershed.

Healthy intact ecosystems are self-organizing, require no maintenance and do not depreciate in value over time. They can provide valuable ecological goods and services on an ongoing basis "in perpetuity" and without cost to humans, but only if these ecosystems are healthy and intact. A forest provides water control, flood protection, aesthetic and recreational values, slope stability, biodiversity and other services without maintenance costs.

The area proposed for this transfer, the southwest corner of Soaring Eagle, is an important component in a complex wetland structure that includes the natural areas of the Trossachs development, the Beaver Lake area, the Hazel Wolf Wetlands as well as Evans and Patterson Creek. This wetland complex is already stressed due to encroachment of human activity and development. Understanding the implications of developing the wetland area of Soaring Eagle Park must be taken in context of the entire wetland structure and not treated as small isolated class II and III wetlands.

Recommendation:

- 1) King County Parks must provide provisions requiring the study of the proposed development and resulting impact on the surrounding wetland areas and larger ecosystem and wetland complex.

Stewardship

As an organization that promotes stewardship and community engagement, PRKC is impressed with the level of volunteer engagement at Soaring Eagle. Since the year 2000, 967 volunteers have given 5323 hours to develop Soaring Eagle as a trail facility and wildlife preserve. Given that volunteers are typically current users, and the users feel strongly that taking 30 acres out of the park will negatively impact the multi-use trail experience, PRKC is concerned that these volunteers will feel betrayed by any action to turn part of the park into an active recreation area. At this time in our development as a region, we need more than ever to reconnect people to their responsibilities to participate in stewardship of natural and public lands.

Recommendation:

- 1) Before proceeding with the transfer and subsequent development of the 30 acres, King County Parks must engage the agencies and individuals who have supplied volunteer hours and get their opinions.

Other Questions

Annexation of the 30 Acres

Soaring Eagle is not within the Urban Growth Area (UGA) for King County and therefore cannot be annexed into the City until such time as it is included within the UGA.³ To revise the UGA boundary is a County-driven action and must be based on a land capacity analysis and buildable lands report which demonstrates that the extra land is needed to accommodate growth. Growth has usually been deemed land for residential/commercial development and not simply land for general purpose. If the County moved the UGA line out to allow for annexation, a potential challenge could be raised to justify this action. It is unclear to PRKC whether Policy U-104 was specifically drafted to facilitate the transfer of Soaring Eagle as it addresses park land and a maximum of 30 acres. If the site was included in a package annexation, (i.e. with Aldarra Estates), annexation would require resident approval. But, before annexation occurs, the site must be included within the UGA.

Recommendation:

- 1) Before proceeding with the proposed ordinance, the King County Council must determine its policy for giving unincorporated parks and open areas to local cities; this policy must not be created in a vacuum around a single issue because it, if not done well, will be manipulated and interpreted in extreme and unforeseeable ways under future development pressure

³ See RCW 35.13.005/RCW 35A.14.005 – “No city or town located in a county in which urban growth areas have been designated under RCW 36.70A.110 may annex territory beyond an urban growth area.”



- 2) The King County Council must put protections in place to ensure that any action it takes with regard to Soaring Eagle and the precedent it sets do not provide opportunities to expand the Urban Growth Area boundary into the Snoqualmie Valley (for flood control), northwest unincorporated Issaquah (aquifer recharge) and west Fall City (fish and wildlife corridor) at some future date.

Development of the Site

Soaring Eagle is encumbered by a Conservation Easement. The conservation easement requires not less than 330 acres of the most environmentally sensitive lands within Soaring Eagle's boundary be limited in the types of development that can occur. Development must be limited to low-impact uses for the benefit of wildlife. There is ambiguity as to whether the intent of the 330 acre conservation restriction was "any acreage within the park" or the "specific acreage denoted by the Conservation Zone." The matter of a floating easement would be a matter for a Court to resolve if opponents of the development of the park sought to challenge the action.

Conclusion

PRKC would like to thank you for your time reviewing this document and considering this important issue. Questions addressed to info@prkc.org will be directed to the appropriate person.