

Appeals Filed to Stop Park Construction

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The City of Woodinville and local nonprofit group Neighbors to Save Wellington Hills Park have filed appeals to try to stop construction of a park where the Wellington Hills Golf Course now stands. They say the planned park violates the Land Use Protection Act, the State Environmental Policy Act and the Growth Management Act.

Both sides in the ongoing debate about the park believe they have Woodinville residents' best interests at heart, but they disagree markedly about what kind of park would really benefit Woodinville and surrounding areas.

The proposed Wellington Hills County Park would be located east of Snohomish-Woodinville Road and State Route 522, along 240th Street SE. The site falls within unincorporated Woodinville, on the Snohomish County side of the Snohomish-King County border.

The 104-acre proposed park would include four lighted synthetic turf sports fields, three grass fields, playgrounds, picnic areas, two off-leash areas for dogs, walking and biking trails and open areas.

According to Alexandra Sheeks, assistant to the Woodinville city manager, the City of Woodinville filed an appeal because of concerns about the park's effect on the environment, on traffic and on stormwater. "We filed an appeal and said they hadn't considered the full impacts," Sheeks said.

Todd Bailey, a representative for Neighbors to Save Wellington Hills Park, said the group had similar reasons — the traffic, noise and damage to the environment the park will cause — for filing its appeal, which is independent of the City of Woodinville's.

Snohomish County will widen and add a sidewalk to 240th Street SE, which runs through the middle of the park, but Bailey doesn't think this would be enough to support the additional traffic the park will draw to the area. He also fears increased traffic on that road will pose a safety hazard by slowing down emergency response vehicles.

The lights and noise from the park will disturb people who live near Wellington Hills, according to Bailey, who pointed out that the noise from Pop Keeney field in Bothell can be heard up to two miles away. Also, leveling the ground and creating synthetic turf fields will displace animals that were able to survive on the grassy golf course.

Neighbors to Save Wellington Hills Park thinks the park that Snohomish County has designed isn't suited for a rural area such as Woodinville. The group wants the proposed park to be replaced with a "natural-style park" designed for a rural area, such as the Burke-Gilman trail, or for the current design to be built elsewhere.

"We think it'd be great to have a rural park, but if you're going to build an urban sports complex, build it somewhere that can handle it," Bailey stated.

Tom Teigen, Snohomish County parks director, wasn't surprised by the appeals, but he contradicts some of the park's opponents' concerns, saying that Snohomish County considered several other locations for the park, but this property was the only one they were able to purchase for a reasonable price. Wellington Hills is located near State Route 522 and Interstate 405, so it will provide easy access for parkgoers.

"We believe strongly that we're going to increase water quality and decrease water contamination problems" by expanding the current retention pond into a "high-functioning wetland," Teigen explained.

Teigen denies opponents' claims that Wellington Hills County Park will be an "industrial" or "mega" sports complex, since synthetic turf sports fields will occupy only 10 percent of the park.

"When you say this is a regional sports complex, we simply don't agree with that."

Teigen pointed out that the park will host regional or national tournaments for lacrosse and soccer "once a year, if we're lucky," for a total of approximately eight days per year.

The extent of the park's development alarms some Woodinville residents, but Teigen emphasized that the master plan includes the maximum development. Some parts — including an indoor mountain biking center, an indoor community center and some of the parking — won't be built for five to seven years, if at all. On the other hand, the traffic improvements to 240th Street SE will be built before the park opens.

A buffer of trees will separate the lights and noise of the sports fields from nearby houses.

Neighbors to Save Wellington Hills County Park, which specifically opposes the synthetic turf fields, believes the new park is "designed for commercial use," Bailey said.

But Teigen explained that "we're already under-serving the local soccer kids and the local lacrosse kids." In addition to serving youth athletes, the synthetic turf fields are "the best cost recovery on site" and will generate the majority of the money needed for the park's upkeep.

"When we build things, we try to make them as self-sustaining as possible, so they don't become a drain on county finances," Teigen said. And since the park is in Snohomish County, Woodinville "is not paying a dime to buy the property or develop the property, but people in Woodinville will use this park every day."

Teigen says Snohomish County has worked with Woodinville residents to incorporate suggestions that have resulted in a better park for everyone, such as relocating the fields to preserve historic trees on the fairway.

"They have never worked with us. That's a flat-out lie," Bailey said. "They've moved pieces from side to side, but they've never downsized anything." He said Snohomish County representatives chose people who supported the park to be on the ad hoc committee that would provide feedback.

But not all Woodinville residents feel that Neighbors to Save Wellington Hills Park represents them.

Woodinville resident Kristen Rose believes “there are hundreds of reasons to support the park” and believes most people in Woodinville support it, but “don’t know how to articulate that.”

“I love to see a community that’s out and active. I have Labs, and I’d love to take my dogs there,” she said. “That’s a wonderful thing, to keep our kids active in sports ... Schools are unwilling or unable to provide that.”