

Revised Plans for Wellington Hills County Park Move Full Steam Ahead

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The Snohomish County Parks Advisory Board, at its Tuesday meeting, approved a revised master plan to construct a regional sports complex on the 100 acres where the Wellington Hills Golf & Country Club once stood.

The process now moves on to a State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review, which, according to Snohomish County Park and Recreation Director Tom Tiegen, could be completed by the end of the calendar year.

The issue could be brought to the Snohomish County Council for final approval as early as late January or early March, Tiegen said.

The revised master plan calls for seven multi-use ballfields — including four lighted and composed of synthetic turf — a community center, two playgrounds, two dog parks and an indoor mountain bike facility, as well as an outdoor mountain bike course, a maintenance facility and picnic areas.

Most objectionable to those neighbors opposed to the plan, perhaps, is two asphalt parking lots combining over 700 spaces — about the same amount, they point out, that exist a half-mile south at Costco.

“Neighbors to Save Wellington Park” spokesman Todd Bailey attended the meeting along with about 30 group members — several of whom spoke during the public hearing — and was actually encouraged by the 9-1 vote.

“It means the county is starting to see the holes in their plan,” he wrote in an email.

“You have to remember that the advisory board has no legal or professional experience with parks. Them passing this only means the plans will go to county council.”

Bailey repeated the drumbeat he’s been banging since the county publicly announced its plan early this year: There have been no studies that show a need for this sports complex; the Wellington park is not in the county’s 2007-2012 Comprehensive Plan even though Brightwater mitigation was settled in 2005; it’s still not been decided if it is a legal use of those funds; the park is being placed inside a residential neighborhood outside the Urban Growth Boundary and, furthermore, the SEPA, traffic, noise, light and EPA studies have not yet been done.

Bailey has long maintained his group is not opposed to a sports park where the golf course used to be; they just don’t want one of this size and scope.

He was asked where his group goes from here.

“We can appeal their master plan when all the studies are done and go after things legally from there.”

Neighbors to Save Wellington Park retained legal counsel in July, and the organization still elicits financial contributions from its supporters to that end.

Regarding the meeting and the vote, Tiegen took a different tack.

“We’ve always encouraged folks to attend any and all of the public meetings,” he said.

“It’s part of the public process and every speaker gets their three minutes. We welcome that.”

He noted that the lone no-voter on the Parks Board Tuesday stated a concern about the indoor mountain bike facility, which will not be built until Phase 2 of the project, in perhaps two or three more years when the funding is there.

He also noted during his time as SnoCo parks director, building maybe a dozen parks, there have always been pockets of detractors, and he appreciated their concerns but the parks have ultimately been successful.

“People need to know that we have thousands of folks very supportive of this park. Soccer people — there are 440 teams in the Northshore area alone looking to be serviced especially during this time of year when fields are unplayable, lacrosse people, bike people, trail runners...people are excited.”

He said there would be three miles of paved running trails, akin to Greenlake, and other “soft surface” trails.

He said earlier plans were modified to allow local residents pedestrian access to the park, at their request.

He talked about traffic improvements, environmental improvements, though clearly not specifically.

“We hope we’ve achieved a balanced approach to weighty concerns from local folks’ needs with those of the broader community.”

Tiegen said there would be more meetings to get locals on board, and opponents would have additional opportunities to vent disapproval.

But what happens now is this: After the SEPA review is sent to the council and they make a decision, opponents will have an opportunity for a formal appeal. If the council goes ahead and approves the project, opponents will have an opportunity to take it to a hearing examiner for ultimate decision.

The legal costs would be massive for both sides.

“I’ve never had one get that far,” Tiegen said.

Said Bailey, already anticipating such a happenstance: "It's sad when Snohomish County is facing budget cuts and looking at laying people off ... is looking at spending \$20 million-plus on a park that is not even needed.

"My question is why not come up with a good plan from the start and not waste money on legal issues. It's time for the county to be fiscally responsible with the taxpayers' money. Remember, all the mitigation money came from King County taxpayers."