



Lights and Shadows from the Dishman Hills, February, 2000

FARWELL MESSAGE

Wyn Birkenthal, the former head of Spokane County Parks and Recreation, has left us for greener pastures in a new job at Richland, WA. His term here in Spokane was of great benefit for the Hills, for the cause of conservation of our nature areas, and for the quality of life in our fair community. He combined ability and expertise with a commitment to see the job done right. He will be missed. Wyn wrote the following article to leave us with an insight into the latest battle in the continuing conflict between city growth and the preservation of our natural heritage, growth management:

Somewhere along the way, consciously or subconsciously, Spokane, with great encouragement by the development industry and accompanied by civic filibusters from elected officials, made a choice to reject growth management. The concept seemed a bit too foreign, and frightened landowners, who expected a short gestation period before fallow fields gave birth to more "Wal Marts". Sure, growth management is still discussed as an issue, meanwhile wholesale exemptions are resulting in ill conceived stripmalls, and grandfathered, sterile, monocultural subdivisions that are already blunting the intended effect of the legislation. Now growth management sits on the shelf of possible good ideas, gathering dust, defeated and discredited, impotent and largely untested. Perhaps it was doomed from the start, imported for the Westside of the Cascades, enacted by a democratic majority in the 1990 State legislature. We viewed it as a fatherly, heavy-handed attempt of the Westside to impose its powers upon the Inland Empire. But like all failures, there are lessons to be learned that are too important to ignore. First, there are other economically viable ways to accommodate growth that conserves land. Mixed-use development is more compact than standard subdivision/stripmall pairings, clustering homes with the majority of the land base remaining as desirable, low maintenance natural space. Zoning of important spaces such as river frontage for open space, allows people to interact with natural features while maintaining the habitat. The second lesson is that well intended legislation does not always work. Perhaps the funds used for planning and enforcing growth management may have been better spent on demonstration projects to offer viable examples of planned growth throughout the county. Why couldn't the county buy a potential development site, and resell the property after zoning it to accommodate comfortably priced homes on small lots with the balance remaining as natural space with hiking trails? Just as Starbucks lattes won the hearts of Spokaneites during the 90's, if growth planning is shown to be "tasty" enough, maybe another Westside idea can find public support. Strangely, even though we have working examples of attractive mixed-use communities with centrally located green spaces in our older neighborhoods, the idea was just too alien for developers

and politicians. Government could have provided some incentives and structure to encourage smart growth, instead of "toothless" sanctions. Pull, don't push. But we continue to strangle ourselves with our lack of sense, as if growth and an expanding tax base is the only answer. The third lesson is that private citizens are not powerless in the face of rampant growth. Determined folk can accomplish great and lasting improvements to the Spokane landscape. Tom Rogers and the creation of the Dishman Hills Natural Area presents the finest example of an individual making a positive impact upon land use I have ever witnessed. Incredibly difficult challenges will present themselves to the Dishman Hills over the next 20 years. Land to the south of the Natural Area around Tower Mountain is poised for development. Spokane desperately needs another Tom Rogers, make that an army of people gifted with the vision and tenacity he possessed, to prevent this ecosystem from falling to the same fate as other ridge top view properties around town. Experience tells us that even if government tries to prevent sprawling growth, chances are better than even it will fail at the task. You can help push the odds in favour of preservation of natural habitat, open space, and recreation areas. Organize, recruit, multiply, lobby! Tell your story to everyone who will listen; Tom Rogers did and we marvel at what his persistence achieved.

ORGANIZATION NEWS

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