

Seaside opts out of open space land purchase

Tuesday, April 27, 2004

By Helen Warriener

The Daily Astorian

Councilors vote 4 to 3 against helping North Coast Land Conservancy buy 364 acres in south Seaside

SEASIDE - The Seaside City Council voted 4-3 Monday not to provide \$38,000 to help the North Coast Land Conservancy acquire 364 acres of open space in south Seaside.

"I personally felt that we had spent enough on those spaces," Mayor Don Larson said, referring to the city's acquisition of 120 acres in the Neawanna Creek estuary. "I feel that the city does not have enough money to spend on this."

Larson also cited the council's promise to the kids of Seaside to build a skate park. The topic was a hot item at a recent public parks meeting. A parks steering committee is creating a master plan to guide the development, maintenance and expansion of the city's parks and open spaces.

"We can't go back on the promise to the kids," he said. "When I saw those kids badly pulling for a skate park, the city cannot take money from the fund and give it to a piece of property that is too far removed."

The area known as the Circle Creek Project is located entirely inside Seaside city limits, west of the Circle Creek Campground. It is one of the largest remaining Sitka spruce swamps on the Oregon Coast and provides important habitat for endangered species such as Coho salmon and northern bald eagles. NCLC has been working for more than two years to raise funds for the acquisition and previous councils had indicated support.

Councilor Don Johnson made a motion to use park system development funds for up to \$38,000, or any amount less than that, if the NCLC received any other grants or donations which would lower the amount. The motion included allowing Planning Director Kevin Cupples to go after grants, also for up to \$38,000. That would have meant that the city would be obligated to provide any amount that Cupples did not receive in grant funding, up to \$38,000.

We have told Neal from the beginning we would support it," Johnson said. "We need to follow through to the bitter end. That's a lot of acreage for a little bit of money."

Johnson and councilors Tim Tolan and Stubby Lyons voted yes. But Larson and councilors Diana Schafer, Don McKay and Larry Haller questioned the validity of spending the amount and voted no.

The NCLC will continue its efforts to raise the needed amount by the Property's closing date of June 1, although there is a possibility of a 30-day extension.

"Our next step is to start baking brownies," NCLC Executive Director Neal Maine said. "We will have to hit the streets to find the balance of the money we need. We're disappointed."

Proponents of the acquisition cited future restoration projects to remove dikes constructed for a failed residential development in the 1970s and planting of trees and other

native vegetation along the creek banks. The land would provide opportunities for wildlife viewing and educational projects.

"This is part of a bigger picture of what Seaside could be," Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Executive Director Mary Blake said. "It would really help secure an extraordinary place in the world. These are places we could never get back."

During a April 6 meeting, the planning commission formally recommended that the city council provide funding for the acquisition. Their recommendation was supported by the open space provision in the city's comprehensive plan which states that outright acquisition is a way to discourage or prohibit development of designated open space.

Darci Connor is a participant in the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments program and is helping the steering committee create the parks master plan. The Circle Creek acreage was not included in an inventory of city parks and open spaces because the city does not have the property. But it is part of the community, she said, and wishes it was included so the public would have been able to talk about it at the public meeting.

"I feel like I've let the community down because I didn't include it in the inventory," she said. "This property falls right in line with the vision of the parks master plan."

The Circle Creek effort originated when the 25-year property owner, Russ Earl, approached the NCLC to ask how his land might fit into a conservation effort. Most of the project's \$1.2 million cost is for property purchase. NCLC has raised about \$1.1 million through grants from the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife Coastal Wetlands Acquisitions, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

That amount also includes a \$68,000 contribution from Earl, donations from the **Rainland Flycasters** (\$3,000), and the local chapter of the Oregon's Hunter's Association and other private donations, Maine said.

"Many people felt that this was the acquisition of the century," he said. "Many in the community felt this was a worthy project. But we'll still try to raise the money we need to get this property."