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Update on Critical Areas Protections in Jefferson County

Port Townsend, WA—With “critical areas” protections a topic of heated debate over the summer months, the Jefferson County Planning Commission formed a Committee to meet weekly to address the complex issues inherent in the county’s obligation to designate and protect critical areas under the State Growth Management Act. Meetings of the four-member Critical Areas Committee and its 14-member Advisory Group of representative stakeholders have been held every Thursday from 7-9 p.m. since August 10th and will continue through at least early October. The meetings are held at the WSU Spruce Room at Shold Business Park in Port Hadlock and are open to the public.

“We’re pleased with the active participation from a diverse group of citizens, all working to give input to County staff and Planning Commission members as the draft ordinance to update our critical areas protections is being reviewed and reworked,” said Al Scalf, director for Jefferson County’s Department of Community Development. “More than 40 people attended last week’s meeting when representatives from the State Department of Ecology addressed and answered questions on the complexities of Best Available Science for the management of wetlands.”

The Committee began its work on August 10th by conducting a thorough review of the draft ordinance, including examining the agricultural exemption from standard stream and wetland buffers so pertinent to farmers. Members are in agreement that agriculture is an important component of the economic and cultural vitality of Jefferson County, supplying both a healthy local food source and helping to preserve traditional rural character.

“To promote the future viability of agriculture in the county, the Committee is considering extending the current exemption from standard buffers to include new agriculture begun after the current limit of April 28, 2003,” said Jim Hagen, Planning Commission Chair and Critical Areas Committee Chair. “Under the terms of the exemption, alternative best management practices are used to protect wetlands and streams from any adverse impacts.”

The Committee has also expressed significant interest in the recent Growth Management Hearings Board decision on how Island County regulates existing and ongoing agriculture and its potential implications for Jefferson County. The Island County alternative for protecting critical areas from the impacts of agriculture is based on implementing best management practices (BMPs) through farm plans adopted in consultation with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and local Conservation Districts. The Hearings Board decision describes the NRCS BMPs as qualifying as Best Available Science for existing and ongoing agriculture and described the Island County approach as a “model for other jurisdictions.” At its September 7th meeting, the Committee moved to adopt applicable components of the Island County model into Jefferson County’s development code and overall approach to protecting critical areas.

The next Committee meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 21, from 7-9 p.m. at WSU's Spruce Room in the Shold Business Park. The public is welcome to attend.

For more information, contact Josh Peters, Senior Planner for DCD at 379.4466 or via e-mail at jpeters@co.jefferson.wa.us or go to the County's Website at www.co.jefferson.wa.us/commdevelopment/CriticalAreas.htm

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