



The Parent Point

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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A Conflict of ^{good} Interests:

Is it possible that two positive and worthwhile planning initiatives can conflict in such a way that the sum of their efforts is a step backward? It appears so when election year posturing and party partisanship are involved. Such is the case in King County these past months.

In its scheduled review last year of the county's Comprehensive Growth Management Plan, the County Council accepted as the beginning point for discussions the County Executive's outline proposal for changes. Included in his report were newly articulated restrictions on non-residential development within designated rural areas. Unfortunately, the new restrictions effectively prevented construction of any new churches or schools – public and private – in these locations.

Quickly, representatives from school organizations joined with leaders from religious denominations and worked through the spring and into the summer with willing members of the Council to fashion a compromise proposal. The goal was legislation that would address the values of rural preservation and protection of the environment while at the same time meet the demonstrated need for essential services for residents of the area. That's when the problems accelerated.

Since county government has no real official frame of reference for dealing with issues of religious or educational services, it was easy to see why some would limit their understanding of the issue through the filters of environmental protection, rural safeguards and salmon habitat. Those are issues they deal with every day. What was surprising to find radiating from a few offices were the character attacks, campaign of misinformation and unwillingness to find a middle ground. Unfortunately, as the war of rhetoric raged on, these one-dimensional viewpoints were perpetuated by some in the media and by

an array of special interest forces traditionally found supporting the campaigns of these office holders.

In reality, the compromise proposal (which was finally passed on July 9, 2001 only to be vetoed the next week by the Executive) adopted some of the toughest environmental standards in the United States for the construction of churches and schools in the rural area. It went beyond the measures set forth in earlier proposals while at the same time allowed for reasonable and realistically sized religious and educational facilities to serve the needs of these growing communities.

Among the specifics of plan, public and private schools would have been treated equally in the application of land-use restrictions. In addition, new, scientifically based regulations for percentages of impervious surfaces and retention of native vegetation would have been enacted. Utilization of captured and recycled water for sewage, irrigation and fire suppression needs would have been emphasized. Traffic mitigation plans would have been required and county resources would have been made available for sponsoring institutions to gain access to the newest technology and research in "green" building techniques.

On more than one occasion, sabers were rattled by hard-line advocates over the hot topic of sewers. Their contention: put in a sewer for a church or a school and within a few years you have houses and strip malls attached to it, accelerating urban sprawl to the rural area. Churches willingly took that issue off the table, seeking to find alternatives that were more appropriate for their sites. Schools, by the nature of their

specific service (and by county health regulations) could only offer the compromise of "tight-line" extensions, which physically and legally would have been incapable of being used by anyone else in the future.

"Unacceptable," said the Seattle Times editorial board. "Once sewers make their way into the rural areas, growth is not far behind." (7/23/01) Fact: only two tight-line sewers have been run to public schools in King County in the past sixteen years and only once has either been tapped – at the request of the county Health Dept. for emergency service to a church with a failing septic system.

This story is far from over. Even if growth in the unincorporated areas has flattened as many claim, the county's own traffic congestion maps indicate that much of the zone covered by these restrictions is at peak saturation. People are already there. Limiting the location of services such as schools and churches to the urban core does nothing to remedy that need and actually magnifies the problem.

This isn't just a King County issue. With new or pending regulations on county drawing boards and at the state level, situations such as this appear to be just the beginning.

It doesn't have to be an either-or solution. We can find ways to regulate growth and ensure that the environment is not only preserved, but also enhanced. At the same time, we can provide services to rural residents with legitimate need. But blind partisan politics, uncompromising and arbitrary stances, and the primacy of professional gain aren't the way. Citizens of King County should be proud of the representation they received from the collaborative councilmembers. Together they authored a bi-partisan solution that should serve as a state model.

Good interests do not have to be mutually exclusive. If we elect innovative and open-minded candidates, we should expect no less.

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