

Agreement sets aside 25 acres from planned DNR timber auction

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EVERETT — Snohomish County leaders, over objections, convinced the state Wednesday to set aside forest land near Wallace Falls State Park instead of putting it up for auction.

They reached the agreement the same morning the 187-acre Singletary sale was set to go to bid. The accord will allow the county to start a formal process to take control of about 25 acres of the harvest. The goal is to preserve scenery around a planned trail to the popular hiking spot near Gold Bar without diverting too much tax revenue from local districts.

Negotiations over the harvest have been ongoing since 2008. Tension between the timber and tourism industries loomed over the dispute.

“This compromise preserves a prime recreational asset while allowing for the sustainable harvest of working forest lands that provide critical funding to our local schools and other special districts,” County Executive Dave Somers said in a statement.

A joint resolution between Somers’ office and the County Council passed 3-2 on Wednesday along party lines.

Councilman Sam Low was opposed, along with fellow Republican Councilman Nate Nehring. Low played a lead role enlisting support for a compromise that the state Board of Natural Resources turned down earlier this month. That deal would have set aside 25 acres of the Singletary harvest for four years, allowing the rest to be cut sooner.

Low said he was “very disappointed and in fact angry” at the DNR board’s earlier rejection, but said the new proposal did nothing to make up for the revenue that local governments stand to lose.

Sultan schools Superintendent Dan Chaplik also had written to council members before the vote, urging them to let the sale move ahead.

“A responsible timber harvest has been pulled from auction at the last minute on numerous occasions over the years for no reason I can ascertain other than the fact that some people don’t want to see even one tree cut down,” Chaplik wrote. “This is a responsible project!”

Nehring read a statement from a Hampton Lumber Mill manager about the importance of having DNR-managed lands available for timber long-term. The Darrington sawmill employs 170 workers.

Council Chairman Brian Sullivan stressed the tourism angle in explaining his support.

“I think it’s in the best interest of the taxpayers to maintain the trailheads,” Sullivan said.

The Singletary land is a small piece of the DNR’s Reiter Forest, which partially surrounds 4,700-acre Wallace Falls State Park. A concern for environmentalists is that logging Singletary would require building roads and bridges that would open up larger tracts of nearby land to logging.

Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz took action Wednesday to let the county start a process called reconveyance. The sale will be reconfigured, without the 25 acres around a planned trail. The remaining land should be ready for a regularly scheduled DNR timber auction in April, Franz said in a statement.

Trail and tourism advocates praised the move.

“The park is a big economic driver for the whole Skykomish River Valley,” said Inessa Pearce from Skykomish Valley Environmental and Economic Alliance. “Over 170,000 recreational visitors to the Park bring business to the local communities. Every single business in the valley benefits directly or indirectly from tourism and recreation.”

The timber land is owned by the county, but held in trust by the DNR. The state manages more than a half-million acres statewide for counties. Timber sales from the land benefit local taxing districts.

The Singletary sale was set for a minimum \$1.8 million bid, before the size reduction. Proceeds would support the Sultan School District, Sno-Isle Libraries, Valley General Hospital and Fire District 26. The county could transfer nearby loggable land to the state as compensation.

The DNR in 2010 granted the county a reconveyance request. That allowed the county to take control of about 150 acres of trust land on Sultan Basin Road for a gun and archery range. The Sky Valley Shooting Park remains under development.

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