

Date: Mar 21, 2014; Section: Front Page; Page: A1

Consultants promote benefits of development rights transfers

By **RACHEL LERMAN**

[@Rachel_SVH](#)

MOUNT VERNON — A proposed Skagit County program to conserve natural resource lands by relocating growth to urban areas would not result in a robust exchange immediately, a market analysis shows, but the county may benefit by putting the program into place now.

The county is studying a transfer of development rights program, which would allow individuals to purchase development rights on natural resource lands in exchange for development incentives in areas where growth is more appropriate.

The market report shows there are limited areas that have indicated they would be willing to receive growth through the program, and the market shows a lack of strong demand to build above base density levels. Early on, the project could be applicable for just a few individual sites where it does make sense.

But you've got to start somewhere, said county Senior Planner Kirk Johnson. Even if the program doesn't kick in for 20 years, when it was needed it would already be in place and the county wouldn't then need to spend years implementing it. "If you want to have a nice big tree in your back yard, you have to plant it," he said. "If you want a functioning TDR program, you have to plant a tree and give it a chance to grow."

If the program is put in place now, it would provide time for the county to work out details, and use would increase as the economy strengthens, the market analysis consultants told county commissioners Tuesday.

The county needs to identify specific areas where it wants to focus conservation efforts, Heartland consultants said.

The consultants' report suggests the program could focus on conserving natural resource land other than agriculture, because the Farmland Legacy Program already exists.

Focusing on other land could avoid perceived competition with Farmland Legacy, Heartland consultants said.

There is strong landowner interest in conserving nonag natural resource land, the report shows.

Development rights, which would be voluntary for the property owner to sell, may be cheaper on resource lands that are not ag, Johnson said. The program could potentially conserve more land on other resource lands because developers would be able to afford more rights, he said.

Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt said the county has heard from timber companies that they would like a program to purchase development rights off timber lands, similar to the one that exists for ag.

Commissioner Sharon Dillon said it could be a way to give people more options on how to use their property. It could help protect land and "keep rural rural," she said.

The commissioners said they were interested in hearing more about the recommendations of the advisory committee.

A draft recommendation report will be brought to the citizen advisory committee in April and to the county commissioners in May.

Reporter Rachel Lerman: 360-416-2145, rlerman@skagitpublishing.com, Twitter: [@Rachel_SVH](#), facebook.com/RachelReports