

Citizen Action

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Citizen activists in Hood River County are on the move to give voters a stronger voice on two major land-use issues.

One group involved in waterfront planning submitted a proposed ballot measure to the city early last week. Several days later, another initiative was filed with the county by a newly-formed group concerned about residential development within a forest zone.

However, the first measure, the "Columbia River Waterfront Parks Ordinance" proposal, was rejected by the city on Tuesday. After reviewing the text, City Recorder Jean Hadley determined, upon the advice of counsel, that it was illegal because the issue was "quasi-judicial" and had to go through a statutory process.

The waterfront measure sought to give city voters the choice to preserve almost all of the public lands along the waterfront for a park. It would have allowed existing structures and infrastructure to remain as long as the current use continued.

"This initiative was basically a vehicle to make our voices heard," said Susan Froehlich, one of the three chief sponsors and a member of the Citizens for Responsible Waterfront Development. She said the CRWD has not yet decided whether to re-submit another proposal. The CRWD contends the port has not included enough public input into its current planning process, an error they are seeking to correct.

"We basically felt our hands were tied and we had to do something," Froehlich said.

Meanwhile, the initiative that was filed by the newly formed Let the People Decide (LPD) political action committee is under review by Hood River County District Attorney John Sewell. State law requires Sewell to prepare a ballot title that will be turned over to Lee Schissler, county elections supervisor. Schissler said if the title is not challenged in court, the petitioners can begin gathering the more than 400 signatures of registered voters needed to place the issue on a ballot.

LPD contends its proposed measure was "inspired" by Mt. Hood Meadows' plans to build a major housing development and destination resort on Aand that provides water to the Crystal Springs Water District. The new ordinance would give voters the right to affirm or deny any county approval of 25 or more homes or overnight units on property zoned for a forest use.

"We believe that given the importance of water to everyone from farmers to residential water users, the people of Hood River County should have the right to decide for themselves whether a major housing project that occurs in the forestlands that supply our water should be allowed," said Wendy Gray, an upper-valley resident and one of the chief sponsors for the initiative.

Both the CRWD and the LPD believe that the people need to be given a more direct voice on the two major land-use issues. However, Froehlich said the two groups are not working together and it

was “coincidental” that the two initiatives were both filed during the same week. The CRWD has termed the waterfront as the “jewel” of Hood River and wants it dedicated primarily for green space. They believe a park will support the growing tourism trade and economic gain brought by “immigrating early retirees, immigrating high net-worth individuals with consulting businesses and clients outside the valley.”

“Unskilled workers will not be provided jobs by condos and hotels on the shoreline, but will instead find employment with opportunities provided in the services industries catering to the needs of the people bringing money into Hood River,” wrote Michelle Slade, CRWD spokesperson, in a position paper dated May 23.

Port Director Dave Harlan said that by filing the initiative, the CRWD had raised two points of “irony.” He said the group argued that the port is seeking to develop the waterfront without enough public input – and then excluded the vote of many residents within the port district’s boundaries. He said the measure was directed only to city voters but the port’s reach extends from Parkdale to Wyeth. Harlan said taxpayers in those areas would have been left out of the decision-making process – even though they might later have been asked to pay their share of a bond levy to cover the cost of developing a park.

In addition, Harlan said the initiative would have “downzoned” the port land by taking away commercial and industrial uses – making it more difficult for the port to qualify for grant funding to make improvements.

But Walter Burkhardt, who joined Froehlich and Lars Bergstrom in sponsoring the initiative, said the prosperity of Hood River is dependent upon maintaining the high quality of life which includes scenic vistas and recreational pursuits.

“It’s just a sad situation that the port thinks they can do light industrial and other uses on a prime piece of real estate,” Burkhardt said.

The LPD has not taken a public stand on Meadows’ stated intent to build a resort on its private Cooper Spur holdings in the southern sector of the county.

“This measure is not about whether any given development is good or bad. It is just about giving people the right to vote on a very important question,” said treasurer Peter Cornelison.

Other residents involved in the formation of the LPD are Hugh McMahan, Dr. Rod Krehbiel, Jurgen Hess and Darryl Lloyd.