

HOOD RIVER NEWS

Support ballot measure for future of water resources

'Another Voice' column

Date Published: October 11, 2003

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This November, Hood River County voters have a great opportunity to take a common sense step to protect the sources of agricultural and domestic water supplies in the County.

Voting yes for the Forestland Water Resource Initiative (Hood River County Measure 14-15) will give Hood River County citizens a direct voice in approving or denying major housing developments in designated forestlands that could threaten agricultural and domestic water supplies.

As anyone who has ever tried to raise a pear tree without irrigation knows, a reliable and safe water supply is essential for agriculture in Hood River County.

This same high quality water supply is also key to ensuring that the water our families drink is safe and reasonably priced.

Without adequate water quantity and quality, attracting new family-wage jobs to Hood River would in many cases become a difficult task.

Major new housing developments, defined as 25 houses or more, are already generally not allowed in lands zoned as forestland where only one house per 40 acres or 80 acres is permitted.

However, the County can bend these general rules and could allow hundreds of houses – with their septic systems – and associated commercial developments in the very forestland watersheds Hood River County depends on for its water supply.

Currently, the public would not have a direct say in this type of decision despite the fact it could seriously threaten water supplies that Hood River's orchards depend on and trigger the need for new multi-million dollar water treatment systems for domestic water districts.

As a result, we have worked with a diverse coalition that included farmers, small business people, concerned water customers and many others to put the Forestland Water Resource Measure on the ballot. The broad support the measure has already received was clear after volunteers gathered over three times the number of signatures needed to qualify the measure for the ballot.

Although initiating the measure was inspired by Mt. Hood Meadows announced plans to build a major housing development and resort within the Crystal Springs Watershed, the Forestland Water Resource Measure would apply to all designated forestlands in the County and not just Meadows.

After we started gathering signatures for this initiative Meadows announced that it would not build in Crystal Springs watershed, which we applaud, but they still own the property and have based their claim on hopes of some unspecified land exchange or property sale.

More importantly, this measure is not for or against any particular development such as Meadows' planned project. Instead, the Forestland Water Resource Measure would ensure a democratic process

where voters get a direct voice in deciding whether a major housing development in our forestland watershed will adequately protect water resources for farms and residential uses.

County planners would still continue to play the lead role in approving or denying new development, but if a major development of more than 25 houses was approved voters would then get the right to approve or deny the proposal.

Mt. Hood Meadows has already started attacking our initiative and appears fearful that increased democratic involvement will threaten their proposed project. Our hope that they would have the confidence to put their project before the voters quickly faded with their claim, in the Hood River News, that our measure would not be upheld by the courts.

This unfortunate political tactic evidently sounded better than directly challenging a measure to give voters a direct voice in a democratic process that would only in the rarest of occasions even be used. While Meadows may wish that this proposal was not legal, you do not have to be a lawyer to know that Oregon's constitution gives voters one of the strongest rights to use citizen's initiatives in the country.

A number of recent court decisions by the Oregon Supreme Court and Courts of Appeals plainly support the legality of the Forestland Water Resource Measure and we would be pleased to publicly debate opponents on this issue and the ballot measure generally.

Many communities have sat by and watched as the quantity and quality of water needed to support agriculture, a healthy economy and their quality of life has disappeared. As petitioners who live in the upper, middle and lower Hood River Valley we filed this initiative because we believe Hood River County residents are willing to take direct responsibility for ensuring that our County's water resources continue to support our farms, our communities and our families.

We hope you agree.