

NISQUALLY BLUFF DEVELOPMENT PUT ON HOLD / HOUSING PROJECT DELAYED FOR CLOSER REVIEW OF ZONING REGULATIONS

[Thurston County Edition]

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Developer Tri Vo's project on the top of the Nisqually bluff will have to wait awhile.

Vo and his attorney, Alexander Mackie, decided Wednesday that the 53-house development Vo has been planning for more than a year - "Nisqually Bend" - should be delayed for another year to make sure the zoning fits the project.

Trouble started brewing with the 45-acre development recently when about two dozen nearby residents said they not only thought it would hurt the bluff but that it didn't conform to the standards Lacey and the county set forth.

"All we want them to do is do it in accordance with zoning laws," said C.E. Redfield, who lives on Sandra Lee Lane on top of the bluff.

Although Thurston County battled with Vo last year over how many trees he could cut, director of development services Don Krupp thinks Vo's proposal would win approval and work.

But Mackie said Vo's idea for houses on fairly large lots - 53 houses on 21 acres - might not pass muster with the county hearing examiner because the property is zoned for much denser development. Neighbors' concerns would just complicate the matter, he said.

"Even if I got an approval, I'm just buying a lawsuit," Mackie said. "A lawsuit takes a year. It takes a year to change the zoning."

The land, in Lacey's urban growth area, is currently zoned as a "village center." That allows 20 or so housing units per acre, coupled with retail and a school to serve residents.

Vo wants the land to be zoned for no more than four houses per acre - the same as a similar housing development being planned just north of his.

Lacey officials acknowledged last year that a village center would never work on the Nisqually bluff property. They said they would consider changing the zoning this year. But they didn't get around to it.

Because the property is in Lacey's urban growth area, both the city and the county have to agree on zoning. Mackie said he confirmed with city officials that they still would support changing the zoning, which would take until the end of 1999.

The zoning isn't the Redfields' and other neighbors only concern. Some of them have appealed the hearing examiner's decision that the project was not environmentally significant. They're worried about the septic tanks, the traffic increase and the loss of wildlife habitat.

But their biggest concern is that the project would damage the bluff, which already has been weakened by floods.

"You're pouring (storm- and groundwater) into McAllister Creek," said Redfield, whose home sits atop the bluff with a clear view of the valley. "My house shouldn't be where it is now. (But) we've been hit with this stuff recently and we've got to prevent it."

About six of the older houses that pepper the bluff were damaged in mudslides during the 1996 winter floods, Krupp said.

But an independent geologic review by a King County firm concluded Vo's development wouldn't increase hazards along the bluff, Krupp said.

"I did my part with the county," Vo said. "They wanted me not to cut the bluff and I did that. We have done far beyond what is typically called for."

Vo said his project would impact the area much less than the current zoning allows.

"I can put 400 units there, and I'm only doing 53, so I don't feel bad," Vo said. "I respect (neighbors') rights, but let's be reasonable."

County officials worry what would happen if the Nisqually Bend project doesn't get approved.

Vo was planning last year to use a loophole in the state's forestry laws that would allow him to log most of the site, replant trees and then cut down the young trees after 10 years to build homes.

After county officials threatened to appeal the project or change the zoning to limit how much he could build, he agreed to leave a 200-foot buffer of trees. But if Vo can't get the current project through, he might revert to his plan to log the property, Krupp said.

"Being able to find a reasonable development plan for that upland part of the property helps us achieve our objective for the Nisqually plan," he said.

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[Illustration]

Caption: BW PHOTO / Janet Jensen/The News Tribune: Dorothy Redfield is one of a group of neighbors who have environmental concerns about the planned Nisqually bluff housing development. (B2)

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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