

## DEVELOPMENT DESIGNED TO AID SALMON / GOAL AT WONDERWOOD IS TO REDUCE HARMFUL STORM RUNOFF

[Thurston County Edition]

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### Document Text

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A couple years ago, when Lacey developer Tri Vo started planning the gated Wonderwood housing development at 45th Avenue Southeast and College Street Southeast, a joke started circulating in the city:

The 14-acre site, thick with old maple, cedar and fir trees, would be developed so densely that everyone would "wonder where the wood went."

But Vo just might have the last laugh by building a housing development with 16-foot-wide grass streets, boardwalks instead of sidewalks, houses that use buried stilts as a foundation rather than concrete and an abundance of trees.

It's all aimed at protecting the environment - especially salmon habitat - by reducing the spread of impervious surfaces.

"It's going to be an interesting proposal," Lacey Public Works Director Dennis Ritter said. "Some of the ideas I actually like, but I just need to see a little more information."

"I'm all for going out and retaining as many trees as possible and 'skinnying up' the streets, but the grass streets, I'm not quite sure," he said. "That might be one too many for me at this point in time."

Local engineer Tom Holz brought his idea for grass streets to the city last fall, showing off an artist's rendition of a pasture-like Sixth Avenue with bridge planks for a driving surface.

Such streets could help salmon reducing impervious surfaces - concrete and asphalt - that send large volumes of stormwater into the watersheds, scouring the spawning gravel and depositing silt that make it impossible for fish to thrive, salmon experts say. Grass streets would absorb and retain rain water.

Holz said the city could go further by building grass parking lots and raised, wooden sidewalks. Like many places in Europe, roofs could have gardens. Houses and roads could be built on stilts, allowing vegetation to grow underneath, he said. All would reduce runoff.

While most of the City Council was intrigued by the possibilities, the projects were too expensive - and unproven - to use tax dollars on them. Holz needed a developer to sign on.

Vo, who was preparing to design the already-approved Wonderwood development, has a good reputation among government officials. In 1997, the city commended him for transforming Brandonwood, a dilapidated apartment complex in south Lacey into Victorian Place, a clean, safe place to live. And squabbles Vo had with the Thurston County over a project on Nisqually Bluff ended with county officials feeling that Vo was cooperative, County Development Director Don Krupp said.

To keep trees in the Wonderwood development, Vo would have to give up about 20 housing units, bringing the total for the development down to no more than 115.

"I realize that you have to pay the price for the environment," Vo said. "However, if the concept is something that's proven that can be more helpful, it's fine. I can live with that.

"It's a very interesting concept."

But before Vo can turn the ideas into reality, Lacey must make some exceptions to its code.

Like many cities, Lacey not only doesn't have standards to encourage projects such as grass streets, it doesn't even allow them, Holz said. Its stormwater rules require a retention pond, which Holz says would be an unnecessary expense in the development. Most of the city's streets are 12 feet wider than what Holz and Vo are proposing.

"We will never see salmon-friendly development until we change some of those standards," Holz said. "If we change those standards and allow salmon friendly development, the world would not end."

He is advising Snohomish County on an ordinance that would clear the way for such "zero-impact" developments there. But he wants Lacey to be the first to "step out into that cold, deep water."

But questions remain. The fire department has been concerned that narrower streets could be difficult for emergency vehicles to negotiate. Ritter asked who would pay if the grass streets caused residential flooding.

City Manager Greg Cuoio said he is glad Vo is considering the concept, but he wants to see detailed plans for the development, and some proof that the ideas will work.

City Councilman Jim Weber wants to see it happen.

"I'm not buying any more excuses," Weber said. "People do things one way, and nobody wants to change."

"And we've got to change the way we do business in our watersheds. This is really it, as far as what needs to be done to save salmon."

The city's utilities committee will hear more about Vo's plans Tuesday morning.

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#### **[Illustration]**

Caption: COLOR MAP/ Derrick Quenzer; The News Tribune - Lacey: Area to be developed (A8).

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#### **Abstract (Document Summary)**

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