

letter of comment in regard to Col Co Comprehensive Plan + Zoning Ordinance re: limited wetland protection

Caroline Skinner <caro4321@earthlink.net>

Mon 5/29/2023 9:11 AM

To: Jacyn Normine <Jacyn.Normine@columbiacountyor.gov>

Cc: Howard Blumenthal <bhandy4@comcast.net>

to: Jacyn Normine

Greetings,

Please confirm you have received our email input below before the deadline to comment. Thank you. Caroline Skinner + Howard Blumenthal

To: Columbia County Commissioners

Re: Proposed Wetland Rules revisions / amendments to comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance

Local file TA 22-02 and PA 22-02

May 29, 2023

From: Howard Blumenthal & Caroline Skinner

462 S Third St

St Helens, OR 97051

To the Commissioners:

We are writing in regard to the Columbia County Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance in order to develop a limited protection program for wetland and riparian corridors. We are writing to express our concern and dismay to learn that Columbia County is preparing to reduce its wetland rules and protections to the point of eviscerating them. The proposed limits to protection are too great. Wetlands and riparian corridors are a very important part of a healthy environment! Wetlands are vital habitats, providing food, shelter and breeding grounds for many forms of wildlife. We value wetlands, and urge commissions to do so as well.

We believe we cannot rely only upon state and federal rules. As a recent Supreme Court decision shows only too well, these rules can change with political fortunes. We want to see a strong and healthy, well-rounded natural environment for our grandchildren to inherit. We believe it is a big step in the wrong direction to weaken or remove wetland protections here in beautiful Columbia County. Healthy wetland are an asset to every community. There are too many ways they can be carelessly and thoughtlessly damaged and degraded. Our county need to do the best it can to take care of this important natural resource, and not leave it open to exploitation and damage.

With this proposal, numerous small creeks can be turned into ditches or buried in culverts. Wetland are important to amphibians, and wetland flora can lose what little habitat they have left. This proposal is too destructive to functional wetland areas. The current proposal offers too little wetland protections. We do not want to reduce the 25-foot buffer around wetlands. We do not want to remove wetlands from consideration from the Comprehensive Plan. We do not want to see all protections removed from unmapped streams or permanent ponds. Stormwater control must be required to stop runoff from silting up major streams.

The value of natural resources to the local economy and property values will be able to bring stakeholders together from land development, water quality, stormwater management, and local government. We propose a comprehensive natural resource

management plan that includes public works, local recreationalists, wetland and stream specialists, etc. as stakeholders. Establishing a 30-year comprehensive natural resource management plan will allow Columbia County to be a leader in creating quality communities that are resilient to social ills affecting other developing areas.

As Senator Gaylord Nelson once said, "Nature always bats last." In other words, the natural environment is bigger than we are. We are no longer debating the reality of climate change; it is now a well-recognized reality, and we must do our best to prepare for it. This certainly includes protections for our wetlands. Specifically, we ask that you not remove or decrease financial barriers for land development in rural areas, as it relates to documenting and mitigating impacts and limiting development around water resources. We urge you to enact the most protective Option #1. We value a reasonably intact water system and urge the county to do so as well.

Beaver are finally getting the recognition they so well deserve, as environmental engineers. Why? Because they are geniuses at impounding water. Water from beaver ponds not only recharges underground aquifers, but provides lush, cool and moist places for many forms of wildlife. Beaver give back and guard the type of natural place we associate with Columbia County. Dry, baked deserts and extensive forest fires caused by drought are not what we want here. We need water to nurture all forms of life Columbia County, including everything from salmon to eagles, and that also includes humans.

The two of us have been active participants in county civic life for more than 15 years. Howard serves on the board of Scappoose Bay Advisory Committee, Scappoose Bay Watershed Council, and City of St Helens Parks Board. Both of us have been volunteer stewards at Nob Hill Nature Park in St Helens since 2004. Over the years we have lead numerous volunteer work parties and nature walks there. We've earned four Trex benches for the park with St Helens Lions Club, and we helped add a large kiosk and staircase at the base of the park. The park is well-used by many, both in the immediate community, and also during the St Helens Halloweentown event. However, we are not writing on behalf of any specific group. We are commenting solely as concerned private citizens and Columbia County taxpayers. We have contributed much to the community, and worked for much of our lives to protect the natural environment here. It is in this spirit that we reach out to you now to share our concerns about the county proposal.

We urge the commissioners in the strongest possible terms to do more, not less, to protect our natural environment, because without a strong and functional environment, we are nothing. Wetland with game fish are important, but so are those with non-game fish like sculpin. Seasonal and ephemeral streams and ponds nurture so many life forms, including salamanders, turtles, insects and frogs. We can't fail to protect these places and species.

We would not want the county to move forward without expressing our strongest concerns and reservations about this plan because it is too weak. We do not want county officials to think no one opposes it, and we do not think there has been enough public engagement on this important topic. There are many people who are unhappy about this downgrade to wetland protection rules, and it is unfortunate that the commissioners are expending their precious time and resources on this issue. Sure, jobs are important, but the county needs to find better ways to support jobs that are not at the expense of the natural environment. Thank you for your consideration.