



The Enterprise

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Controversy snarls watershed meetings

Story by: Jesse Burkhardt

A controversy is threatening to disrupt the work of the Watershed Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) board, which meets monthly.

In a Jan. 22 memorandum, Curt Dreyer, director of the Klickitat County Planning Department, said Klickitat County representatives would not attend upcoming WRIA meetings until certain procedural issues were resolved.

"Pursuant to a work session conducted by the Skamania County Commissioners and the Klickitat County Commissioners, Klickitat County will not send a representative to the WRIA-29 meetings until the role and authority of the Initiating Governments is resolved to the mutual satisfaction of both counties," read an excerpt from Dreyer's memo, which was sent to WRIA coordinator Charly Boyd of the Skamania County Planning Department.

WRIA-29 is a 27-member board created to study watersheds in regional sub-basins. The goal of the board is to come up with goals and objectives for water resource management and development in five sub-basins, including: the White Salmon River, Wind River, Rock Creek (in Stevenson), and the Little White Salmon River. Catherine, Major, and Jewett creeks together comprise the fifth sub-basin.

The watershed board was formed by five "initiating governments," including Klickitat County, Skamania County, the Skamania Public Utility District, the Yakama Indian Nation, and the city of White Salmon.

Klickitat County Commissioner Don Struck said he believes the board has gotten off track in recent months.

"There is a lot of in-feuding in that group, and we were trying to determine if there was something we could do to try to make sure there is progress toward the goals of the watershed planning board," Struck explained.

Struck added that he questioned the changes the WRIA board was making to the operating procedures process.

"The planning unit was making amendments to the operating procedures manual, but DOE [Washington Department of Ecology] sets forth how the planning process will work," he said. "The WRIA process was adopted by the initiating governments, and once the document is signed off on, the planning unit is supposed to follow the procedures. We've spent the last 12-14 months arguing about following the manual, and it has brought the

process almost to a halt."

Wil Keyser, public works director for the city of White Salmon, offered the same concerns.

"My understanding and my frustration is the inability of the planning unit to come to any decisive conclusions regarding bylaws and Robert's Rules of Order," Keyser said. "They are bickering over minimal issues, and not directly attending to the issues at hand -- and the purpose the WRIA was established for."

One of the issues that came up recently concerned whether the WRIA board ought to keep the 80 percent supermajority requirement to pass any contested proposals. By consensus of the board, that requirement was changed to a two-thirds (66 percent) supermajority instead of 80 percent.

Both counties turned to legal counsel to get a definitive answer about whether the board has the right to change operating procedures.

Skamania County Prosecuting Attorney Peter Banks believes the watershed planning unit does have the right to modify bylaws regarding process.

In a memo addressing several specific issues, Banks said he had determined that the function of the initiating governments is to give final approval or disapproval of the watershed plan once it is presented, and the initiating governments have no control over the planning unit beyond that.

When asked if the initiating governments must approve any changes in the WRIA-29 decision-making procedures, Banks determined: "The planning unit is free to establish its own decision-making process."

Klickitat County sees it differently, however.

"We are seeking legal counsel from the Foster/Pepper group in Seattle - who were instrumental in working with us to set up the watershed planning group -- to see if the initiating governments do have oversight," said Commissioner Struck. "We had asked the Skamania County Commissioners to suspend the process until we get legal answers. Hopefully, this can be resolved by the end of this week."

Even with the Klickitat County representatives absent, however, a WRIA board quorum is still possible. There are 27 members, and 14 are needed to make a quorum, but Boyd said the board did not want to proceed that way.

"I'm hoping we can get it resolved with the county so we can work together again," Boyd said. "That would be best for the whole process."

Controversy is nothing new to the WRIA board. On Aug. 28, the planning board rejected accepting a \$100,000 grant from the Washington Department of Ecology. The money was intended to help pay for costs of studying "in-stream flows" in the various watersheds. The vote was 11-8 to accept the grant, but with its bylaws requiring support from at least 80 percent of the board members, the measure failed to win approval.

Skamania County Commissioner Bob Talent, Skamania County's representative for WRIA-29, said he was "deeply concerned" about the

track the WRIA board is currently on.

"The impasse revolves around actions the WRIA board has taken in recent months, but if they [Klickitat County] boycott, that would weaken their position, not strengthen it," Talent said.

The next WRIA-29 meeting is set for Feb. 26 at the White Salmon Park Center. The meeting begins at 5 p.m., and is open to the public.