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The silence of the plan

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Five years of effort. Dozens of meetings. Hundreds of hours of volunteer time. And at least \$500,000 in taxpayer funds. That's what literally went down the drain when the local Watershed Resource Inventory Area No. 29 (WRIA) committee failed to come up with a watershed plan for the White Salmon River, Jewett Creek, Major Creek, and Catherine Creek.

This failure is likely to prove to be a monumental setback to the interests of western Klickitat County.

Those representatives who balked at agreeing to a comprehensive water use plan are intelligent, and their concerns are legitimate. But they were not the only ones with legitimate concerns, and what they failed to realize or accept is that compromise is necessary when forming public policy. That's why 27 separate interest groups -- with local representatives -- were named to serve on the WRIA 29 planning board. Naturally, with 27 groups hoping to get enough water to take care of their particular interests, there is going to have to be some compromise. When the public's interests are at stake, a variety of needs must be weighed, not just one or two specific, narrow interests.

Like it or not, water is a precious and relatively scarce resource. For that reason, the water resources in our regional watersheds cannot all be set aside to make sure there is plenty of water to allow subdivision development. It can't all be set aside to irrigate farmlands either, and it can't all go to help fish. And that is precisely the point of compromise: Irrigators get some, the fish get some, developers get some, etc. Every interest group gets something, but no one interest group gets everything. Yet that approach was apparently not acceptable to everyone.

Given the WRIA group's bylaws, all it took to stop a plan from being adopted were the votes of just over one-fifth of the committee members. Just six of those in attendance -- a "superminority" -- could stop anything and everything.

It has become almost fashionable in some quarters in recent years to blame public agencies in Olympia or elsewhere for our area's economic ills. In particular, the Washington Department of Ecology (WDOE) has been singled out. The agency has been the chief villain whenever the future of Condit Dam is brought up, for example. It's convenient to accuse those working for the agency of trying to push something through without allowing enough local input.

Now and then, that might be the case. But that is very far from the reality of this situation. The WDOE provided a grant of \$500,000 to pay for local

studies and planning in a large portion of Skamania County and Klickitat County. No one can honestly say the agency was "trying to ram this down our throats," a phrase we've heard a lot over the years. On the contrary, the WDOE was all but begging for citizens to advise the agency how we, collectively, want the water in our region allocated. The WDOE asked for a water usage blueprint that took a variety of interests into account. Recognizing that the task was complicated, the WRIA committee was allowed five years to fashion a proposal that folks in the area could agree on. But in the end, those who didn't want a plan in place effectively forfeited the opportunity for local voices to be heard.

The result is, the Washington Department of Ecology (and/or the courts) will have to step in and call the shots in the watersheds of western Klickitat County. How does that expedite the processing of water rights applications? Does anyone seriously believe the courts will be quicker?

It is beyond ironic that those who have blasted the WDOE for not listening to their views in support of Condit Dam have effectively stonewalled five years of watershed planning. That forces the WDOE to decide for us how the water will be allocated, and makes it much less likely that new water rights will be granted here anytime soon.

At last week's White Salmon City Council meeting, Wil Keyser, director of the city's Public Works Department and a WRIA committee member, publicly called the collapse of the watershed planning process a "disaster and a disgrace." Sadly for our area, that assessment is right on the mark.

JB