

# The Leader

## DNR boundary hearing brings support, questions

Posted Tuesday, November 1, 2016 7:25 pm



The majority of people who spoke at an Oct. 25 public hearing in Quilcene favored the state Department of Natural Resources proposal to expand the Dabob Bay Natural Area Preserve and the Devils Lake Natural Resources Conservation Area. A DNR official noted that no privately owned land would be acquired unless the seller was willing, and due to how the process works, there is expected to be no loss of property tax to local taxing districts. Photo by Viviann Kuehl

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Most of the those attending an Oct. 25 hearing in Quilcene voiced support of the state Department of Natural Resources proposal to expand the Dabob Bay Natural Area Preserve (NAP) and Devils Lake Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA).

Devils Lake is an upland lake near the entrance to Quilcene Bay on Mount Walker's northeastern flank. The Devils Lake proposal would add 415 acres to the current Devils Lake NRCA of 80 acres to extend its boundaries southward from the lake and eastward to Quilcene Bay, protecting the lake, peat bog, wetland and forest to coastal bluff shoreline.

A map is available at [file.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp\\_devils\\_lake\\_map.pdf](http://file.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp_devils_lake_map.pdf).

The proposed expansion area is currently common school trust land, said DNR officials. If approved by Peter Goldmark, Washington State commissioner of Public Lands, an equivalent area elsewhere within the Quilcene School District boundaries would be transferred into school trust lands.

The Dabob Bay NAP was established in 1984 to protect the salt marsh and sand spit. In 2009 it was expanded to include feeder bluffs. The current area of 2,771 acres protects shoreline, marsh and forestland in what has been recognized by DNR and others as a rare, high-quality ecosystem.

The current proposal would add a section of the Toandos Peninsula between Thorndyke and Dabob bays, including 940 acres of state trust lands and 2,700 potential acres of private land, including homes and businesses.

A map of the Dabob Bay area and proposed expansion is at [file.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp\\_dabob\\_bay\\_map.pdf](http://file.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp_dabob_bay_map.pdf).

The DNR prioritizes land for natural areas based on high conservation values for ecological systems, scenic qualities, wildlife habitat and low-impact recreational opportunities. The area designation comes with no obligation to private landowners and no regulations; it allows DNR staff to discuss potential purchase of property with landowners.

“It doesn’t mean that everything in the Natural Area becomes DNR property,” emphasized John Gamon, assistant manager of the DNR Conservation, Recreation and Transactions Division. The DNR is restricted to buying private property at market rates, as determined by independent appraisers, from willing sellers, he said.

“Nobody has to sell,” Gamon noted. “This gives us the authority to ask people if they are interested in selling to DNR.”

DNR competes with other state agencies to get funding for prioritized purchases, he noted, and is not interested in small properties with houses.

“We wouldn’t ever start with small parcels with high value residences on them,” Gamon said.

Any public land in the area would be swapped for equivalent public lands in the same taxing districts, he noted.

“So far, the track record has been pretty good,” said Gamon when questioned about that process. “We’ve been able to find suitable swaps. We’re looking for overall value, so there can be a slight gain or reduction in acreage. It’s a complicated process, and it’s not always readily apparent at the start where we will find equivalent value. We do what we can to insure that properties are equivalent.”

A crowd of about 60 heard testimony from 25 people, of whom 21 expressed support or strong support for the proposed boundaries, and three expressed economic concerns regarding property tax revenue. All agreed that the Dabob area is special.

Supporters included spokespeople for Olympic Forest Coalition, Jefferson Land Trust, Taylor Shellfish, Northwest Watershed Institute, Hood Canal Environmental Council and individual residents of Dabob and Jefferson County.

Many felt that the protection guaranteed by the DNR was important, but a few questioned whether protection was necessary.

Dabob Bay resident Jeffrey Delia said that he has not observed much change in the last 40 years, and questioned the need for spending money on protection when there are so many other pressing societal concerns. Seventeen others testified that the need to preserve the area is pressing, citing regional patterns of growth and change.

“This is an exceptional part of the world,” said Erik Kingfisher, stewardship director at Jefferson Land Trust, noting habitat changes over the last 100

to 150 years. “These features are fleeting. In 100 years, and I know it’s hard to get your head around that, but I think there will be a lot of change. We can’t protect this area without a dedicated mechanism for that.”

“The [Jefferson County] Comprehensive Plan, good as it is, cannot assure land will be protected,” said former county commissioner John Austin, citing an example of 800 people bringing Port Ludlow tree-cutting concerns to the commissioners. “The DNR has a good record of being accessible to the voters of Jefferson County.”

Several people testified to the integrity and efficiency of the DNR, and the need to protect sensitive habitat.

“Our generation has a duty of doing better planning for the future,” said Mike Dougherty, retired Clallam County commissioner. He urged consideration of costs of restoration, which amounted to \$342 million on the Elwha River, in his supporting testimony. “There’s an important lesson in sensitive areas like this. Preserving natural functions is so important,” he said.

Bill Taylor of Taylor Shellfish stated that the shellfish industry depends on clean water, which in turn depends on high quality environments, for shellfish jobs, as well as tourism and recreational use. Quilcene’s major industry is shellfish production.

“As landowners, it’s all to our benefit,” said Barbara Paulson, a 45-year Toandos resident. She said only one rat-infested, abandoned house was removed in the current area.

“People don’t want to pay more taxes,” said Jeff Chapman, Jefferson County assessor. “I have no problem with Devils Lake or Dabob. I have a problem with removing property from our tax rolls.”

If everything in the proposed area was purchased by DNR, said Chapman, as much as \$39 million could come off the tax rolls, offset by \$7 million coming in, he said. “If the Navy wants to give us \$30 million we could put it to good use.”

Quilcene resident Tom Brotherton asked about making up an unspecified prior loss of income to the Quilcene fire district. Gamon said he was not sure what those potential revenue losses might be. Brotherton did not have any figures.

Peter Bahls, director of Northwest Watershed Institute, pointed out that the property that DNR has prioritized for protection, with unstable slopes and wetlands, is subject to restrictions that make a third to a half of the area essentially a dead asset, with no revenue to the junior taxing districts. Private industry rules and more available harvest allow an important economic benefit in the transferred property, noted Bahls. He listed the hundreds of acres of land available for transfer in each taxing district.

“DNR has an excellent track record,” Bahls said. “There was no net loss of fire department value; in fact, in Quilcene it almost doubled.”

“The NAP program has proven to protect the junior taxing districts from harm and loss of revenue,” said Patricia Jones, Olympic Forest Coalition executive director.

“Perfection is not the enemy of the good,” said Harry Springs, a fourth generation Washington resident and strong supporter, who suggested that the area exclude already-developed communities, and that DNR provide workshops and/or forums to address economic concerns.

Resident George Yount, expressing support for schools, hospitals and fire departments, and echoing many speakers, said, “I say bring it on. We’re trying to save a heritage here.”

The proposal's public comment period ended Oct. 21. DNR staff are to compile information for Goldmark to render a decision.

(Viviann Kuehl is a freelance writer living in Quilcene. She is a member of the Quilcene School District Board of Directors.)