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Sunday August 25, 2002



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'We don't want another Aldercrest'

By Venice Buhain



Photo by Greg Ebersole

Kelso Planning Director Kent Anderson walks through property west of Aldercrest at the intersection of Grim Road and Banyon Drive, near where landowners have plans for a 20-lot housing development and mobile home park. An overhaul of city zoning rules would limit the number of homes allowed on hilly areas of east Kelso.

Nearly five years after losing more than 120 homes in the Aldercrest disaster, Kelso officials are considering their first measures to prevent new hillside neighborhoods from sliding.

As part of a major rewrite of city zoning codes, city staff is proposing to sharply increase minimum lot sizes in the city's east hills:

n East of Cedar Falls Drive, in the lower of the Three Rivers Estates subdivision, minimum lot size would increase from 6,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet, or a quarter acre.

n On steep areas east of South Vista Way, the minimum lot size would balloon to 110,000 square feet --- about two-and-a-half acres. This new zoning designation, called the estate zone, also encompasses part of the Three Rivers Estates project.

n West of Aldercrest --- in areas around Grim Road, Haussler Road and south to Cedar Falls Drive --- minimum lots sizes would be 15,000 square feet.



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n The Aldercrest disaster area, including 11 homes, would be zoned for open space, with no homes allowed. Planning commissioners have asked city staff to see if there could be different kind of zone for the houses that already exist.

By decreasing the number of homes on hill slopes, the city hopes to reduce soil disturbance, and developers would have to prove that each lot has a stable place to build a house, said City Planning Director Kent Anderson.

The proposed rules are in part to protect against lawsuits like a multimillion dollar lawsuit by Aldercrest homeowners, who argued that the city shouldn't have allowed the development because of known slide hazards.

Yet Kelso, mostly developed in the flat land between the Cowlitz River and the freeway, faces pressure to develop the vacant land towards the hilly east end of the city, which includes ancient landslides.

There already has been interest in developing land off Grim Road and Banyon Drive: a 20-lot subdivision by Aldercrest property owner Rod Wright and a mobile home park by property owner Nick Divine, also of Kelso. Neither have submitted plans but have described them at city planning commission meetings.

"I don't like being real conservative with development," Anderson said. "I wish there were people out there developing."

Some builders say the city is taking the right steps by acknowledging the risks of building in its hills.

"This addresses the geologic issues," said Eric Hansen, director for the Lower Columbia Contractors' Association. "That's good for Kelso."

He said property owners might be more interested in developing in the hills when the city has shown what the potential problems are.

"Maybe you won't be happy if you're a current owner," he said. "But don't you as a consumer want to know what you're getting?"

But others told Planning Commissioners Wednesday night the zoning imposed too many restrictions on too little evidence.

Three Rivers Estates developer Randy Bjur told the Planning Commissioners the new "estate zone" would cut the 396 proposed lots in his project, the largest subdivision ever proposed in Kelso, to 128 lots. Just before the

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Aldercrest disaster, Bjur received preliminary city approval for the first 64 lots of the subdivision.

Bjur said earlier in the week until the city has evidence that land east of South Vista Way is unstable, planners should stick to the original master plan.

A geologist hired by Bjur four years ago said the hill's stability problems were temporary and measures could be taken to prevent slides. However, three separate geotechnical consultants have found or mapped major active slides in the area.

Bjur and other landowners appealed to planning commissioners to do more studies before changing zoning.

"There is not a rational reason for it," Bjur said earlier in the week. "I don't think there is the data."

Planning commissioners acknowledged development pressures on Wednesday by giving Bjur a month to find evidence that there is little slide risk or that slide risks can be reduced. The zoning issue will be revisited in September.

The area east of Interstate 5 between Haussler and Grim Roads had such a long history of sliding that the state moved the freeway west of the Coweeman River to more stable ground in the late 1970s.

Having fewer homes is less important than taking measures to prevent water from saturating the hillsides, which makes them unstable, geologist Scott Burns, a professor at Portland State University who has studied sliding in the Kelso east hills.

"The best way to be careful is not to build on it," Burns said.

The second best way is to build and maintain water drainage and collection systems for subdivisions, he said.

"It's easier to do it if you have lower density," Burns said.

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