Wetlands Considered Holistically

Testimony for the Planning Commission by Scott T. Wellman

At the previous hearing before the Planning Commission I submitted my testimony entitled "In Defense of the Wild," addressing what I like to call the three Ws: wetland, wildlife, and well-being. Although we are disputing the future status of an 11.47 acre tract of land, Associate Planner Jamie Fleckenstein was at pains to point out that only 3.09 acres of the land can be labeled wetland, and of that land the Premier development will only obliterate 1.06 acres, leaving us the consolation of 2.03 acres. Using these figures the planning department is hoping to convey how comparatively slight will be the impact of Premier's roads and homes on the wetland basin. However, with all due respect, we find this to be an outrageously trivializing tactic in the planning department's lust for development at all cost.

Although there is a technical definition for how wet land must be to be designated wetland, the fact is that wetlands are very rarely equally wet, just as creeks are never equally deep. The hired experts have traipsed all over the wetland basin and found sufficient wetness here and insufficient wetness there, establishing a jigsaw approach to the designation of these 11.47 acres, when in actuality the whole area can legitimately be called a wetland. This is common sense. We don't reduce the land to component parts due to naturally occurring differences in patches of soli. Rather we consider the whole, and how it functions as a whole. This is basic ecology.

Countless examples abound of how an ecosystem has collapsed because just one component of it was altered. Just the other day, for example, I read of the devastating impact the release of lake trout in Yellowstone Lake had on the native population of cutthroat, leading to a chain reaction of dire consequences for predatory birds and mammals.

It is extremely important then to consider the eleven and a half acres as part of a larger

ecosystem which consists of Baker Creek, the riparian forest, the wetland basin, the slopes of the basin, and the oak ridge above. All of these components contribute to making a functioning ecosystem that benefits the land, grasses and plants, living organisms from bugs to birds, and ultimately, human beings.

According to experts, "The most important factor producing wetlands is flooding" (Wikipedia). In looking at the surrounding topography of the Baker Creek Wetland Basin it is easy to understand how the creek has overflowed its banks and carved out of the ridge an extent of land equal to the basic task of absorbing flood water. Over countless centuries this flooding created a wetland, considered, scientists say, as "the most biologically diverse of all ecosystems, serving as home to a wide range of plant and animal life" (Wikipedia). Consider then, how this biodiversity will be fatally compromised by wedging seven homes into the the slopes of the basin, and in cramming another seven homes into the proposed cul de sac area, just feet from where the creek takes a hard bend to the north, resulting in several verifiable flood paths.

In "The Oregonian" for May 7th we could read of a United Nations report alerting the whole world to the looming extinction of a million species of plants and animals due to the loss of native habitat to agricultural use and urban development. While the question of what becomes of the Baker Creek Wetland Basin might not seem crucial to some, we know it will be crucial to all the animals and plants that have made this place their home for hundreds of generations, and for the health and well-being of those of us who can appreciate them. The late Doctor Oliver Sacks spoke of the "restorative" and "invigorating" power of nature on not just his neurologically challenged patients, but on all human beings who struggle to make sense of the grinding complexity of our modern life. It behooves us all to do our part to make this world better by leaving it alone!