

September 6, 2011

City of Bainbridge Island City Council
280 Madison Avenue
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110

The Honorable Kim Brackett
The Honorable Kirsten Hytopoulos
The Honorable Debbi Lester
The Honorable Bob Scales
The Honorable Hilary Franz
The Honorable Bill Knobloch
The Honorable Barry Peters

Dear Mayor Hytopoulos and Council members Brackett, Franz, Knobloch, Lester, Peters and Scales:

I have read Ms Dorner's (Puget Sound Partnership) letter of August 30, and since it appears to be written to counter comments I made at the recent special session, I would like to offer the following response:

First, my remarks were intended to address proposed changes in the Shoreline Residential zone that would require increased buffer widths and restoration of native riparian vegetation.

Since under this proposal over 50% of the island's waterfront homes would be "non-conforming structures", this has become one of the most contentious issues in the SMP update and has divided the community. From that point of view, it seemed appropriate to question the relative importance of these two issues within the context of broader regional efforts to restore the health of Puget Sound. In other words, looking at the big picture, how important are they compared to other threats and priorities?

I cited the work of the Puget Sound Partnership because I think they provide a useful framework from which to consider these issues. They have done outstanding work analyzing the ecological condition of the Sound, identifying the most significant threats facing it and developing a set of prioritized action items to help meet the larger goal of restoring the Sound to health by 2020.

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Their "Guiding Principles for Ecosystem Management in Puget Sound" (2008 Action Agenda, page 32) includes the following:

- Address threats and choose opportunities with the highest potential magnitude of impact.
- Address threats with the highest level of urgency. (e.g., how imminent is the threat?)
- Use strategies that have a reasonable certainty of effectiveness and reflect a balanced precautionary and adaptive approach.

Does the need for expanded buffers and shoreline vegetation restoration rise to this level of prioritization? Reviewing their list of urgent threats and action items, it appears not.

Out of 146 near-term actions aligned with direct and indirect threats, only one deals with the issue of buffer/riparian restoration actions by private landowners (Priority B.3, page 47), and this recommends providing incentives to encourage voluntary restoration projects.

So, again, looking at the big picture, how important are expanded buffers/native vegetation restoration compared to other urgent threats and priorities? It appears that they are considered to have some lower level of urgency and priority. Unfortunately, Ms. Dorner's letter does not address this issue nor provide any additional evidence to the contrary.

To further respond to some specific comments in Ms. Dorner's letter:

2009 State of the Sound and 2009 Technical Memo (Identification, Definition and Rating of Threats to the Recovery of Puget Sound).

In both documents, the threat category "Residential, industrial, commercial, port and shipyard development" is a very broad category that includes the combined threat posed by all of the development serving the 4 million people in the Puget Sound basin. It makes no distinction between low impact single-family use and intensive industrial /commercial use, or between existing development and new development, or between shoreline development and upland development.

Certainly the cumulative effect of development (and resulting alteration and loss of habitat) justifies the "very high" threat rating for this category.

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However, Ms. Dorner's conclusion that this means that "residential development along the shorelines is an important threat to Puget Sound", troubling. There is a lack of nexus here between the combined effect of millions of actions at a macro scale and the contributing effect of one relatively small sub-category. In terms of logic, this is like saying:

- Global warming is a very high threat to the ecosystem
- Your Prius emits greenhouse gases
- Therefore, your Prius is an important threat to the ecosystem.

A contributing threat maybe, but compared to, say, a coal-fired power plant...?

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My comments were directed toward the issue of expanded buffers and riparian restoration, not shoreline armoring. In any case, the fact that the Puget Sound Partnership has targeted shoreline armoring has little relevance to the issue of buffers and vegetation restoration. And, given that shoreline armoring is specifically addressed the Action Agenda, while buffers/vegetation restoration are not, suggests that the latter are not considered to have the same level of priority.

Item #1 (Habitat Alteration, question 2, page 21)

I urge you to read this section in full. It identifies six broad categories of threats. For the category of habitat alteration, there is a description of the cumulative threat to Puget Sound from activities throughout the basin, including loss of marsh habitat and wetlands, removal of old-growth forest, massive increase in impervious surfaces, construction of dams, spillage of oil and hazardous waste, etc. It is clear that the concern about habitat alteration and loss of habitat is not just directed at the nearshore environment but at the entire ecosystem including river systems, upland forests and meadows, marshes, wetlands, etc.

Conservation of habitat and reduction of pollution are considered to be the most urgent priorities. From this point of view, we on Bainbridge Island might make a more important contribution if we focused on controlling pollution (by better managing runoff from our streets and parking lots, addressing failing septic systems, providing better control of run-off from upland property, etc) and conserving existing areas of high value habitat (e.g., by supporting the Bainbridge Island Land Trust in their effort to acquire and preserve open space). These are the types of actions consistent with the priorities of the Action Agenda, while mandatory restoration of shoreline vegetation is not.

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Item #2 (Protection of Habitat, Section A2.2, page 37)

Section A.2 addresses the protection of intact habitat ("Permanently protect the intact areas of the Puget Sound ecosystem that still function well"), and is not relevant to the proposal to require restoration of riparian buffers.

Item #3 (Native Species and Restoration, Section B.1, page 45)

There is no disagreement that native species should be used in restoration projects, or that restoration projects will have ecosystem benefits. On the other hand, there is nothing in this section suggesting that forced restoration of native vegetation on existing residential property is a high priority.

In conclusion, I continue to question the relative importance of expanded buffers and restoration requirements for existing homes along our shoreline. I think the proposal is so controversial that it has become a distraction from the larger, and more important, goals of the SMP, which needs community support to be successful. From this point of view I urge you to consider the following:

1. Revise the proposed regulations to make existing shoreline residences categorically exempt from the increased buffer and riparian vegetation restoration requirements.
2. Add incentive programs to encourage private homeowners to voluntarily undertake and maintain restoration projects (as recommended in Section B.3 of the Action Agenda), including:
 - Outreach and education
 - Direct financial incentives
 - Indirect financial incentives (e.g., property tax relief)
 - Technical assistance
 - Conservation leasingIf I'm not mistaken, this is the approach Port Townsend used in their SMP update (which has been completed and approved by the DOE).
3. To meet the standard of "no net loss", focus more attention on efforts to control pollution entering the Sound, such as improved management of storm water runoff from Island streets and parking lots and better monitoring of failing septic systems.

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Regarding the importance of priorities as part of an overall strategy, the Puget Sound Partnership has written:

"While numerous threat reduction objectives could be set, the direction from the Leadership Council is to set a few important targets first, as the Partnership needs to be strategic about focusing the regional work and our own efforts."
(2009 State of the Sound, p 64.)

This seems to be a very sensible strategy, and worth considering as a model for decision making about the update of our SMP.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



Michael Whalen
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Cc, Jeannette Dorner, Puget Sound Partnership
Bainbridge Island Planning Commission