

County Council

21 Feb. 2008

Mike Cooper
Dave Gossett
John Koster
Dave Somers
Brian Sullivan

Somers Promotes Moratorium on 'Fully Contained Communities'

An attempt to place a moratorium on building "fully contained communities" in rural Snohomish County came up one vote shy of passage before the county council Feb. 20. "But this issue isn't going away," said County Council Chair Dave Somers, who introduced the proposal. "There remains a critical need to take a time out while the council reviews the rules governing these controversial developments."

M/S #609
3000 Rockefeller Avenue
Everett, WA 98201-4046
425-388-3494
FAX 425-388-3496
TTY/TDD 425-388-3700

The proposed moratorium garnered three favorable votes from the four councilmembers present; however, emergency ordinances require a super majority of four votes for passage.

Fully contained communities essentially are minicities created outside of existing urban growth areas. Such developments are allowed under the state's Growth Management Act. Rules require innovative design and a mix of land uses providing a balance of employment, retail and commercial services, schools, public facilities and a variety of residential styles at urban densities sufficient to support the needs of residents.

Two proposals for fully contained communities within Snohomish County are currently being pursued by developers, but no formal permit requests have been filed. One project named Falcon Ridge proposes to build about 6,000 homes on 3,000 acres just west of Lake Roesiger. A second fully contained community is being looked at for 2,000 acres in the Seven Lakes area, north of the Tulalip Reservation.

In 2005, the county council amended county code to allow for fully contained communities. "This is an action [moratorium] I feel is necessary," said Somers. "We have a new council this year and we need to take a new look at some of the actions and policies we have in place. There have already been pre-application meetings regarding the development at Lake Roesiger. It would be far better to take a time out now rather than go down a long expensive permitting process road first."

Councilmember John Koster opposed the emergency ordinance. "No one is more opposed to the vesting of applications for fully contained communities than I am – at this point in time in the Seven Lakes region or anywhere else in the county" said Koster.

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“But there’s no emergency,” Koster added. “A moratorium is an extreme remedy for an extreme risk, and we have had no discussions or presentations that we are at extreme risk. There is a perception perhaps, but the council controls whether [a fully contained community proposal] flies or dies.”

A moratorium now, he said, is justified to avoid the possibility of permit applications being formally filed and such projects becoming vested before the council has a chance to review and probably change the county regulations governing fully contained communities. Once vested, such developments would not be subject to any subsequent rule changes the council might make.

In promoting the moratorium, Somers cited the inevitable traffic jams on rural roads with little probability of state road funding assistance. The failure last November of Proposition One, the \$46 billion regional road and transit measure, he said, left the county with even fewer resources to cope with traffic congestion throughout the county. “I firmly believe that the costs to the taxpayers for new roads, schools, police and fire protection, and other infrastructure would be huge. These developments never fully pay their own way,” he said.

Noting similar developments in King County, Somers said, “Fully contained communities are not working as promised. The idea of a fully contained community with jobs and residences in the same place has not worked out in King County. It’s a nice idea not based on reality.”

Instead, he said, “they are just large housing developments in rural areas with no roads or infrastructure. I don’t think they are appropriate in Snohomish County.”

Somers said fully contained communities threatened valuable forest resource lands, and the county lacks the financial resources to provide needed urban infrastructure for existing communities, let alone coping with any new, very large minicities. “You can’t protect productive forest lands by paving them over,” said Somers. “I’m also concerned about setting up competition for limited tax resources with existing cities.”

“I think it would be a wise move to take a time out,” he said.

Councilmembers Brian Sullivan and Mike Cooper supported the moratorium. Cooper, a former firefighter, cited the pressures such large developments would place on rural volunteer fire departments and local water supplies.

After the vote, Somers said he would likely reintroduce the moratorium as a regular ordinance, requiring a lengthy review process, including scrutiny by the county planning commission.

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CONTACT: Fred Bird
Council Public Information Officer
425-388-3873; Cell 206-200-2514
fred.bird@co.snohomish.wa.us