

County Council

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County Council rejects funding for South Snohomish flood map studies

**Mike Cooper
Dave Gossett
John Koster
Dave Somers
Brian Sullivan**

Bringing possible closure to contentious development issues in the South Snohomish Urban Growth Area (UGA), the Snohomish County Council voted 4-1 January 30th to not spend any more public funds to appeal a 2005 federal rule change that significantly restricted floodplain development. Instead, the council directed county staff to investigate if the county could change its regulations to ease the burdens placed on local businesses by the federal action.

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“These businesses and the airport are valuable assets for the community,” said County Council Chair Dave Somers. “Our Planning and Development Services Department will be working with them to see if we can make changes to the county building code to allow them greater flexibility to protect their investments.”

The South Snohomish UGA lies in the Snohomish River’s floodplain just across the river from the city of Snohomish. Located within the UGA are two major and long-existing businesses, Harvey Airfield and the Seattle-Snohomish Mill, as well as over 30 small businesses along Airport Road. In 2005, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a revised floodplain designation map, changing the area’s designation from “flood fringe” to “density fringe.” That change automatically made all the businesses “non-conforming uses,” kicking in county land use rules forbidding most changes or improvements to business properties.

“I strongly support looking at ways to help these businesses out of the non-conforming use trap so they can prosper,” said Councilmember Dave Gossett, “but we need to do it in an environmentally responsible way that avoids additional fill in the floodplain.”

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Council rejects funding, continued

At issue were proposals to spend \$211,031 in taxpayer funds for additional environmental studies necessary for submitting a formal Conditional Letter of Map Revision (CLOMAR) to FEMA, asking the agency to reconsider the its floodplain map changes. County staff has consistently said that it is highly unlikely that FEMA would change the map, but the agency might be open to easing some of the restrictive building code regulations.

“We should not be spending county money on what is bound to be a failed effort,” said Somers. “Expanding development in a floodplain is a bad idea, but we need to assist the existing businesses.”

Councilmember John Koster’s lone vote for paying for the studies came after his motion to defer making a decision for 30 days was defeated. Koster said delaying a decision for a month would allow the county to study possible code changes while keeping funding of the studies as an option if FEMA would not allow any code changes.

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