

**BOARD OF ISLAND COUNTY COMMISSIONERS MINUTES OF MEETING  
OCTOBER 14, 2009 – SPECIAL SESSION**

The Board of Island County Commissioners met in Special Session on October 14, 2009 beginning at 6:00 p.m. at the Island County Annex Building, Basement Meeting Room, 1 NE Sixth Street, Coupeville, WA. The purpose of the Special Session was to consider whether to accept, modify and accept, or reject the Whidbey Island Conservation District's and Snohomish Conservation District's proposed system of special monetary assessments on land following public comment. John Dean, Chairman, Helen Price Johnson, Member, and Angie Homola, Member were present.

Attendance: Approximately 40 members of the public and press

Also attending were the Whidbey Island Conservation District Board of Supervisors Fran Einterz, Karen Krug, and Duke LaBaron; Stu Trefry from the Washington State Conservation Commission; Carolyn Henri, Natural Resource Economist and private consultant hired to work on the analysis; and Karen Bishop, Manager and Stacy Smith, Natural Resource Planner and Low Impact Development Coordinator from the Whidbey Island Conservation District.

The following, as a result of the public hearing, are on file with the Clerk of the Board:

- *Attendance sheets*
- *Special Session Notice*
- *Power Point Presentation and Hand-outs*

Chairman Dean opened the public hearing to consider whether to accept, modify and accept, or reject the Whidbey Island Conservation District's and Snohomish Conservation District's proposed system of special monetary assessment on land. The Board, he said, would not make a decision at the public hearing but rather hear a presentation from the Conservation District and take public comment on the proposal. The Board would meet in Special Session on October 20 at 6:00 p.m. on Camano for the same purpose. Following both public hearings the Board will return to the County Seat for a decision which could be as soon as October 26 (not a firm date). Chairman Dean turned the meeting over to Karen Bishop from the Whidbey Conservation District for her Power Point presentation.

Ms. Bishop provided a Power Point presentation (*on file with the Clerk of the Board*) explaining the function of the Conservation Districts and the proposal for a special assessment that will benefit both Whidbey (the assessment collected on Whidbey would be used by the Whidbey Island Conservation District to serve the residents of Whidbey) and Camano (the assessment collected on Camano would be used by the Snohomish Conservation District to serve the residents of Camano). Commentary included:

- History of Conservation Districts
- What is happening with forest lands and farms with a look at farms by size and what is being grown
- State statutes providing for the assessment
- Support organizations
- Washington State Districts
- The Districts (13) with assessments
- Work of the WICD and SCD
- Natural Resource Planning and Technical Assistance
- Preserving sustainable farms and forest lands

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- Areas of activities and programs
- Low impact development
- Public outreach, education and partnership
- Estimated assessment revenue
- System of assessment
- Assessment process
- The current WICD budget

Members of the public proposed that the Board wait to make a decision until resolution of the *Mason County* lawsuit.

Mr. Trefry from the Washington State Conservation Commission remarked that the Mason County assessment was passed by the Mason County Board of Commissioners in a way that was not in agreement, in the Commission's view, with State law. As a result of the lawsuit, the Commission spent nearly a year gathering comments and working on administrative code to clarify what an assessment is and the process for obtaining an assessment. The resulting code (WAC) helped the \* Okanogan and \* Kittitas districts more recently, and now the Whidbey and Snohomish Districts, with their assessment proposals. Mr. Trefry said that the Whidbey and Snohomish Conservation Districts went above and beyond what was required by code to implement the process for assessment. Overturning the *Mason County* assessment only applies to Mason County and possibly Pierce County; the fact pattern for the Whidbey and Snohomish Conservation Districts is very different than that for Mason County.

At this point Chairman Dean invited to the microphone, in order of the attendance sheets on file with the Clerk of the Board, those who wished to comment for or against the proposed assessment. Each speaker was allowed approximately two minutes in order to provide everyone an equal opportunity to address the Conservation District and Board of Commissioners. Concerns and opinions by those who support and did not support the proposed assessment included:

- Funding, inability, and lack of County personnel to implement the proposal
- Definition of *assessment* versus *tax*
- Citizens are being overly taxed (statistics were provided)
- For those who use the services of the Conservation District there should be a fee for service
- A tax revolt will occur if the assessment is approved
- It was argued that alternate funding is available to the Districts through grants and the marketplace (grants, however, are competitive and matching funds an issue)
- The proposal should be a decision of the voting public
- Exclusion of forest lands was confusing (process is too complicated and expensive for the County)
- Propose a smaller amount
- The Conservation Districts should be supported for what they provide. Environmental protection is as important as police and fire protection. Conservation Districts are a way to control natural resources.
- Request that the Board re-consider other fees and taxes, most notably the septic inspection fee.

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- Makes more sense to have one agency specializing in what it does rather than regulating through federal, state or local municipalities.
- Island County pays one of the lowest tax rates as a community in the state
- *Need* versus *want*
- Delay assessment until the economy improves
- It would be difficult for the Board to find that every parcel assessed will receive some special benefit
- Provision for relief from assessment for low income senior citizens
- The needs should be those that would promote private enterprise
- The assessment is the only pot of money available to address the priorities of Whidbey and Camano

A member of the audience asked if the Board's decision on the assessment could be put off to 2010 to provide an opportunity for the public to be better informed.

It was explained that if the decision were delayed the process would need to start over.

It was also asked that the Board make a decision sooner rather than later to provide ample time to gather signatures for a petition in opposition by the deadline of December 15.

Chairman Dean closed public comment and provided the floor to the District for closing remarks.

Conservation District Board members concluded by saying:

- Staff work hard and do as much as possible on a volunteer basis. People should be aware that the educated, informed, and respected staff are not, by any means, overpaid.
- While some may not agree with the proposal, District board members would be willing to meet with anyone to talk about the issues.
- The Districts have no ability to charge for services and they do as much as possible to raise money.
- Money received from the County is more efficiently used than taxpayer money received from the state or federal governments (non-regulatory).

The Special Session adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
ISLAND COUNTY, WASHINGTON

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John Dean, Chairman

ATTEST:

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Helen Price Johnson, Member

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Elaine Marlow  
Clerk of the Board

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Angie Homola, Member