

GUEST COLUMNISTS

Please Continue Being Champions for Kids

SCHOOL NEWS

By Andy Wolf



As my time with Yelm Community Schools slips away, I would like to thank the community and surrounding area for the tremendous support they give our students, staff and schools.

Each and every day of my time here I have

witnessed some act of kindness or support for kids by people outside the school system. It is this willingness to get involved and find ways to improve and enhance what we do for kids that makes Yelm very special.

You have helped create a culture that provides opportunities for students to have great success both in school and beyond. Thank you for being champions for kids.

As I'm sure you have all heard by now, Brian Wharton will be the next superintendent of Yelm Community Schools. Throughout his career, whether it was as a teacher, coach or administrator, he has been recognized for his excellence. He has a

tremendous vision of education and is a true advocate for kids.

I'm excited to work with him over the next few months so the transition will be as seamless as possible. He will no doubt support and create systems that will benefit our students. I wish him the best and am confident he will have continued success in his new role.

In closing, I urge you to continue your unwavering support for our schools, staff and children. There are still many challenges for school districts across the state to overcome. Yelm, like all other districts statewide, will face uncertainty about state funding, the cur-

rent teacher shortage and dynamic and ever-changing educational standards put forth by state and federal agencies. Locally, you still will need to find some sort of relief for the continued growth of our student population. None of these issues are insurmountable but are opportunities for this community to once again show its greatness and find ways to make good things happen for kids today and into the future.

It has been my honor to serve the students, staff and community of Yelm the past 14 years. I will always remember my time here fondly and with great regard.

Thank you.

Thurston County Invents \$42,000 Gopher Tax

BY GLEN MORGAN



The Thurston County Commissioners, in collusion with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have created a novel method of extracting additional tax dollars from prospective new homeowners in Washington state.

According to public documents, Thurston County staff has proposed a new gopher tax, up to \$42,000 for new homeowners who might consider building a home on or near land that might be inhabited by a rodent called the Mazama pocket gopher. This gopher tax (called "mitigation" in planner-speak) would be in addition to any other fees, permits, taxes or other costs that might be imposed on the construction of a new home in Thurston County.

The \$42,000 gopher tax is likely to become law later this year. Two of the three commissioners (Sandra Romero and Cathy Wolfe) have been supportive of the plan and the process for many years now. In addition, the Thurston County Planning Department has been largely controlled by the USFWS for years — many of the county employees are entirely subsidized by USFWS grant money. This has been a concern of property rights advocates for many years because local county staff won't question their orders from USFWS when their jobs depend on grant dollars from that federal agency.

Another aspect of the gopher tax that has local observers concerned is the current plan for much of this money to be transferred to an out-of-state nonprofit organization. Some of these gopher tax monies would stay in Thurston County, but it appears that after insiders get their cut, most of these funds would be sent to an out-of-state organization to manage local taxpayer-purchased land that could be set aside as bonus pocket gopher habitat.

The Pocket Gopher: Endangered Animal or Convenient Excuse?

The Thurston County Mazama pocket gopher was listed as a threatened species by the USFWS in April 2014. The listing process was controversial, and generated a lot of local citizen backlash as well as open ridicule by rural Thurston County residents directed at the commissioners, USFWS, and others who championed the original listing process. Most casual observers could see that something was very wrong in Thurston County.

Pocket gophers are considered pest rodents throughout most of the United States where they live. They are prolific and resilient creatures, often found in areas that have been heavily disturbed by agriculture or forestry efforts. In fact, the two largest concentrations of pocket gophers in Thurston County were found at the Olympia Airport and the surrounding industrial park and at the nearby Fort Lewis Firing Range.

Interestingly, the very gophers who USFWS claims are threatened, thrive in the middle of the artillery impact range on a piece of land that has been repeatedly pulverized, destroyed and burned for most of a century. Now, both USFWS and the Thurston County planning department argue that building a home on five acres will so harm

the gophers that a prospective homeowner must pay \$42,000 for permission to apply for a home — maybe.

Few observers accuse the USFWS of staying true to science or the facts when it comes to listing endangered species. On the east side of Washington state, USFWS attempted to list the "White Bluffs bladderpod" as an endangered species certain that this plant was so rare that it justified land restrictions. However, a local agricultural organization took samples of the "endangered" plant, conducted DNA tests, and determined that it was a very common weed found in many Western States. USFWS still plans to list the plant as endangered regardless of the truth or science. This wouldn't be the first time USFWS has listed an animal on the Endangered Species list that wasn't endangered. In some cases, the listed animals haven't even been proven to exist.

The pocket gopher listing process has become just as silly. No USFWS employee is willing to say how many of these endangered pocket gophers actually exist. In fact, they tend to become angry if anyone dares ask. Partly, this is because past population counts have proven to be wildly inaccurate.

Another reason government staff requires forced ignorance of the gopher population numbers is that it would lead to a logical question which they also refuse to answer — how many gophers do you need for them to no longer be considered threatened? None dare even think these thoughts, at least not if you want the grant gravy train to continue. Solving a real problem has never been the goal.

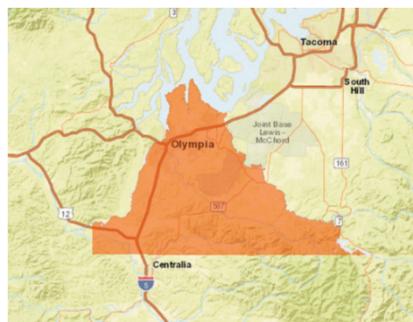
Interestingly enough, the DNA samples for this "endangered" gopher exist at the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, but they refuse to allow an outside organization to take samples for an independent DNA test. It is illegal for someone to trap a gopher and take independent samples — you could be arrested and get a criminal record. Willful ignorance appears to be the order of the day in Thurston County and at the USFWS. Science and the facts are entirely irrelevant. The process is the point and the punishment.

It Isn't About the Gopher

As the handful of extremists who have testified in favor of these pocket gopher property restrictions have publically stated in the past, "it isn't about the gopher." It is about the private property inhabited by the gopher. For those using the gopher as their excuse to legislate rules and taxes, it is about power, money and control. It will never be enough.

A casual review of these proposed gopher tax plans also reveals an effort by Thurston County planning staff (under the direction of the USFWS) to severely restrict the use of the homesite property, even after the gopher tax has been paid. The diagrams and concept homesite maps indicate restrictive size limits on the home, restriction of outbuildings, landscaping and even how far away from the home a dog house could be located. It appears that a "buffer" around the home will be "allowed" for a yard and maybe playground equipment, but the rest of the property will become "no touch" zones of some type.

Gopher habitat restrictions have been in place throughout rural Thurston County for



Map Courtesy US Fish and Wildlife Service
This map shows the area designated as Mazama pocket gopher habitat by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

several years. These have included forcing homeowners to hire a gopher site inspector to inspect the property to verify if the gophers live there (only between the months of June and October — if you need to build something else at a different time of year — you must wait until the gophers are more active).

Eventually, this changed to three different gopher site inspections by government gopher experts three times during the limited months gophers would be active. Despite the large amount of taxpayer resources dedicated to gopher plans, Thurston County failed to match their written policies with their actual policies, which has led to another lawsuit filed a few months ago by the Olympia Master Builders, Thurston County Chamber of Commerce and other local business organizations.

These past property restrictions, lack of science, evolving rules, and unpredictable outcomes has created resentment in the affected communities. Thurston County government has clearly lost credibility with rural residents. Many rural south county residents have complained that Thurston County refuses to adequately fund law enforcement while devoting massive resources towards gophers and other central planning schemes like increasing taxes on septic systems, increasing (or just inventing) wetland buffers, denying permits to make minor property improvements and building doggie parks.

Some of this resentment was translated into election outcomes in 2014, which confounded local political insiders. Newcomer Independent candidate Bud Blake became the newest Thurston County commissioner by defeating incumbent Democrat Karen Valenzuela who had been a champion of the gopher tax plans and private property restrictions. Commissioner Blake beat the incumbent veteran politician despite being new to politics. He was outspent by the Democratic incumbent almost three to one. His overwhelming support from the rural voters helped him achieve a nine point margin of victory.

The two legacy incumbent commissioners Romero and Wolfe have both stated they will not seek reelection. Instead, they are pushing staff to finalize the \$42,000 gopher tax and other rural property restrictions as early as this summer before they depart their offices. Two new commissioners will be confronting the gopher legacy when they take office next year. Many residents have begged the lame duck commissioners to delay imposing further harmful restrictions before they leave.

Those constituent requests have fallen



Photo Courtesy www.wethegoverned.com

The Mazama pocket gopher is at the center of a controversy surrounding property rights and development contrasted by species survival and its Threatened Species listing.

on deaf ears. In fact, County Manager Cliff Moore has often told local residents that it is just their tough luck because owning property in Thurston County is a gamble.

Thurston County a USFWS Test Location

For those who do not live in Thurston County, this story may seem like a parody of government gone awry. The absurdity seems like it could never happen elsewhere. However, bad ordinances and central planning schemes, no matter how absurd, tend to fester and spread like a disease to other local governments.

It is well known that USFWS is using Thurston County to test this concept of outsourcing local planning control to a federal agency like USFWS. USFWS tosses a few million dollars into the local jurisdiction, effectively rents the staff for a few years to do their bidding, then once the final nail is in the coffin for local residents, USFWS staff move on to their next victims.

It is interesting to note that most senior USFWS staff who laid the groundwork for this pocket gopher tax scheme have moved to other states to continue their harmful work on the taxpayer dime. They can laugh at Thurston County today, but nobody will be laughing when they experience the same rules where they live.

The commissioners have invited USFWS to direct and manage local planning resulting in this new proposed gopher tax scam. Rural residents certainly believe they have been targeted by the outgoing Democrat Commissioners Romero and Wolfe.

This absurd, but very innovative gopher tax provides another example of harmful political leadership in Thurston County. The scheme can still be prevented, but the effort to stop the gopher tax scam will take maximum public exposure, serious political will, and new commissioners who actually want to put people first for a change.

If you are interested in contacting Thurston County directly, they can be reached at 360-786-5440. It is always interesting to see how they spin their story. Taxpayer funded public information officers are standing by.

■ Glen Morgan was the grassroots director and the property rights director at the Freedom Foundation from 2011 until January 2015. He publishes commentary on his website www.WeTheGoverned.com.

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