

## **Land Acquisition in Grant County**

### **Proposed Oregon Parks and Recreation Department**

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) proposes to acquire 6,300 acres in Grant County north of Mt. Vernon referred to as Grouse Mountain. Acquisition of this property is compelling as a future park for the following reasons:

- Within its boundaries, the land provides ample representation of natural features that characterize the region, including geologic features, the variety of plant communities, the rich wildlife habitat, and the scenic vistas of that attracts visitors to the regions.
- The landowners are willing sellers/donors that have dedicated years of responsible land stewardship for which they would like to see carried on into the future and made available to the public to enjoy.
- Given its accessibility to local communities, it will provide opportunities for traditional uses, interpretation of local culture, as well as education programs accessible to a wide range of users.
- Creating the park will help the area reach a critical mass of regional attractions by joining places like Bates State Park, Clyde Holliday State Recreation Site, Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site, John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, designated Scenic Bikeways and Byways. The new park will attract new visitors while building capacity to accommodate the increased demand for services.

The acquisition of Grouse Mtn. is the beginning of a broader planning and development process that will engage the local community to decide how best to integrate the future park into the community, honor shared values, and contribute to the economy. Provided below are responses to specific issues raised at the recent public meeting in Mt. Vernon and by local residents.

#### **Recreation**

Concept of Potential Uses: Based on recreational surveys in the region, and the landscape and facilities at Grouse Mtn., OPRD has identified potential uses of the future park that include camping, hiking, horseback riding, wildlife-viewing, fishing, environmental education, and agricultural uses.

Park Planning: After acquisition, there will be an interim period during which OPRD will continue current land management practices. Interim and future comprehensive park planning will be conducted closely with the local community and Grant County commissioners to address the needs and concerns of local residents. Any early interim access will be addressed during the planning process.

Use of Structures: The property has two houses, an office, and outbuildings. The office and outbuildings would be integrated into future park management. The smaller house will likely provide employee housing for the future park manager. The larger house would likely be used as a multi-purpose visitor center and environmental education facility.

Environmental Education: Acquisition of the larger house provides a number of options of potential uses complementary to the park, particularly environmental education. Given the site's biological diversity, access and location, it could provide facilities for primary, secondary, post-secondary school environmental education.

## **Community Impacts**

Taxes: In the future, the proposed park will stimulate the local economy through additional visitors brought to the area and the services needed to support them. At some measurable point, the additional stimulus will compensate for any temporary loss of county ray revenue resulting from the acquisition of the property. Until we arrive to that point, the park will contribute to local services provided through districts and organizations that are normally compensated through the annual tax assessment. OPRD will provide compensation directly or indirectly to assessments for those services such as schools, hospitals, and fire control.

Private/Government Land Conversions: OPRD is working now and will continue to identify opportunities with other state agencies for sale/exchange of state-owned properties to private interests. For example, Division of State Land is completing a plan that identifies 2,100 acres in Grant County potentially that could be sold over the next four years.

Long Creek Rest Area: This ODOT facility north of Grouse Mtn. on Hwy. 395 has been identified by the former landowner as a potential state park facility. OPRD will work with the local community and ODOT to determine if this is a suitable, feasible and desired outcome.

Neighbor Relations: OPRD strives to maintain good relations with its neighbors. By and large, our employees are locals. To that end, we have met and will continue to work with neighbors to understand their needs and keep them informed of park management practices. This includes maintenance of perimeter fences, helping with escaped cattle, addressing potential trespass issues, and taking care of fire and weed management.

## **Natural Resources Management**

Fire Protection: Currently, OPRD pays the Oregon Department of Forestry for fire protection on most properties. It also contracts with local fire districts for fire protection not provided by ODF.

OPRD will pay for fire protection either to ODF or directly to the local fire district, or both, to be determined in discussions with the local fire district and ODF. In addition, OPRD will exercise prudent fire preventative and control measures as part of its park management.

Forest Practices: OPRD actively manages its forest lands throughout the state by selectively harvesting trees to enhance forest health, create diverse plant communities, and reduce fuels. With experienced staff foresters, OPRD would continue the current landowners' efforts to remove western juniper from the predominantly Ponderosa pine forest. It is anticipated that forest management would include commercial harvests depending on the project scale and market conditions.

Agricultural Uses: Currently, approx.40 acres of Beech Creek bottomlands are in hay production, with potentially additional irrigable acres that could be brought into production. It is OPRD's intent to continue the hay production for the foreseeable future. To restore the land, a cattle grazing was removed from the open range portion of the property by the current owner. OPRD does not intend to re-introduce cattle into the areas currently without fences and under restoration.

Water Rights: As a common practice, OPRD maintains the water rights it acquires with a property. OPRD will utilize and maintain its water rights for irrigation as part of its intended agricultural uses, including hay production.

Weed Control: The current owner has been very aggressive and successfully improved weed control on the property. OPRD will continue this effort, knowing that any pause in weed control will result in loss of past investments. OPRD has made considerable progress in controlling weeds at Bates and Clyde Holliday and remains committed to this effort.

Hunting: Providing hunting in state parks is not central to OPRD's mission and is normally not allowed due to potential conflicts with recreational users. However, hunting is allowed in specific state park properties, such as along the Willamette Greenway and Cottonwood Canyon State Park in Gilliam and Sherman counties. Hunting is one of many wildlife management tools that OPRD may use as part of its participation in the larger wildlife management framework administered by ODFW. For example, OPRD has considered hunting as a form of hazing to decrease browse damage on adjacent private lands.

