2012: Working Toward a Better Future

Spring is underway and 2012 already presents opportunities and challenges for Thurston County. I, with help from my fellow commissioners and constituents across the county, have been steadily moving forward on last year’s projects, as well as planning for the coming year. From preserving critical areas and boosting the local economy, to raising awareness of social issues, we will work together to improve the community we value so much.

Protecting our Critical Areas

As many of you have heard, Thurston County is long overdue in updating our Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) as mandated by the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA requires local governments to protect five types of precarious regions: fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, critical aquifer recharge areas, frequently flooded areas, and geologically hazardous areas such as bluffs. These regulations determine how development and redevelopment can safely occur on protected county lands.

Our CAO dates back to 1994 and many portions are now out of date and have failed to keep pace with changes in state law. Together, my fellow commissioners and I continue to work with our Planning staff to update comprehensive plans and development regulations to manage growth and prevent urban sprawl. The ordinance is currently being reviewed by our citizen Planning Commission and we hope to have a hearing before the Board of County Commissioners by late spring.

Enhancing Opportunities in Agritourism

This year, I will continue my work on agritourism as a means to revitalize south Thurston County’s economy. The Agritourism Overlay District (AOD) Ordinance recently passed after years of collaborative work between local farms, wineries, and other business owners to help farmers make a living all year round. Among other things, the ordinance will reduce regulatory barriers, streamline permitting, and help guide and encourage future development of agritourism operations within the overlay district. The ordinance covers activities including farmers markets, overnight farm stays, farm stores and bakeries, country inns, wineries, breweries and more. To help launch this new endeavor, I am working with an agritourism subcommittee to develop a showcase that will highlight our rural community’s numerous features. Stay tuned for more information about the fun and festivities that are certain to bring folks from far and wide to enjoy all that we have to offer!

Increasing Awareness

During this economic recession our community is also facing some issues that I am deeply concerned about. Primarily, I am referring to the county’s recent rise in child abuse that has come to the attention of the Department of Social and Health Services. April is Child Abuse Awareness month, so I am working with representatives of local welfare groups to bring the attention to child abuse in the community and to identify preventative measures to reduce harm to children. We want Thurston County residents to know that there is help available in a non-judgmental way for families and caregivers who feel overwhelmed and need someone to talk to.

Cleaning up After the Storm

By far the biggest event faced by our community in recent months was the January storm that disrupted so many of our lives. In an effort to assist with recovery, we have provided free storm debris dump sites and curb side pick-up, held a winter storm after-action review, and talked with constituents to learn more about what went well and what could be improved in the future. Most recently, Thurston County was one of 11 Washington counties included in a federal disaster declaration signed by President Barak Obama, making us eligible for FEMA assistance for damages and costs suffered during the storm. If you have any additional ideas or experiences you’d like to share, please contact my office.

With the onset of spring and flowers starting to bloom, we look forward to many new projects and opportunities for growth in Thurston County. Please contact me for additional details about any of these projects or to get involved.