



City of Tacoma, Mason Gulch Public Meeting Facilitation

Meeting Notes

May 25, 2016

Center for Urban Waters

Staff and Consultants

Claire Hoffman, ESA

Curtis LaPierre, ESA

Jeff Wale, Robinson Noble

Rick Powell, Robinson Noble

Jim Hall, Pierce County Tax Assessor's Office

Mike Lonergan, Pierce County Tax Assessor's Office

Shannon Brenner, City of Tacoma

Mike Carey, City of Tacoma

Lorna Mauren, City of Tacoma

Desiree Pooley, City of Tacoma

Brett Houghton, PRR, Facilitator

Tori Varyu, PRR, Note taker

Open House:

The meeting began with 20 minutes for participants to engage one-on-one and in small groups with individual experts at open-house style stations, including: Pierce County Tax Assessor's Office, City of Tacoma Urban Forestry, City of Tacoma Passive Open Space, City of Tacoma Municipal Code, and science experts from Robinson Noble and ESA.

Opening Remarks:

Lorna Mauren opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and reviewing the agenda.

Presentation:

Pierce County Tax Assessor's Office:

Mike Lonergan presented the Pierce County tax assessment evaluation process. He stated every property receives a green assessment card each year. Assessors visit properties every six years for more thorough review and updates. Properties in the City of Tacoma, Mason Gulch area, are scheduled for in person assessment soon. In person assessments are also done when there is new construction, during an appeals process, and for administrative appraisals.



Mike then discussed how views are considered in the property value. Mike reviewed the view rating structure, which is based on a subjective nine point -quality scale. He explained, for views to add value to a property, they need to be accessible from a common area of the house, like a living room or other entertaining area.

Jim Hall presented the re-evaluation and appeal process, emphasizing that the Assessor's office works with property owners to ensure a fair view assessment. Individual assessors have limited time at each property. Property owners should visit the County's website to find their view quality rating and get appeal assistance if they feel it is incorrect.

Questions and Comments

- One attendee asked if a larger plot of land affects the tax and rating.
 - The Assessor's team clarified that a larger plot does create a larger tax. The multiplier used to determine the tax tapers off as the size of the plot increases.
- One attendee voiced that an increased property tax based on a value increase is a good thing for the neighborhood because a higher land value is positive. This attendee stated the larger concern was about the loss of property value with its view obstructed. Additionally, if one house value goes down, the houses around it will likely go down too.
 - The Assessor's team clarified that the property tax system is designed to take into account the fluctuations in property value by pulling comparable sales into its value algorithm.

TMC 13.11 – Critical Areas Code

Shannon Brenner presented on Tacoma Municipal Code, Chapter 13.11, Critical Area Preservation. She also clarified that local jurisdictions are required to uphold state laws and implement critical areas code per the Growth Management Act (GMA).

Shannon then explained the following critical area concerns covered in the Tacoma Municipal Code:

- Wetlands
- Streams and Riparian Habitats
- Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas
- Geologically Hazardous Areas (Steep slopes)

She explained that many activities within these areas require city staff review and those that are significant require a permit and mitigation. She also explained that because of the proposed scope of activities for Mason Gulch are extensive and long-term; a management plan will be required to accompany the minor development permit.

Questions and Comments

- One attendee asked if the contents of the Code were developed by the City of Tacoma.
 - Shannon clarified that the requirements are developed at the state level and that it is then implemented by the City through code.
- Another attendee asked for clarification on how the view zoning interacts with this code.

- The view-sensitive overlay district in the ordinance only regulates the height of structures. TMC 13.11 and 9.20 allows for pruning that could accommodate view, but it does not allow the activities that have happened in the past.
- Another attendee asked for a copy of the 2013 GeoTech report.
 - City staff clarified that this report is posted online.

Draft Mason Gulch Landscape Management Plan:

Curtis LaPierre shared information about the Mason Gulch slope and explained that the hillside shows signs of instability - due to the soil type and current vegetation condition. Curtis then presented the plan's goals, objectives and standards including a goal 'target ecosystem' and the goal of improved storm water benefit through healthy tree canopy and vegetation.

Rick Powell discussed the anatomy of the slope, the areas that are potentially problematic, and management considerations for the slope. Rick shared that Robinson Noble had calculated the Factor of Safety for the slopes near Stevens and Mason Streets to be close to 1 (A number larger than 1 is more stable a number less than one is less stable and more likely to fail).

Curtis shared a management concept being considered. Breaking the hillside up into small management areas – where treatments could create sunny patches for new trees to establish. If feasible, this approach could preserve and possibly create view while protecting the slope stability.

Questions and Comments

- One attendee asked for the depth of the sand layer above the clay layer.
 - ESA staff responded that they weren't sure, but given the field work, they would estimate about 100 feet.
- One attendee asked if the City could hard armor the slope. He referenced a practice in Japan.
 - ESA responded that it is possible and that the cost would be astronomical.
- Another attendee asked why the slope has not experienced a major slide in the last 80 years.
 - ESA staff responded that sand has different densities. The sand on the Mason Gulch slope was deposited when continental glaciers receded from the area and is very dense.
- One attendee commented that she thought there should be a plan to conduct trimming in the interim time to preserve the view and expressed concern that many of the views are covered up now.
- Another attendee commented that there is potential harm for people running outside or for people coming up the hillside.
- One attendee asked if there could be more pipes and drainage put in place to mitigate the significant failure possibility.
 - ESA staff mentioned that the pipes and drainage are benefiting the slope now, but are degrading and possibly insufficient to fully mitigate the risk.
- One attendee asked if the new trees would grow as tall as the maples and what percentage of the views would be preserved.
 - ESA staff responded some new trees will grow as tall as the existing maples, but they will be strategically placed. It was too soon in the process to know the percentage.
- Multiple attendees suggested alternative models for planting.

- ESA staff responded they are considering various alternative models, but they will not do any work that will pose too much risk.

Mike Carey then went over a Vegetation Modification Request, the formal process for property owners to modify vegetation on City-owned open space properties that are located within environmentally Critical Areas (regulated under TMC 13.11). He emphasized the City's budget limits the pace of the project. The work funded by Surface Water Utility fees in the area must focus on slope stability and stormwater benefits. He further explained the City is considering a process for public parties interested in faster change to leverage their own resources in the project. Private investment might either go into one large fund for the city to perform the work or residents could hire a private consultant/contractor to do the work on their own. Any private consultant would be required to follow the same process and permit requirements with the City of Tacoma providing oversight and approval.

- One attendee asked if money could be collected from local property owners through a LID (Local Improvement District).
 - Mike explained he was not clear if LIDs could work for this application and if they are available to fund an open space plan, but that it had been talked about and will be considered.
- One attendee asked if the City could give a budget and timeline for the first option Mike mentioned.
 - City staff clarified they are gathering data from the Schuster Slope project to understand the expected budget. In the meantime, the City is developing a permitting process to allow residents to trim. The Mason Gulch Landscape Management Plan will have to be permitted before any of this work can begin.
- One attendee asked if the City would plant Vine Maples.
 - ESA staff confirmed this.
- One attendee asked if it would be possible to trim the trees now.
 - ESA staff responded no – this action is no longer permitted or sustainable. The slope is unstable and needs the trees' mass to hold the soils together.
- Another attendee suggested that topping the trees might get rid of a lot of the maple seeds that will spread.
- One attendee asked if it was true that most native conifers don't have deep root systems.
 - City staff clarified in most natural Pacific Northwest environments, the roots will grow closer to the surface (within top 36"). Native conifer root systems will adapt to soil conditions and follow the resources. In this case, they will grow very deep to find water and soil nutrients.
- One attendee asked if a seismic event would move the slope.
 - ESA staff responded that it is possible.
- Another attendee asked if the rate of root growth will vary depending on the size of the tree.
 - City staff responded that this was correct and that it also depended on the species of tree.
- Another attendee asked how much money the City would need to complete the landscape management plan more quickly.
 - The team responded that they didn't know the answer to this question yet.
- One attendee noted that the current plan does not include trails.



- City staff explained that the management plan will not include trails. Metro Parks is the lead entity for recreational trails.
- One attendee suggested that the City put the management plan process in a diagram so residents can understand what to expect.

Next Steps:

The City will take comments, revise the plan and come back with an updated draft at a public meeting in late July/early August. The new plan will be published online before the meeting.