

Sumas residents raise city gripes at meeting

200 pack hall to help shape mountain's future

ROCHELLE BAKER

RBaker@abbotsfordtimes.com

Sumas Mountain residents packed into Straiton Community Hall for a public meeting held to discuss a recent environmental plan instead took the opportunity to air their concerns and grievances with the city on a wide range of issues.

Around 200 people jammed the venue and close to 30 speakers broached topics such as private property rights, environmental management and eco-sensitive areas, development issues, rock quarries, road maintenance and park development on the mountain.

The meeting's intended focus was to discuss the city's recently completed Sumas Mountain Environmental Management Study (SMEMS).

Some speakers noted the SMEMS had already taken place without much consultation with residents, and that they were being asked to provide input on a study they didn't possess.

"You want feedback but we haven't seen data on what constitutes a species at risk," said Trevor Newton, owner of Sumas Mountain Farms.

"We need access to the same data you have access to. That way we can give

you meaningful input at the next meeting."

Newton also expressed frustration with the city's streamside protection bylaws.

Other residents wanted to know that if their land was environmentally sensitive, how that would shape their property rights or the well-being of any at-risk species on the land.

Others, concerned with

see SUMAS, page A5

The study's aim was to identify ecological and recreational resources on the mountain, how to connect them in the future, and evaluate current strategies to address environmentally sensitive areas.

Eventually the SMEMS and public feedback will help update the city's official community plan, which will include the former Area H on Sumas Mountain, a process that is to begin in the fall.

Many residents expressed fears the city would dictate what they could or could not do with their property, or impose land use decisions on them without consulting them.

City staffers said no land use decisions or OCP revisions would take place without resident input.

Mayor Bruce Banman acknowledged that some residents' fears were based on poor communication.

"The city can do a better job at listening and communicating with you guys," said Banman, adding the city will listen to residents' desires around what "intelligent growth" on the mountain should look like.

"Residents will be consulted before that growth happens, and residents will decide how and what pace it occurs," he said.

Blasting, quarries still a concern

SUMAS, from page A4

trespassing and public access to future parks, wanted assurances that recreational corridors or trails wouldn't impinge on their private property.

Coun. Bill MacGregor, chair of the Area H advisory committee, said any notion of buffer zones limiting residents' actions on property next to a park were abandoned.

Neither would recreational visitors be allowed right of ways on private land.

Residents also raised ongoing concerns around existing and future gravel quarries on Sumas, citing problems with blasting, truck traffic and road damage.

Ted Carlson, president of Mainland Sand and Gravel, which operates the Cox quarry on Sumas Mountain, also spoke at the meeting and requested that his business operation be seen a stakeholder in shaping the mountain's future.

Others expressed frustration about the lack of snow removal and road maintenance in the area, and the difficulty in determining whether it was a city or provincial responsibility.

The city would assume road maintenance for the former Area H in July 2013, said Jim Gordon, head of engineering for the city.

Speakers' concerns also reflected competing interests

on Sumas Mountain.

Some property owners expressed the desire to limit development to preserve the rural lifestyle of the area and protect green spaces, old growth and wildlife.

But others requested the city respect their investments and the sanctity of private property rights, which included the potential development of their land.

Resident Glen Hildebrand noted that he, like other property and home owners, are generally concerned they will lose the ability to make decisions about what they can do on their land.

"I'm a homeowner not an environmentalist, but the environment is important to me," said Hildebrand.

"I'm also not a developer but development is important to me. Let's have park-designated areas and maintain landowners' rights.

"There has to be a balance between both."

■ The city has scheduled more meetings for the fall:

A second SMEMS public meeting for Sumas Mountain residents at Straiton Hall is planned for Sept. 11.

A SMEMS general public meeting at the Abbotsford Recreation Centre is set for Sept. 19.

And a town hall meeting at Straiton Hall for Sumas Mountain area residents to discuss a wider range of issues takes place Oct. 24.