

## **Staff Report #2: Expanding the Residential Pre-Application Process**

2/28/09

### **What:**

Expand the County Residential Pre-Application (RPA) process to incorporate more information about the ecological sensitivity of a site prior to beginning design and building process. The RPA has two components: site visit and follow up letter from County. We are recommending changes to both components.

### **Desired outcomes from revised RPA**

1. Prior to designing and beginning construction, provide useful information to property owners about the ecological sensitivity of their site to better inform their decisions.
2. Provide specific and technical information about site planning to reduce loss of native trees and ground cover to maintain ecologically important erosion and accretion processes.
3. Explain regulatory requirements to protect shoreline features and their ecological rationale prior to design phase to reduce conflict and improve protection of sensitive site features.
4. Create a collaborative approach between the County, technical consultants property owners, realtors and building/landscaping professionals.
5. Expand the use of RPAs.

### **Current Process**

The information currently provided by the County through the existing RPA process:

1. Determine set back for homes by defining where the top of the bank is.
2. Presence of Bald Eagle nests and the requirement of a Bald Eagle Management Plan. (This information is not accessible freely to the public.)
3. Presence of archeological site. (This information is accessible freely to the public.)
4. Building requirements such as how tall and wide the house may be and how many structures may be on the property.

### **Recommended Changes:**

The San Juan Initiative recommends expansion of the Residential Pre-Application process as follows:

Include the following information in the RPA:

1. Identify forage fish beaches, presence of eelgrass, feeder bluffs and retention of vegetation as specific ecological issues to be considered in building on the property.
2. Discuss vegetation retention and the ecological value of retaining native vegetation. Include pictures of what a “filtered view” and what shoreline access might look like and how much vegetation could be removed.

3. Identify the shoreline type that applies to the property. Provide information on the shoreline type as it relates to building design or considerations.
4. If the property is in an area susceptible to erosion, include geotechnical information to help property owners understand likely issues with erosion.

Improve the manner in which the information is provided:

1. Institute collaborative relationships by encouraging the presence of the County stormwater and planning staff, the landscaper, and the builder as well as the property owner (or her agent) to allow for a full discussion of the property's ecological issues.
2. Develop process for providing differing levels of site information from curious buyers (most general) to pre- build site visits (most specific). Develop web based and print tools to help property owners/ prospective buyers understand what is ecologically important on their property and how that may affect permitting process.
3. Provide information at that time about stewardship of the shoreline to property owners – similar to the “Coastal Living” brochure, Shoreline Stewards Guide, etc.
4. Share and create photos of “filtered views” and pedestrian access to shoreline.

Expand use of RPAs:

1. Create a promotional strategy to target:
  - a. real estate professionals
  - b. contractors
  - c. landscapers
  - d. new home buyers
  - e. existing home owners inquiring about permitting
2. Encourage the use of the RPA by creating some incentive in the permitting process – reduced fee, expedited process, others?
3. Change the name to “Pre-Application Ecological Site Review” to communicate the focus on identifying how design needs to be shaped by ecological conditions.

**Issues to Address:**

1. If the information listed above were provided, would it be sufficient to achieve the outcomes listed above?
  - a. What organizations and experts should be involved to create the strongest team and garner the trust of the property owner and private contractors?
  - b. The Conservation District also provides information to property owners. How this information dovetails with the RPA process needs to be crafted.
2. Should RPA cost be raised to cover the additional County staff time and educational information or reduced to encourage use?
3. Although the RPA does not bind the County or the applicant to any particular outcomes, it does provide the property owner or her agent some certainty about

likely issues and provides the builders and the architect a chance to discuss site design with the County while at the property. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the non-binding nature of the RPA?

**Process to develop a detailed set of recommendations for the RPA:**

1. Initial Meetings (February/March):
  - Convene a meeting with the Work Group to discuss how to structure the RPA to be useful, what information is most needed and in what form that information should be provided.
  - Convene a meeting with County staff who currently perform RPA's and talk about how to incorporate the elements listed above. Identify constraints.
  - Convene a meeting with Conservation District staff and talk about the services they perform and how they dovetail with the County process.
  - Meet with realtors and talk about the proposed changes and how to promote the RPA.
2. Refining Meetings (April):
  - Host a meeting with County Staff, Conservation District, realtors and Work Group to refine the pieces and gain agreement on RPA recommendations.
  - Present outreach strategy to ...
3. Finalize Changes (In May):
  - Send out to parties the final structure to gain agreement prior implementation that will hopefully be supported by a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to the County.