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**COMMUNITY PLANNING &
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT**

Creating Solutions for Our Future

Joshua Cummings, Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Planning Commission

FROM: Ashley Arai, Natural Resources Planner

DATE: August 3, 2022

SUBJECT: Development Code Docket Item A-25, Healthy Forests Project

Purpose

The purpose of this discussion is to introduce the Healthy Forests Project, share research findings, and explore concepts for moving forward with a code update to the County's Forest Lands Conversion Ordinance (17.25 TCC).

Background

This item has been included on previous official and preliminary dockets between 2009 to present. The forest lands conversion item has been officially docketed since 2018 and in 2020, the Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) combined this item with a review of the County's tree protection standards. In 2022, the Board clarified that Docket Item A-25 shall focus on a review of *rural* tree protection standards, while *urban* tree protection standards and policies will be reviewed and updated through the County's joint plan review and updates (docketed separately as items CPA-1, and JP-2, JP-3, and JP-4).

Existing Tree Protection Provisions

Thurston County currently regulates forest conversions and tree protection through several ordinances in different locations of the Thurston County Code.

- Thurston County Forest Lands Conversion Ordinance (17.25 TCC), adopted in 1997, was designed to carry out the provisions of the WA Forest Practices Act, State Environmental Policy Act, and the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan through the proper regulation of forest lands converting to other non-forestry uses.

- Thurston County Critical Area Ordinance and Shoreline Master Program (Titles 24 and 19 respectively) regulate trees in critical areas and along shorelines to help protect the value and function of unique environmental elements.
- Thurston County Zoning and Development Standards (Titles 20, 21, 22, 23) contain landscaping and open space requirements that are administered at the time of development.

Within Thurston County, four cities (Lacey, Olympia, Tumwater and Yelm) have adopted urban forestry plans and corresponding tree protection regulations, and an additional two cities (Rainier and Tenino) have adopted public street tree plans to maintain and grow their urban canopy.

Healthy Forests Project Scope and Timeline

In February 2022, the Board directed staff to move forward with a multi-phased planning effort for Development Code Docket Item A-25. This planning effort is referred to as the Healthy Forests Project and contains the following four inter-related phases:

Phase 1: Managing Forest Conversions (Spring 2022 – Spring 2023)

Update the Forest Lands Conversion Ordinance (17.25 TCC) to clarify permit processes and make provisions easier for the public to understand and for the county to implement. This phase also includes working with the Thurston Regional Planning Council to analyze historical permit data and identify areas at highest risk of conversion.

Phase 2: Studying our Forest Canopy (Summer 2022 - Summer 2023)

In partnership with the City of Olympia, Thurston County is utilizing a grant from the Washington State Department of Natural Resources to complete a detailed land cover analysis to better understand the extent and composition of our forest resources. This new land cover dataset will be a helpful resource for ongoing watershed basin-level planning, habitat conservation, the Voluntary Stewardship Plan, in addition to the update to rural and urban tree protection standards.

Phase 3: Planning for a Growing Forest Canopy (Spring 2023 – Winter 2023)

Update county tree planting standards for rural areas (Titles 18 and 20) and reviewing forest conservation programs with an aim of growing and restoring healthy forests.

Phase 4: Planning for our Urban Forests (Spring 2023 – Summer 2024)

Update urban forest management provisions as part of the Joint Code Update projects with Lacey, Olympia and Tumwater. These are slated to begin in 2023, following the completion of the Joint Plans. They are separately docketed as items JP-2, JP-3, and JP-4.

Who has been engaged on this project?

To date, staff has conducted stakeholder interviews with the WA Department of Natural Resources, the cities of Olympia and Tumwater, Thurston Regional Planning Council, Thurston Conservation District, Mason Conservation District, Thurston Climate Action Team, and the Northwest Natural Resources Group. Additionally, staff has conducted briefings with the Surface and Stormwater Advisory Board and Development Services Staff.

Broader community engagement to small forest landowners is planned for later this fall in partnership with the Thurston Conservation District and DNR's Small Forest Landowners Office.

Upcoming Work Sessions

- **September 21** – Review proposed code amendments to 17.25 TCC – Thurston County Forest Lands Conversion Ordinance