

Strong citizen response at first of two Parks Commission meetings on St. Ed's

AARON KUNKLER, Bothell Reporter Reporter – January 29, 2016



St. Edward Seminary was built in 1930. *image credit: Aaron Kunkler/Bothell Reporter*

Although no finalized proposals have been presented to the Washington State Parks Commission detailing possible development by Daniels Real Estate to restore a seminary at Saint Edward State Park, battle lines are being drawn between those in favor of development and those opposing it.

Tensions ran high at a Parks and Recreation Commission meeting at Edmonds Community College Jan. 28, where dozens of people came to voice their opinions on the seminary rehabilitation.

“Change. People don’t like it, it’s very uncomfortable,” said Kenmore business owner Carl Michelman, addressing the Commission. “We’re reactive, we’re never proactive.”

And so the dialogues went, as both sides made their cases to either preserve or restore the seminary.

“I urge you to do this, this is the best opportunity we could have,” Michelman said.

The 85-year-old seminary was built to train priests, but was sold to the state in 1977 and turned into Saint Edward State Park.

Since then, the building has continually deteriorated, with certain portions maintained to facilitate events, and for a time housed the park’s rangers.

Heating and lighting the building costs the state around \$100,000, and as State Parks continues to feel a post-recession budget crunch, they began looking at new ways to generate revenue and preserve the seminary, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Repairs to bring the building up to code have been estimated to cost as much as \$50 million.

“Stabilizing that building is going to cost a lot of money we don’t have, tearing it down is going to cost even more,” Commissioner Rodger Schmidt said.

Kevin Daniels owns Daniels Real Estate, and stated his interest last year in restoring the building and turning it into a publicly accessible lodge, similar to those found at Yellowstone or Rainier National Parks.

A deadline for submissions was extended to September of this year, to allow Daniels to submit a fleshed-out proposal on what he would do with the building.

In doing so, a land swap was proposed, whereby the state would trade around five acres, which the seminary sits on, for nearly 10 acres of undeveloped land on along the parks northern boundary.

But this proposal has rubbed many people the wrong way, especially many neighbors of the park and environmental activists.

David Stokes, an ecologist at the University of Washington Bothell, said the park’s most valuable resource was the natural environment. The high attendance rates, he said, showed people came not for the seminary, but for the well-preserved forestland and grounds.

In separate phone interviews, concerned citizens also voiced their concerns.

“We want to protect that legacy for our kids, we don’t want to give away our public park and turn it into a private hotel just to enrich the privileged,” said Kenmore resident Joe Marshall. “The land’s gotta remain public, the buildings must remain dedicated to park use or nonprofit use.”

Either partially restoring the building for public use, he said, or letting the building continue to deteriorate and stand as an open air monument would be ideal.

This idea doesn’t sit well with Kenmore Mayor David Baker.

“I would hate to see that building fall down,” he said. “I think it’s an historic building, it is a national landmark, and I’d like to see it preserved.”

Though he said he would need to see the Daniels’ proposal before coming to a decision, a feeling Kenmore resident Anita Merrill shared at the meeting.

“I am concerned that we are talking about the property exchange issues like putting the cart before the horse,” she said.

Bastyr University, which is also located in Saint Edward State Park, supports the Daniels bid.

“We’ll all be better off to preserve this historic landmark than to demolish it, or wall it up behind a fence,” university Chief of Staff Coquina Deger said at the Jan. 28 meeting. “Every interaction we had with (Daniels) and his staff was of the utmost quality.”

A State Parks meeting will be held on Feb. 9 at Kenmore City Hall, where Daniels Real Estate will discuss the land exchange and design proposal, as well as provide an opportunity for a public hearing.