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Selkirk Sun
Op Ed.

Pend Oreille County commissioner candidates Kevin Young in District #3 and Steven Minnich in District #1 have both come out strong on Pend Oreille County opting out of the GMA (Washington Growth Management Act). Given the fact that the GMA is a Washington state law (RCW 36.70A) and was adopted by the Legislature in 1990, plus the fact that Pend Oreille County “voluntarily” opted in to “plan fully” under the GMA, Responsible Growth * NE Washington is not sure just how Mr. Young and Mr. Minnich plan on opting the county out. Maybe they have a “concept” of a plan they would like to share.

In addition, POC failed to opt out when it had the opportunity under EHB 1224 in 2014. Four counties, with population under 20,000, had the option to opt out - Columbia, Ferry, Garfield, and Pend Oreille Counties. Ferry was the only county to opt out.

At the onset, HB 2929 “required” counties with high growth rates to plan and also allowed counties, like Pend Oreille, to opt in and fully plan under the GMA. The caveat - once a county committed to planning under the GMA, it could not change its mind and withdraw.

In the early summary of the GMA, four key purposes of the Act were identified: “(1) avoiding sprawl by concentrating new development in urban growth areas; (2) ensuring adequate public facilities for that development through infrastructure that is planned and built concurrent with new development; (3) protecting environmentally critical areas from harm and conserving agricultural, forest and mineral lands by directing development elsewhere; (4) and coordinating local plans and regulations regionally to ensure fair and efficient allocation of locally undesirable but regionally essential facilities, while compelling state compliance with local plans and regulations.”

The chances that either Young or Minnich could opt Pend Oreille County out of the GMA would be about the same chance as them trying to opt out of the lower school zone speed limits. It isn't going to happen. However, the legislature, that has the authority, over the years has made several adjustments and exceptions in the GMA for the smaller populated counties & cities to make planning easier and more cost effective.

It would be nice if Young and Minnich explained why they feel there is a need to opt out of the GMA. RG * NEW can assume they have a concern that the GMA is hindering economic growth and development in the county.

Going on that assumption, Young and Minnich are not the only two commissioner candidates who assign blame on the GMA for slow economic growth. Incumbents Gentle and Smiley in a February 10, 2021, Newport Miner article “ How much growth does the county need?” laid out their concerns. Gentle stated that there wasn't enough “land available for commercial use or shovel ready parcels for light industrial and

manufacturing.” Smiley said, “We hear all the time from economic development folks that there are businesses that would like to locate in the county but they want zoned or industrial (land)”

The county just rezoned 65% of the county and that included eliminating public lands and adding new land use zoning. Under the present and updated POC Comprehensive Plan, dense single family residential development, planned unit developments, and commercial, plus light and heavy industrial development fall under the new zoning regulations. RG * NEW appealed these new zones with the Growth Management Hearing Board as we felt and still feel that over a period of time the new zoning designations of light & heavy industrial will have significant and adverse environmental impacts.

Unfortunately for the environment, RG * NEW lost its appeal and the GMA Hearing Board, with minor exception, ruled in favor of Pend Oreille County. What more does the commissioner candidates Young and Minnick want? The GMA worked in the county’s favor. Do they just want unbridled urbanization and sprawl into our rural areas anywhere and at anytime? That, too, is just not going to happen.

RG * NEW has said it many times before - what is hindering responsible economic growth and development in Pend Oreille County is not the GMA; it is the lack of visionary leadership with a coordinated vision, mission, and goals for our economic future that utilizes the natural resources we have here in our county. Finding fault with the GMA takes the responsibilities of economic growth off the shoulders of those officials who took on the challenges of county leadership. They can blame something other than themselves.

Instead of candidates Young and Minnich wasting time thinking Pend Oreille County would be better off opting out of the GMA, their time could be better spent, while campaigning and if elected, formulating plans and developing goals to prevent catastrophic forest fires here in Pend Oreille County. Plans that would clean up our forests, put men and women to work building trails and roads, developing local businesses that utilize wood products, supporting entrepreneurship/small businesses, and supporting tourism.

Finally, the GMA has addressed a number of new issues and reforms within the last two years that all Washington counties are going to have to start considering and redirecting their energies and resources toward and not the least being climate change impacts and requirements, plus affordable and allowable housing types. Two critical issues that no candidates are addressing here in Pend Oreille County. Why not?

The GMA has a strong basis in trying to address climate change impacts and urban sprawl into our rural areas. While some folks don’t care, there are many more people becoming alarmed. It is not economically or environmentally prudent for us to spread out more creating a need to drive further away from our jobs, business, stores, and appointments. Our consumption of fossil fuels has impacted our planet to the point that

catastrophic forest fires and hurricanes like Helene are becoming common place. Spanning out into our rural areas makes no sense on any level. It is not economically feasible, nor is it sustainable. These are the issues all our candidates should be addressing. These are the issues that are going to impact us for generations to come.

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