

Leavenworth neighbors weighing wetland issue

by Jefferson Robbins

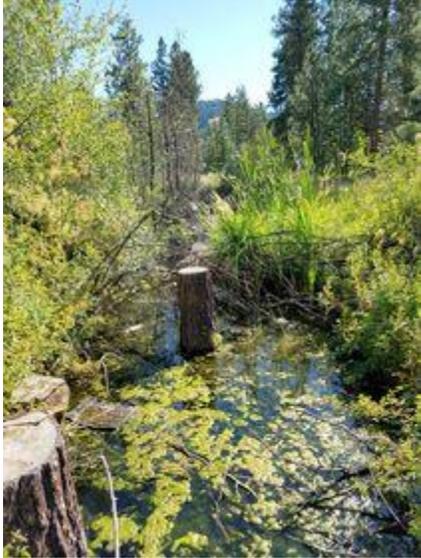
Feb. 23, 2018, 3:14 p.m.

Outdoors



World photo/Jefferson Robbins

Homebuilder Matt Melton looks out over the wetland in his backyard along Alpensee Strasse in Leavenworth in July 2016. Spring runoff often brought water levels up to his rear deck. He has since sold the home.



LEAVENWORTH — Noreen Freese has lived along Alpensee Strasse long enough to know: The creek that used to run through her backyard is now a wetland, and it's getting bigger.

Freese, 87, built her home just above the Wenatchee River in 1979. She could look from her little rear pavilion, where she casts concrete birdbaths, into a thicket of snowberry and ponderosa pine. Now? Nothing but cattails.

"I never used to have this grow up that far," Freese said in summer 2016, pointing to the rushes encroaching just eight feet from her workspace. The year before, she noticed the fir tree on her back property was dying, drowned by water that refuses to flow out of the channel as it once did.

The Chelan County PUD held an outreach meeting Wednesday in Leavenworth for Freese and other concerned neighbors, where stormwater consultant Aaron D. Anderson with Pacific Engineering explained the backup comes from ongoing siltation. Sediments washing through a culvert that crosses nearby Chumstick Highway have filled in the historic water channel.

As a result, Anderson said, "We can't get the water out of the bathtub."

The channel runs largely through a four-acre strip of PUD property, between Alpensee Strasse to the southeast and Chumstick Highway and County Shop Road to the northwest. But the designated wetland — now about 19,000 square feet, or about two-fifths of an acre, according to biology consultant Ryan Walker with Grette Associates — overlaps four private residential parcels. When it swells with spring runoff, the water level can rise within a few feet of homes.

“I would look at it from my living room,” said Matt Melton, who built a house along Alpensee Strasse that he’s since sold. “It was uncomfortably close.”

The siltation blocks the water from flowing into a downstream culvert under Alpensee Strasse and out to the Wenatchee River. Anderson said that’s a case of the wetland working as it should — keeping dirt out of the waterway. Water could be channeled off by installing a new culvert and a pipe running to the downstream outlet, preserving the wetland but acting as a check on flooding.

But because the marshy area is designated as wetland, the PUD can’t address the waterflow unilaterally. Partners including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state Ecology and Fish and Wildlife departments, and the city and Chelan County would all have to have input on permitting.

“That’s why the simple solutions we talk about aren’t that simple, in the framework of the permits that are required — and even whether the permits would be issued,” Walker said.

Meanwhile, the PUD has had to cut down ponderosa pines killed by the water. Walker said the decline of the pines and the establishment of water-loving plants like cattails means the character of the land is changing.

Don White, who owns a storage business along Chumstick Highway and has tracked the wetland’s growth since the mid-2000s, said it poses a real property hazard during large spring storm events. At times the water has risen close to his storage units, and ongoing development upstream worries him

“You’ve got streets, you’ve got house runoff and all that,” White said. “Even with retention ponds, you’ve still got more water coming down through there.”

David Lodge, an engineering project manager with the PUD, said the meeting is a first step in the planning process. “Our commitment is to report back by summer of where we’re at,” he said. “Ideally with a decision point.”

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