

Open space grows with land sale, gift

Persimmon donates about \$5 million in land as part of Metro deal

BY MARA STINE

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In what Metro officials are calling the most generous land donation they've ever received, Persimmon Development Group of Gresham has agreed to sell 92 acres within the East Buttes to Metro for just over \$4 million – less than half of what the property is worth.

An appraisal is still in the works, but initial estimates of the land's value are about \$9 million, making the donated portion worth approximately \$5 million.

Metro councilors in a 6-0 vote approved the deal as well as two other land purchases on Thursday. In total, Metro agreed to buy more than 130 acres in Gresham including:

- The 92 acres owned by Persimmon Development Group. Eight of the acres are on the southern slope of Hogan Butte next to 40 acres owned by Gresham and Metro. The remaining 84 acres are nestled between the upscale Persimmon housing development and the county line. Those acres had been slated for 86 large lots as part of Persimmon's Phases 7, 8 and 9. The land boasts stunning views of Mount Hood, Mount Rainier and Mount Adams, as well as views into the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge.
- Another 37 acres on Gabbert Hill that last October were just days away from possibly being approved for an 82-lot subdivision called Darby Ridge. Metro and Gresham have teamed up to pay \$3.6 million for the property.
- Just over an acre off Southeast Hogan Road and Ambleside Drive, completing a network of 40 acres that Metro now owns along Johnson Creek and the Springwater Trail. The price of the property, which includes a historic stand of Hogan Cedars and a house, is \$450,000.

The Persimmon property includes the headwaters of Hogan Creek, as well as the top of a forested butte located within the East Buttes – one of the target areas identified in Metro's voter-approved bond measure passed in November 2006. The purpose of the measure is to preserve open space, parks and streams, and to keep nature accessible to the public.

The East Buttes are south of Gresham and north of Damascus. They include extinct lava domes and forested hills that catch rain to feed the Willamette Valley's water table. The buttes also are home to native plants, fish and wildlife.

Hiroshi Morihara, a partner in the development group, said the donation fits the company's recent shift toward environmentally friendly, green construction.

"It's just a beautiful place," Morihara said. "We wanted to make sure this area is property preserved."

"This land could have become large (lot), view homesites for a few people," said Rod Park, Metro's deputy council president and the East Multnomah County representative on the

Metro Council. “Instead, it will provide a natural area and views for many. The views from the top are stellar and so is the view of the buttes from below. This is a great purchase for Metro’s natural areas program and builds on prior lands acquired by Metro and the city of Gresham.”

Gresham’s parks department will manage the Persimmon and Gabbert Hill properties, both of which could be home to future trails.

“These properties are more than simply open spaces,” wrote Gresham Mayor Shane Bemis in a letter to Metro councilors. “They are jewels of our region, and protecting them represents a legacy to which we can all be proud. Gresham’s buttes and vistas are unique treasures, and this decision is emblematic of our joint commitment to livability and the environment.”

The forested hillsides of Gabbert Hill and the Persimmon property not only protect water quality in Hogan Creek, a tributary to Johnson Creek, but the land also acts as wildlife corridors and fish habitat areas.

The 130 acres Metro approved buying on Thursday will join a network of property that Gresham has been piecing together since 1990, when under former Mayor Gussie McRobert’s leadership, Gresham voters approved a \$10.285 million open-space bond. It was the first such city bond measure passed in the state devoted to open-space acquisition and trail development.

Since then, Metro has spent the past decade buying large parcels of property in the East Buttes to protect wildlife and water quality from the effects of urban development.

To date, Metro has purchased 439 acres, adding to the 374 acres Gresham already had preserved in hopes of building an uninterrupted habitat corridor.

Once the land purchases approved on Thursday officially close, Gresham and Metro will have nearly 950 acres in their open space network. Due to the large scale of the public holdings, Metro officials have informally dubbed the area “Forest Park East.”

“It’s not 5,000 acres,” like Forest Park in Portland is, said Jim Desmond, director of Metro’s regional parks and green spaces department. “But in two or three more bond measures it could be.”

The Persimmon donation is the most financially valuable contribution Metro has ever received, Desmond said. “This is one of the most significant conservation donations in the history of the region,” he said.

Morihara and his business partner, Brian Lessler, attended the Metro council meeting along with their spouses, Mary McSwain and Michele Lessler. Councilors told Morihara and Lessler they were grateful for the donation and their willingness to depart with what would have been highly valuable development property.

The 130 Gresham acres are among the first pieces of property Metro will buy thanks to the \$227 million open-space bond measure approved by voters in November.

“It’s hard for me to imagine coming out of the shoot with a package more exciting than this,” Desmond said.

