

News Release

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County Implements U.S. Fish & Wildlife Gopher Review Process for 2015 **Building Permits**

Building permit applicants get free gopher reviews through October

If you plan to build in unincorporated Thurston County between now and October of 2016, Thurston County officials encourage you to apply for building and development permits right away.

When you apply for a building or development permit, Thurston County will conduct a Critical Areas Ordinance review that includes a screening of your project site for the presence of Mazama pocket gophers. The habitat of Mazama pocket gopher and other species is part of the county's Critical Areas Ordinance review process.

The screening process is similar to the review process the county followed last year, which resulted in more than 90 percent of permit applicants receiving clearance for their permits. This year's process—recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)—includes two to three site visits conducted between June and October by a team of county and USFWS prairie experts. In order to schedule and complete the visits within this timeframe, the county strongly suggests applicants submit permit applications by Friday, July 31, 2015.

The gopher screening site visits will be free to those who apply for county building or development project permits, though regular permit application fees still apply. The county will receive funding assistance from USFWS to cover the costs of the gopher screening site visits.

According to Thurston County's Director of Resource Stewardship, Scott Clark, "Now that the county has a process in place for 2015, we believe this will help developers get financing. Banks have been reluctant to finance major construction projects in Thurston County without it."

The county is currently creating a habitat conservation plan (HCP) that will define the county's approach to development for up to 30 years. Habitat conservation plans are a tool used by local and state governments that allow land use decisions and policy-making to remain at the local level, while still meeting the federal requirements for conserving and protecting species and habitats that are considered threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Mazama pocket gopher is part of a growing list of Pacific Northwest prairie species that are considered threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Once adopted, the county's habitat conservation plan will provide long-term certainty for developers and will help the county retain local control over land use and permitting decisions, all while still protecting endangered and threatened prairie animals and plants.

You can find more details about the county's habitat conservation plan and the 2015 gopher review process at www.ThurstonPlanning.org. To speak to a Thurston County planner about the process, please contact Andrew Deffobis at DeffobA@co.thurston.wa.us or (360) 786-5467.

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