

Feeling Pinched, State Park Turns To Developer for Help

By JOSHUA MCNICHOLS



Ranger Karl Hinze in the bell tower of the old seminary at Saint Edward State Park

Saint Edward State Park is a swath of forest north of Seattle almost four times the size of Disneyland.

It was once a seminary, and now the state wants to give the land to a developer to morph into a privately owned hotel and spa.

In exchange, the developer would give the state 10 acres of sloped woods at the northeast corner of the park.

This plan has divided neighbors who say that nature must be preserved – and that the beautiful brick building at the heart of the park should be turned into a community space.

That building has been a money pit. The state hasn't been able to renovate it, and it costs taxpayers \$100,000 a year just to keep it from falling apart.

Ranger Karl Hinze leads me up a narrow spiral staircase to the top of the bell tower. There's an ancient-looking bell mounted on rickety wood scaffolding. "You want to ring it?" Hinze asks. With a great heave, he sets the bell in motion, and a great noise echoes through the park. A giant white owl, clearly freaked out, flies silently from the rafters. Hinze leans out the window after it. He spies a couple visitors on the ground far below.

“Did you hear the bell?” he calls to them. “Wow, you should have heard it from up here. I think we’re half deaf!”

A plastic owl, meant to frighten small birds from the belltower. There’s a real owl living in the rafters.



From here, we can see the roof of the seminary below. It stands in the middle of a green lawn. A vast forest surrounds the lawn.

The state park system wants to give the building and some of the lawn to Daniels Real Estate. Activist Colleen Ponto says talk of the deteriorating building distracts from the main point: nature.



“One day in this ravine, I was hiking, and I saw a bald eagle flying low among the trees here,” Ponto says. The eagle snatched a small bird and carried it up to a branch.

“I stood here about 30 minutes watching the crunch of the bones and the feathers fly,” she says. “It was just so amazing to witness.”

Developer Kevin Daniels says the property would remain accessible, even in private hands. “Just think of any hotel you’ve ever been in,” Daniels says. “You can go in and have dinner. You can use the spa, even if you’re not staying there. And so, most of these rooms that I’m showing you now are actually going to be open to the public.”

The hotel room hallways themselves would be reserved for guests. I meet Daniels on the seminary grounds, and he shows me around the old dormitories.

As we pass by the open doorways to the tiny rooms, we’re bathed in sunlight, then shadow, sunlight then shadow. It’s just one of many special experiences that inspires Daniels about this building.

“It’s the rhythm of the light coming through, the era that it was built in, and just how it all fits together,” he says.

“All of these halls, on all of these floors, will be preserved exactly how they are now.”

Behind those doors, the rooms will get a makeover. They’ll get private bathrooms, whereas priests-in-training used a common shower down the hall.



Photo Left: A floor of classrooms in the Saint Edward seminary building

Photo Below: Dining Hall



The dining hall at the Saint Edward seminary building is a rare part of the complex currently in good condition.

Daniels made a career in architectural preservation. He restored Union Station in Pioneer Square, and the Starbucks Headquarters in Seattle’s SODO neighborhood.

“The city’s soul is its history,” he says. “It may have an economic heart. But its soul is where we come from.”

Ponto, the activist, doesn’t like how the real estate developer has swooped in to take the seminary building.

“The land and the habitat should trump the use of this building,” she says. She would rather see this building fall to ruin than lose it to a private developer.

Another option, she says, would be to demolish the dormitories – and let the community find a public use for the rest of the seminary building, which is in better shape. As for the trade, Ponto says the state should buy the 10 acres that Daniels has offered without making a trade. Buying that acreage has been on the state’s to-do list for years, but has never received funding.

“I still feel like it’s wrong to sell any part of a public park,” Ponto says. “Especially one in the Pacific Northwest, used by so many people. This is a public park, not a private park, and it should remain so.”

Daniels’ offer has divided the community. At a recent public meeting, the two sides mostly sat on opposite sides of the room, like the bride and groom’s family at a wedding.

Above the murmuring crowd, Washington State Parks and Recreation planner Michael Hankinson urged the crowd to, above all, listen to each other. “There’s two sides to this story,” he told me before the meeting. “But what’s interesting to me, is everyone is interested in the park. Everyone here supports the park. It’s just, maybe we don’t agree necessarily on our prioritization.”

Hankinson says as a result of the recession, the state Legislature told state parks officials they’d have to start operating like a business, earning their own keep.

“The harsh reality is that when you make business decisions, this is what it looks like,” Hankinson says. “We have people who say, ‘Oh, it’s abhorrent to have commercialization of parks.’ But we really have no other choice. If we want to save historic structures that are so costly to the taxpayer, there’s no other way to do it.”

The state will decide by September what to do with the seminary. After that, the federal government will decide whether to allow it.

In September, the state will decide whether to push the deal forward. But there’s still a long way to go, even after that. The federal government could choose to block the deal. That’s because the state obtained federal money to buy the land and the building in 1977. That gives the feds a say in the land’s future.



An old photo of the seminary hangs on a wall inside the mostly unused building.



Seminarians occupied tiny rooms. These rooms received their colorful paint when a youth conservation group occupied them in the late 70s. Several small rooms will combine to make a modern hotel room, but door spacing in the hallways will not change.



Developer Kevin Daniels, left, and parks planner Michael Hankinson, right, describe the hotel and spa plan before a divided crowd at Kenmore City Hall.