

Transit authority narrows down parking sites

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Mason Transit Authority is one step closer to building its first park and ride facility in Mason County.

During a public hearing March 1 at the HUB Center For Seniors, the transit authority and the civil engineering firm it hired presented the top four property choices for the project, which will be built in Belfair.

"This is the last thing we want to do before moving forward with negotiations (to purchase properties)," Mike Oliver, development manager for MTA, told the *Herald* before the meeting. "We want to make sure there's nothing else in the way."

Of the four properties presented, MTA listed two as the best choices: a plot at the northeast corner of state Route 3 and Log Yard Road, and a site directly across state Route 3 at the southeast corner of the two roads.

MTA hired SCJ Alliance, a civil engineering and transportation planning company in Lacey, to help choose the right land. Patrick Holm, deputy



Herald photo by Brianna Loper

North Mason resident Ken VanBuskirk, left, speaks with Patrick Holm, deputy project manager for SCJ Alliance, on March 1 as the two look over a map detailing the locations of four properties, one of which could be the future home to a park and ride facility. Mason Transit Authority hosted a public hearing last week to glean input on the properties and the project.

project manager for SCJ Alliance, presented the group's findings during the public meeting.

Holm said the top two sites had ample space for the project, and direct access to state Route 3 and the future

proposed Belfair bypass, which set the properties apart from other options.

Oliver said the park and ride facility will have about 100 parking spots, and will include a building with office space for bus drivers. About five or six buses will be stored at the facility when not in use.

Holm said a work group, made up of North Mason residents, elected officials, and MTA and SCJ Alliance employees, reviewed all the eligible properties based on five criteria.

The criteria, in order of importance, are: access configurability, or flexibility of entry and exit locations; operations flexibility, or how ready the land is to build on; proximity to the proposed Belfair bypass; proximity to downtown Belfair; and economic development possibilities.

The work group met four times to narrow down the list from an original 14 properties, which was made up of all the land for sale in Belfair, Holm said.

About a dozen North Mason residents attended last week's meeting to

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hear the plans, but few commented on the presentation.

Earl Iddings, who owns land on the northern border of Mason County that was one of the top four properties considered, attended the meeting. He said he felt like his property wasn't evaluated fairly because it scored lower than the top two properties.

However, after nearly half an hour of discussions with Holm and Oliver during the meeting, Iddings said he "probably wouldn't have sold his property" to MTA anyway.

Oliver said MTA has not contacted any property owners in regards to the project, other than to get permission to visit the property, to prevent conflict of interest.

"We purposely did not have contact with the land owners," he said.

The next step is to begin negotiations regarding price with property owners of the top two sites, Holm said.

"We're not married to either property," Oliver said. "These are just what scored the highest. These are the properties that rose to the top."

If negotiations with the top two properties' owners fall through, MTA will look at other top-ranked sites.

"If they say, 'You have to fight me to take it,' well, then we'll have to go back to (other options,)" said Mason County commissioner Randy Neatherlin, who participated in the work group.

This is the second public meeting the transit authority has hosted regarding the project. During an August meeting, MTA heard resident and commuters' concerns for the future park and ride, which included parking lot security, whether to involve outside agencies such as Kitsap Transit or local port districts, and accessibility to state Route 3 for the buses.

MTA manages park and ride facilities at Southeast Craig Road and Cole Road, Railroad Avenue and U.S. Highway 101, and state Route 3 and Pickering Road. However, the transit authority did not build any of those sites, Oliver told the *Herald*.

Holm said, ideally, if the property is purchased by this summer, construction could start at the start of next year and be finished by the end of 2018. Earlier this summer, the transit au-



Photo courtesy of SCJ Alliances
SCJ Alliance, a civil engineering and transportation planning company in Lacey, presented four possible sites for the project.

thority opened an 85-spot park and ride behind Safeway in Belfair as a temporary solution to the parking problem.

For more information on the project or to see updates, visit www.mason-transit.org/parkandrideproject.