

Open Spaces: Protecting Our Critical Areas

Open spaces are valuable and fragile natural resources and are often protected Critical Areas. As members of our vibrant city, it's important for us to understand and protect the natural areas that bring numerous benefits to our community. One crucial aspect of this is recognizing what are known as *critical areas*.

What are Critical Areas?

Critical areas are specific areas within our city that are particularly sensitive to environmental changes. These areas can include open spaces, wetlands, streams, floodways, shorelines, geologically hazardous areas such as steep slopes, critical aquifer recharge areas, and fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas. They play a vital role in maintaining biodiversity, regulating water flow, and providing habitat for native plants and animals.

Why are Critical Areas Important?

Critical areas serve as essential components of our local ecosystem. They provide numerous benefits to our community, including:

1. **Water Quality and Flood Control:** Wetlands and streams help absorb excess water during heavy rains, reducing the risk of flooding in our neighborhoods and filter pollutants from stormwater runoff, helping to keep our rivers and streams clean for drinking water, recreation, and wildlife.
2. **Air Quality:** Plants and trees within our critical areas refresh the air we breathe and relieve the burdens that urban development can create, including congestion, noise, odors, and air pollution.
3. **Habitat:** These areas provide homes for diverse plant and animal species, including some that are rare or endangered. Protecting critical areas helps preserve biodiversity and maintain healthy ecosystems.
4. **Recreation and Aesthetics:** Many critical areas offer opportunities for outdoor recreation, such as hiking, birdwatching, and photography. They also contribute to the scenic beauty of our city.

Activities Allowed in Critical Areas:

While critical areas are sensitive and need protection, some activities are allowed under certain conditions. These may include:

1. **Scientific Research:** Studies and monitoring projects that contribute to our understanding of these areas and help guide conservation efforts.
2. **Limited Vegetation Management:** Necessary actions to control invasive species or reduce hazards, such as noxious weed and dead tree removal. Please call for details, an exemption may be needed.
3. **Public Access:** Trails and viewing areas allow the community to enjoy these natural spaces while minimizing impact.

How Can You Help?

As residents of Washougal, we all have a role to play in protecting our critical areas:

1. **Stay Informed:** Learn about the critical areas in your neighborhood and the regulations that govern them. The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to help preserve these valuable resources.
2. **Respect Signs and Boundaries:** If you encounter signs or barriers indicating a critical area, please respect them and avoid disturbing the environment.
3. **Report Concerns:** If you notice any activities that may be harmful to critical areas, such as illegal dumping, tree removal, or unauthorized construction, report them to our Code Compliance Office at (360) 835-8501 ext. 609.
4. **Get Involved:** Consider volunteering with local environmental organizations or participating in community clean-up events to support conservation efforts in our city.

By working together to understand and protect our critical areas, we can ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy the beauty and benefits they provide.

Thank you for being stewards of our environment and helping to keep Washougal a wonderful place to live, work, and play!

**Community Development
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**Visit our website at
www.cityofwashougal.us**