



MASON COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES

Building, Planning, Environmental Health, Community Health

Fall 2018

Public Benefit Rating System - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is Open Space?

Washington State Law (RCW 84.34 – Open Space Taxation Act) defines "Open space land" as:

(a) any land area so designated by an official comprehensive land use plan adopted by any city or county and zoned accordingly, or

(b) any land area, the preservation of which in its present use would (i) conserve and enhance natural or scenic resources, or (ii) protect streams or water supply, or (iii) promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes, or (iv) enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open space, or (v) enhance recreation opportunities, or (vi) preserve historic sites, or (vii) preserve visual quality along highway, road, and street corridors or scenic vistas, or (viii) retain in its natural state tracts of land not less than one acre situated in an urban area and open to public use on such conditions as may be reasonably required by the legislative body granting the open space classification; or (c) any land meeting the definition of farm and agricultural conservation land under subsection (8) of this section.

Q. What is a Public Benefit Rating System?

The Open Space Taxation Act, RCW 84.34, provides an incentive to private landowners to preserve important natural resources by offering direct property tax relief for retaining natural features that provide a public benefit. By applying the "public benefit rating system" as provided for in state law, local governments can quantify and demonstrate the public benefit of tax relief that is being given to private property owners. The County can clearly define program enrollment criteria to target property selection to only those attributes and public benefits most desirable for their community's needs.

Under the current generic approach for Open Space enrollment in Mason County, there are nearly 300 property owners receiving the tax relief. Neither public access nor public benefit have been quantified for these properties.

Q. If I get Open Space Tax Relief from the County now, will I lose it?

Those property owners currently receiving tax relief will get reevaluated under the new program. The primary goal of this public benefit rating system is to enable the County to answer to tax payers questions about tax relief being given to private property owners and quantify and ensure the public benefit.

The DRAFT Public Benefit Rating System is designed to quantify benefits for a wide range of open space including:

High priority open space resources. Ten (10) points each:

- Public recreation area;
- Trail linkages and recreational corridors;
- Natural shoreline environments;
- Aquifer protection areas;
- Special plant or ecological sites;
- Significant fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas;
- Historic landmarks/archeological sites.

Medium priority open space resources. Six (6) points each:

- Conservancy shoreline environments;
- Scenic natural resources, viewpoints, and view corridors;
- Urban open space;
- Rural open space.

Low priority open space resources. Two (2) point each:

- Restored lands;
- Other shoreline environments.

Q: Mason County already has a process for evaluating Open Space, so why do we need a Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs)?

The current process for evaluating Open Space in Mason County consists only of determining whether a parcel of land meets the minimum qualifications of the program and if so, provides the same amount of tax relief to all qualifying parcels, regardless of the quality or quantity of benefits being provided to the public. A PBRs provides a way of extending tax relief in a way that is representative of the corresponding benefits the land provides.

Q. What happens if my property in Open Space doesn't qualify under the PBRs?

If previously classified open space land does not qualify for classification under the newly adopted PBRs, the land will retain its status as open space, but may not receive any tax relief. Alternatively, the owner may request to be removed from the program without payment of additional tax, interest or penalty.