

State of Oregon Invokes Eminent Domain on Park Property

By Scott Laird

In what is described as "...a very rare action..." the State of Oregon used its power of eminent domain to transfer privately held property rights to Stub Stewart State Park. At a meeting of the State Parks and Recreation Commission on August 7, 2007, timber rights held by Banks resident Jim Smejkal were transferred under the declaration, stopping the possibility of additional logging inside the park.

The State of Oregon entered into an agreement in 2002 to acquire land owned by Smejkal, that eventually became part of the Stub Stewart Park property. The agreement included an exchange of properties, with the State receiving the land and Smejkal retaining the rights to log on the property.

When asked for more detailed information about the situation, State Parks spokesman for the Office of the Director, Chris Havel replied, "In 2002 we gave him (Smejkal) two state park parcels, one on the coast and one in northeast Oregon. Together, they paid for the 113 acres Smejkal gave us, but weren't valuable enough to cover his timber rights, so we both agreed to work over a two year period (2002-2004) on a land trade for another piece of property Smejkal also wanted. The problem was this third parcel wasn't owned by state parks it was owned by the Department of Forestry. Any land negotiation can fall through, and that one did. We weren't able to obtain the land Smejkal wanted; he continued to prefer a land trade over cash, so we continued to work on that angle."

"The problem was complicated," continued Havel. "We buy new parkland every year using lottery funds. Smejkal preferred a land trade. That's fine, but it takes time because it has to be the right land, land that doesn't significantly contribute value to the state park system but that Smejkal would find attractive and useful. We wouldn't want to force him to take land that didn't satisfy him, so it was taking time to research and offer land to him. That's what we agreed to do in 2002, and that's

what we were doing this year, up until just a couple of weeks ago when Smejkal announced his intention, in the middle of negotiations, to cut a second area -- this time including the land around the new cabins. We felt the only way to give him what he wanted, while simultaneously protecting the trees for park visitors, was to invoke eminent domain; it was the only guaranteed way to accomplish both goals."

Smejkal, when reached for comment said, "It's a shame because we spent many hours looking at trade possibilities that wouldn't have cost the state any money. And the director slammed the door. It's unfortunate."

Smejkal explained the history of the agreement. "We had an agreement all worked out in 2002 that involved state forest land, but the forestry department backed out at the last minute. So we all agreed to a land swap that didn't include the timber rights. The state had a two year option to purchase the timber rights, an option they didn't exercise before it ran out in 2004. They said they didn't have the money or interest in the timber rights. They continued to claim they had no money until I filed a logging permit this year. We met in May and they said they would have the money by the end of July. On the last day of July, they still hadn't come up with the money, so I filed for another logging permit, because I needed to get my timber out before my rights expired."

"There are still pieces on the table that could make an exchange work which would save the taxpayers money -- which would make good sense," concluded Smejkal.

"We deliberated this very carefully, and we considered the eminent domain option very seriously," said Havel. "We much prefer open, willing negotiations, and we've been successful using negotiations to acquire thousands of acres of state park land for the past 30 years without declaring eminent domain even once. But this situation called out for a solution that would give everyone what they needed -- for both the park visitors and Smejkal."

Bike and Build-Pedaling Across America

By Scott Laird

Vernonia was recently the host for an amazing group of young adults. They spent the last day of their trip here, and, according to most, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Participants with a group called Bike and Build spent July 24th, the last night of their cross-country bicycle trip, at the Vernonia Christian Church on North Street before pedaling out of town the next morning, heading for Cannon Beach, the Pacific Ocean, and the end of a fantastic, but grueling, journey.

"It's been tough," said Elliot Wells, from Charleston, South Carolina, after sixty-nine days on the road. "I'm really looking forward to finishing."

Bike and Build works with young adults aged 18-25 to undertake cross-county cycling trips that benefit affordable housing organizations. They hope to introduce and engage the participants in the affordable housing issue, connecting them to the cause in a very unique and intimate way.

Bike and Build had six different trips taking place this summer. The group that stopped over in Vernonia was known as the Central US trip, based on the route they took across the country, and was made up of twenty-seven riders from eighteen different states. Each participant must raise a minimum of \$4,000 for the trip. Starting in Virginia Beach, Virginia, on May 17, the group pedaled across West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon. I met them on the morning of their last day on the road.

Kim Peven, a twenty-one year old nursing student from the University of Michigan, was not even a biker before this trip. "I hadn't been on a bike since I was a little kid," Kim told me as she stretched in preparation for the final leg of the trip. "There is a whole range of us in the group, from bike mechanics, to everyday riders, to those who got their bikes the day before the trip started. It was really tough in the beginning," said Kim about her experience, "but it's really more mental than physical."

Bike and Build solicits grant requests from housing groups for projects that are planned mostly by other young adults throughout the country. The

riders decide as a group which projects to fund. The group had nine "Build Days" in their schedule where they stop to help work on housing projects organized by either Habitat For Humanity or Rebuilding Together, a group that does rehab projects as opposed to new constructions.

When asked about highlights of their trip, Wells told me he enjoyed seeing the variety of cities and seeing how people live. He mentioned Boise, Bloomington, and Portland as favorite cities. Rocky Mountain National Park was also a highlight for Wells when the group topped 12,000 feet in elevation. "That was a real sense of accomplishment," said Wells.

Each trip is led by four peer leaders who act as unofficial guides for the trip and are mostly responsible for safety and policy enforcement. Jake Stangel, a twenty-one year old graduate of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) who calls New York City home, was one of the peer leaders. "I wanted my trip to be more meaningful, and I prefer to be part of the decision making processes," said Jake. "It's tough work but really rewarding."

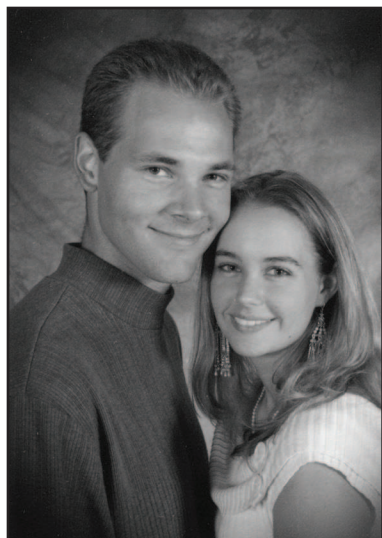
The group shares chores and sleeps at host spots that are pre-arranged. Folks at the Vernonia Christian Church were responsible for feeding them breakfast.

Kim told me she really enjoyed working with the families during the build days. "The Habitat For Humanity families are required to work between two hundred and three hundred hours on their homes, so they were often there working along side us," said Kim. "It was really cool to meet them, hear their stories, and see how excited they were about their project."

It's almost certain that each of these riders will not forget their trip, their ability to make a difference, and the memories and friendships that were created during two months of pedaling across America.

Bike and Build is based in Brooklyn, New York. For information go to www.bikeandbuild.org

Ben Davis and Christie Brown to Wed



Christie Brown and Benjamin Davis are to be married at 3 o'clock on September 1st, 2007 at the Davis residence in Vernonia. Family friend Craig Mills will perform the ceremony for the daughter of Norman and Deborah Brown and the son of Gary and Patricia Davis. The maid of honor is Kat Leach, long time friend of the bride. The bridesmaids are Kristin Frances, Jessica Davis, and Bethany Davis. The groom's best men are the groom's brothers Mathew Davis and Timothy Davis of Vernonia.

The groomsmen are Dan Davis and Andy Davis of Napa, California. The flower girl is Aubrey Luv Leach, daughter of Kat Leach. A reception will follow the ceremony at the Scout Cabin. Coordinating the event will be the bride's aunt, Dorothy Wiren. The bride is employed as a Paramedic with Metro West Ambulance. The groom is employed as a Fire Fighter/Paramedic with Columbia River Fire & Rescue. After the honeymoon in Australia, the couple will reside in Vernonia.