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Editors note: the 350 acre parcel of dune, forest, and wetlands just south of Sand Lake estuary is commonly known as the old Beltz Farm. Although private property, locals have used the land for over 30 years for natural recreation. The parcel is for sale and some developers have an option to buy. Writer and frequent trespasser Nancy Slavin writes a letter to the land.

November, 2002

Dear Beltz Farm:

As you know, I've been trespassing on you for years. Over the last decade, I've hiked your triangle-shaped land tucked between the sea and Sand Lake many times. I've always been grateful for your tide-shifted dunes, snarled woods, bogs, wetlands, and, of course, your teeming estuary.

Late this summer, I ventured out; I hiked the long beach up from Tierra del Mar, shading my eyes from the great wet wall of Cape Lookout, which radiated in the bright sun and spindrift off of blue-green waves. Along the south side of the estuary, two greater yellow-legs piped off warning cries and a few sanderlings poked around in the mud. Then, I cut inward to the edge of the forest where chartreuse old man's beard hung thick from spruce trees, grasses turned gold, sedges shined ever-green, and even after such a dry season, low-lying mudholes still bred some fierce mosquitoes. I'm almost positive I found a black bear track and I know I saw a few piles of berry-laden scat.

A murder of crows followed me from the flats all the way along the wetland's perimeter, and a great blue heron squawked and gamboled from treetop to treetop, eyeing my dog who accompanied me. In the woods, I picked ripe huckleberries until I came to the sunbreak on the old dike where it was so hot I had to take off my shirt. A group of thrushes that ate both the Himalayan and Northwest blackberries fluttered off from the brambles when I passed.

When I reached the middle of the dike path, a large doe poked her head up on the other side of the canal - her ears rose as big and alert as satellite saucers - just twenty feet from us. My dog could smell her, but couldn't see her, tucked in the twinberry and willow bushes as she was. I apologized to her for our disturbance but kept walking; I eventually took off my shoes and walked barefoot along the path. There were otter prints in the mudflats and a kingfisher flapped and flitted out its staccato cry. Right at the bend in the dike, a Northern Harrier soared, the stark white of its tailband flashed like a flare, then it veered and took a dive after a rodent in the lowlands. A few blue asters still bloomed, a cluster of cat's paw, wild calendula, yarrow, and all the sedges, grasses, rushes and reeds. Ripples made by fish ringed the water and I wondered if they were wild coho fingerlings waiting to migrate out to sea. I soaked it all in. I was so happy to be out there, so glad to know you'd hardly changed in all the years I've trespassed on you. So many times you have saved me.

On my way out, I cut across the dunes. The sandpaths worn by other human trespassers are now marked by survey poles, watertable-indicators, and staked neon-pink flagging tape, all signaling that things are about to change.

You are for sale, old farm. Over the years, you've had various "owners" who've mostly let you be, but your most recent "owner," wants to sell and he's asking 5.5 million dollars. The asking price is quite a bit more than your estimated value since your wetlands and estuary make for a lot of restrictions in regards to development. It's strange to me to have any price put on you, but the important thing to know is this: a group of "principals" currently has the cash and an option to buy you.

The principals are made up of big-time golf professionals - I'm talking PGA level - and they are avid. They've trespassed on you, too, and envisioned the possibility of a golf course along your strip of dunes and woods. Apparently, your 120 or so acres tucked between the estuary and the Pacific is a rare piece of land for the kind of golf course about which these developers dream. The layout that they're proposing is based on old traditions of golf that started in the Scottish highlands, where the landscape remains as close to possible as the original. It's called a Scottish links-style course, kind of like the new golf courses they built down south in Bandon.

On your behalf, I've gone some of the community meetings the developers have been holding about you. Just so you know, our county's regulatory planning process doesn't require that potential buyers hold these community meetings - they're offering them of their own accord to be courteous, accessible, and to keep the lines of communication open. All they really need is the conditional use permit from the county to start their project rolling.

The developers have assembled a whole group of experts: geologists, ecologists, hydrologists, wildlife biologists, a transportation expert, and course designers to help the human community understand what might happen when this golf course goes in. These guys are aren't dumb; they hired an attorney who grew up in the county and can speak of his personal connection to your land, they hired a local facilitator who worked on the sale of Whalen Island just to your north, which recently was dedicated as the first state park on the coast in thirty years, and most ingeniously, they hired the former county planning head, a guy who's generally respected for his fair-mindedness and ability to draw the full picture.

The meetings have been long. The moderator has been articulate and able, for the most part, to hedge off volatile human emotions with compassion. The experts have stood up and patiently answered all that they could about the boundaries and layout of the course, the various flora and fauna surveys, the grasses they plan on planting for the putting greens, the mitigation of the 1-2 acres of wetlands inside the dunes, concerns about pesticide, herbicide, and fertilizer run-off into the estuary, their use of water for irrigation, their plans for testing water-quality, and the potential impacts of increased usage on the already apt-to-flood septic systems of Tierra del Mar. The experts addressed ideas about possible interpretive signs, a trail along the estuary, human access to your land, local residents' usage of the links, and, even, the hazards of golf balls slicing off from the dunes onto the beach.

At the meetings, the developers have emphasized they're not interested in making a profit, they just want to "break even." They propose to build only the course, a modest clubhouse, which will only have 6 or so boarding rooms, a restaurant, a bar, and only one rest stop out on the links. They'll have a maintenance building to store fertilizers, pesticides, lawnmowers and such. The parking and traffic flow shouldn't be a problem,

they say, and as far as increased litter, they said they'd go out and pick it up themselves. They estimate they'd employ 50-100 minimum-wage new employees, use local contractors for construction, and encourage their guests to use the community's businesses. These guys claim that they want to have a low-impact course; a private refuge for 150 or so members who can afford the 20-40 thousand-dollar joining fee. It's kind of funny, seeing how I can barely count on my 10 fingers the number of people I know who make over \$40 K a year in Tillamook County. I guess I know the wrong kind of people.

Actually, though, I believe the buyers don't want a lot of development on you, either. They love the wildness of your land just like I do; that's one of the things, they say, that makes it so unique. They acknowledged that your land is one of the last pristine estuarine habitats on the Oregon Coast. Out of the 15 estuaries, Sand Lake is one of the least developed, one of two in our fair county. But, really, we both know you're not totally pristine - there is your dike, after all, and a lot of humans and horses have walked on top of you for years, and the distant rumble from the Sand Lake recreation area 4-wheelers echoes throughout your dunes all day long.

At the meetings, a few environmentalist-types have raised some questions like whether an elite golf course is a fair trade for the social loss of such rare habitat and who is truly benefiting in the long run? I listened to their answers, but I have to admit, my mind kept wandering to what the weather is really like here on the coast in the winter months. Do you remember that old movie *Caddyshack*? And that minister who played the best round of golf in his life during a torrential rainstorm because the wind kept blowing the ball in the hole? Remember how at the 18th hole, he missed his putt, held his club into the air and cursed, then got struck by lightning? It made me laugh just thinking about it. But these principals hail from the Northwest; they're used to the rain. They say they want to live on the coast, raise their children, and contribute to the community. Besides, they claim that golfers love to brag about how bad the weather is when they play. They're even proposing to name their golf course "Pacific Gailes," which is the old Gaelic way of spelling our word for gale. I suppose that's pretty appropriate.

These principals are going above and beyond the call of most developers and they've offered to sign what they call a "contract with the community," a document that will put all their promises and concessions in writing so they can be held accountable. They even set up a website to continue the conversation with us humans. I've checked it out - only a few people have expressed their concerns there. According to the facilitator, hardly anyone has called the information line the developers set up. Some letters to the editor have been published in the local paper, both for and against the project.

Way back in August, after the first three-and-a-half hour meeting, I was awfully tired and hungry. I probably should have stopped for some food at the local pub, but something in me said to keep driving. So I headed North toward my home, right out of Pacific City, over Cape Kiwanda, past the junction of the latest local development, and then slowed down at Tierra del Mar until I was cruising the dark Sand Lake road alongside of you. Besides my physical hunger and exhaustion, other emotions suddenly started to growl inside of me; feelings I might call anger, loneliness, frustration, or heartbreak. I shook my head and said out loud, "God help me," and then I got some help: I started crying - weeping, really, the kind of well-up that makes for dangerous driving

along a pitch-black rural road. But I couldn't help it; a decade of love in an instant turned into grief. I wept all the way home, and ended up crying on and off for days.

Friends tried to help me out of my sadness. "If development has to happen," they'd say, "this golf course is probably the best case scenario." That might be true. I believe the golfers are sincere in their love for the land, that they get salvation through their meditative sport the way I do just walking outside. I don't even loathe golf, you know. When I was a kid, living in Chicago, I had a boyfriend who was captain of the golf team and we'd play a few holes every so often, but inevitably I'd get bored and do cartwheels along the fairway instead. I always appreciated getting to be out there, though, in a space inhabited with more grass, trees, birds, and water than people. My brother is a big golfer, too. I spent a week once at his wedding on the Monterey Peninsula in California, which is home to 12 golf courses. I guess I just fear that the Oregon coast might soon look like Monterey if developers keep persuading citizens that golf courses are the best use option for private, undeveloped land.

Other friends, perhaps worried that my sadness was turning clinical, offered another favorite condolence - the famous adage "you can't stop progress." That slogan always makes me wonder about the definition of "progress," a word which implies improvement and betterment. I can't say which is better, wild lands or manicured greens. It's my own selfishness that wants access to you and your flowers, shrubs, trees, otters, deer, elk, bear, hawks, waterbirds, wetlands, estuary, open sky. It's a right of access I never even legally had. I simply trespassed on you because of my inability sometimes to shake my noise-polluted self without the help of your quiet soul.

Practical-minded friends tried to convince me that the only way to talk to developers is through money. I've heard some talk about conservatories or land trusts that could potentially buy you. Or maybe, even, Oregon State Parks could expand the new Whalen Island Park. But the post 9/11 federal administration seems to have cut all 60 million dollars allocated to public conservation, and besides, non-profits aren't allowed to pay more than the land value of the property, which is considerably less than the 5.5 million that the golfers can pay. In the past, other groups have tried to negotiate with your landowner about a price, but an agreement couldn't be reached. I'm sure the seller has heirs to think about.

The money-logic argument never gets me very far anyway - I'm a writer who gets by on meager wages just because I love living here on the coast. I have wondered if I had a ton of money, what kind of legacy would I really want to leave for my family? Sport or space? Maybe there's some private philanthropist out there who could fork out the money, but they're hard to find.

I wish we could transform you, Beltz Farm, into something like Yasgar's farm, if only for one weekend before development begins. We could sing those old Joni Mitchell lyrics, "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." I know it's ridiculous, my silly nostalgia for a kind of consciousness that seems to have recessed just like the economy. I wondered sometimes if my Vietnam-conceived generation is simply too jaded and too cynical from a lifetime of questionable warfare practices to be open to really shouting out a rallying cry for sacred spaces. After all, that last Woodstock revival idea degenerated into a mess of riots, rapes, and violence.

A lot of friends, of course, have told me that I'm way too sensitive. That comment is nothing new for me and I'm sure it's true. But my sensitivity is why I love living here on the Oregon coast: in the sensuality of your moist environment I get to *feel*, I get to be alive and in touch. And, besides, you're just as sensitive as I am.

Anyhow, I'm getting over my grief now. Autumn storms are brewing in the air and they help me sense that you can take care of yourself, old farm. I've thought about how when they cut down the trees to make room for the fairways your unstable sands might shift and cut a deep rut in the north end of the course right down to the estuary. Or maybe when they relocate the wetlands, a sinkhole will show up somewhere on the 7th green. Or after a dry summer like this one, their aquifers could dry up in a flash, with the maintenance men watering their course with as much as 450,000 gallons during peak days. Who knows, maybe the development won't make it past the permitting process, or the public hearings, or the county commissioners – I've heard that one of our notoriously pro-development commissioners is against this project because Sand Lake happens to be in his backyard. And if the proposal did make it through the county, other environmental groups likely will send the case to the Land Use Board of Appeals. There are all sorts of outcomes over which I have no control.

I'm really just writing, old farm, to tell you that no matter what happens, I wanted you to know how lucky I feel for having had the chance to get to reconnect my soul to yours. In fact, the last time I hiked on you I found an old horseshoe that had fallen from the hoof of another frequent trespasser. I took it as a sign for good luck and left the rusty metal there, stuck in the mud at the edge of the forest just in case you needed it.

But on second thought, I don't know if I should even wish you the kind of luck we humans have. I'll just wish you the kind of fortune, Beltz Farm, that only your natural resources can provide. Take care.

Nancy

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Nancy Slavin