



Creating a Horse-Friendly Society Summer 2011

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Creating a Horse-Friendly Society

By Alan Shank, Farm Planner and Horse Owner

Have you ever considered the social and political responsibilities of horse ownership? We may think we're just an individual who loves all things horse, but not consider ourselves part of a bigger movement. By owning and using horses we actually do belong to a group of people who all have a mutual interest in keeping horses a viable and enjoyable activity where we live.

How we care for and use our horses affects our social environment as well as our physical environment. If neighbors and government regulators are annoyed at the unintended effects of bad horse-keeping practices such as weeds, flies, odors, manure piles, dust, mud, water pollution, etc., we're already at a disadvantage when a public decision is made about animal ordinances or trail use.

If, however, our neighbors enjoy pastoral settings, wildlife, and beautiful horses viewed from their window, we've made a convincing argument for encouraging horse recreation in the area before any discussion begins.

The experiences of our non-horse neighbors, and the public as they come in contact with our horse practices, are vitally important for several reasons. A positive experience can, 1) prevent ordinances that are onerous to keeping horses, 2) protect equine access to trails on public and private land, and 3) garner public funds to create and maintain equine recreational opportunities.

Can Cities Be Horse-Friendly?

For example, in 2004, the Mukilteo Public Works Department was being pressured to change their animal ordinance to prohibit livestock within the City of Mukilteo and enforce more restrictive measures for keeping horses. Since 1999, my wife and I have kept two horses on our property in Mukilteo, using Best Management Practices that the Snohomish Conservation District advocates.

Our eleven neighbors love having bucolic open space and lovely horses to look at. They wrote letters to the City Council and came to public meetings advocating for an animal ordinance that continued to allow horses in the city. If our practices had been annoying to our neighbors, they could just have easily testified against us or been passive about the outcome.

The Public Works director then attended one of the Conservation District sponsored farm tours at our home to see how horses in the city could work and asked the Snohomish Conservation District to advise them on their animal ordinance changes. ("City Horse Owners Make It Work," Oct 22, 2004, www.Heraldnet.com).

The original animal ordinance draft would have made keeping horses on our property nearly impossible, but, thanks to our neighbor's support, the final ordinance accommodated our existing horse setup. By using established best

management practices and having non-horse owners advocating for us, it was demonstrable that horses in the city could work.

Being Visible Makes a Difference

Of course, it's also important to be visible in public eyes. Some effective ways to be more visible are: 1) Educate your neighbors about your good practices. 2) If you're using best management practices, contact the Conservation District and let them know your farm is available for farm tours and educational purposes. 3) Attend public meetings on parks and land use. 4) Join or form a volunteer organization like "Friends of Lord Hill" (<http://friendsoflordhill.org/>) that are active in working with Snohomish County Parks and Recreation to improve parks for equine use and building relations with other park users.

Looking Ahead

Pilchuck Tree Farm near Arlington has generously made their private land available for equestrian use and is one of the main trail-riding areas in the County. What if the tree farm is put up for sale in the near future? Would the local horse community be in good enough standing with the public, and be well organized and networked with county government to advocate for buying that land as a park that continued to welcome horses?

In response to these kinds of events, King County horse owners formed the King County Executive Horse Council in 1985. Their primary focus is to *"support the horse industry and equestrian way of life in King County by taking part in pertinent land use issues and by promoting the protection and creation of equestrian trails and facilities."* (www.kingcountyexecutivehorsecouncil.org/index.html)

Besides advocating for equine interests in King County, this council educates horse owners about responsible practices and proper trail use. An organization like this makes horse owners visible to county officials who may subsequently make decisions about parks and recreational uses and animal ordinances. This group also helps the horse community speak with one voice for clear and effective communication with county government.

In Snohomish County, the equine industry is represented on the County's Agricultural Advisory Board by horse owner Jackie Macomber of Granite Falls. The board advises the County on its Comprehensive Plan, agricultural regulations and other agricultural policy matters. Let Jackie know what equine and land use issues you're concerned about. (Contact Jackie through Snohomish County Agriculture Coordinator Linda Neunzig, linda.neunzig@co.snohomish.wa.us or call 425-388-7170)

First Impressions Last

Effective organization and representation is important in informing public decision makers and the public about the needs of the equine community. However, good first impressions from horse farms and trail riders are THE most vital and effective defense against opposition to equine recreation in the county.

Good horse-keeping has the same beneficial effects on clean water, stream recharge, wildlife habitat, and open space as good farming practices do. Good horse-keeping also means happy neighbors. Why not do all you can (by using best management practices and joining effectively with other horse owners) to protect clean water and build strong positive relations with the non-horse owning public and local governments? All this ensures that horses are generally seen as an asset to our environment, the local economy, and the community. If you aren't already involved in some way, consider getting involved in horse and volunteer organizations working to educate horse owners and advocate for them.

If you need assistance to improve your horse farm with best management practices, contact Alan Shank at the Snohomish Conservation District (alan@snohomishcd.org, 425-335-5634 x120) or attend a SCD workshop or farm tour. You, your horses and your neighbors will be glad you did!