City of Cannon Beach

Dear Madam or Sir:

Once upon a time there was a village built above the flood plain of a beautiful river. The villagers knew from long experience that it would be foolish to build houses on the floodplain, because when it rained hard in the mountains, the river would overflow its banks. They were content to watch the everchanging river from their homes on higher ground.

A wealthy developer approached the village council with a proposal to build many houses on the edge of the river. He would sell these houses to city people so they could see the beautiful river even closer than the villagers.

The villagers told the developer the houses would be on a floodplain and that this was unwise.

The developer and his lawyers used clever legal arguments and their political connections to overrule the common sense of the villagers. The developer bulldozed the floodplain. He built many houses that he advertised had beautiful river views. He sold them for a good profit to people from the big city, who also ignored the villagers.

Now, when the villagers looked at the river and its flood plain, they saw houses.

The rains came. The waters overflowed the banks of the beautiful river. The foolish owners of the riverside homes cried, “Woe is me.” They proposed digging a canal that would go around the flood plain, so when the rains came, the water would flow “somewhere else,” a place of mystery, out of sight and out of mind. This seemed sensible to them. They even offered to pay for digging the canal.

The villagers objected, pointing out that nature would take nature’s course; eventually the canal would again overflow its banks and the homeowners would soon be asking to build another canal. The villagers also said undesirable consequences would result from diverting the river to “somewhere else.” The diverted water would, perhaps disastrously, affect the plants and animals of the flood plain. These costs would redound upon the villagers, not the homeowners. Finally, the canal would be ugly. The villagers would see it, but not the homeowners. The plan seemed not only risky, but unfair.
The owners of the riverside homes hired the same big city lawyers to once again use clever arguments and connections to bend the law to their will.

The story ends here.

I tell it, as someone who lived through the initial controversy over building houses on the foredune back in the 1970s. All of today’s problems were foreseen and ignored. I know the council faces a difficult decision. It is possible that some of the homeowners may not have heard of the initial controversy over building on a shifting dune in the first place and bought their homes in ignorance. I sympathize. It was, however, all in the public record. Asking the whole community to bear the environmental risks and potential costs of grading for views, to bail out a tiny minority, is unfair and perpetuates a practice that was seen to be ill-advised decades ago. I would hope we all know better now. I urge the council to vote against grading dunes for views.

Sincerely,

Karl Marlantes