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Timber in transition: Plum Creek says it's willing to listen
By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

CONDON - Melanie Parker wouldn't mind getting a little mad at Plum Creek Timber Co. once in a while.

But try as she might, Parker just can't seem to work up a head of steam.

"The company has been very good, very proactive with us," she said. "And it's hard to fault them for trying to make money."

These days, making money often means selling corporate timberlands for real estate development. And that new economic reality concerns all sorts of folks, because Plum Creek is far and away Montana's largest private landholder, with the power to fundamentally reshape entire forest landscapes.

It concerns Parker especially, because her Condon-based nonprofit is homegrown to connect community with conservation. She and the folks at Northwest Connections like working woods, where rural traditions such as logging and hunting can continue to identify a quality lifestyle.

Her husband, in fact, is an outfitter and has taken trophy bucks on Plum Creek land that now boasts trophy homes.

All of which explains why Parker wouldn't mind at all if she could get fired up and fuming with the company that's changing her community so dramatically.

But her world is not so very black and white, not peopled with good guys and bad guys. Hers is messier than that, full of gray ambiguity and negotiation.

Since 1997, Parker has been working with Plum Creek, sitting across the table to discuss which Swan Valley timberlands are coming up for sale, and which might be purchased for preservation.

"We're 10 years into this," she said, "and for the bulk of that time the company has either come to us of their own initiative, or come when we called. That exchange of information has really paid off."

And it's paid off in places far beyond the Swan Valley as well, said Kathy Budinick, a spokeswoman for the timber giant.

Budinick sat down recently and crunched the numbers relative to Plum Creek's Montana land sales over the past five years or so. She excluded large-block sales to other timber companies, because those transactions resulted in little or no change for local communities.

As for the rest of the sales, she said, for every acre sold into real estate development a full seven acres were sold into conservation. That was possible, Budinick said, because the company has recognized its activities impact enormous segments of Montana's population.

"In the past several years, we've given hundreds of thousands of dollars," she said. "We gave the Nature Conservancy \$250,000 over five years."

And with that money, the group purchased land and retired development rights, conserving wild open space for the future.

In effect, Budinick said, Plum Creek has given the public at least some of the money needed to buy Plum Creek lands.

"We've been doing this sort of thing for some time," she said, "but there is a more recent recognition that we need to be even more connected with these communities."

The fact is, as the Plum Creek business model shifts toward real estate deals, the company likewise shifts toward more community involvement.

"We want to listen and learn and see what's going on," she said. "We want to take a more active and prominent role."

That's not to say the company is giving away any land. When the public buys timberland for conservation, it must pay the company full value for both the timber and the real estate beneath.

The money Plum Creek has given, in fact, is a drop in the bucket compared to the money the company has received. And often, the company reserves the right to continue logging the land, even after being paid not to sell it for real estate.

But more important than the grant money itself is the company's recognition that the money is needed, because it is that same recognition that drives long-term conservation conversations.

"By coming to us and keeping us informed," Parker said, "Plum Creek gives us the opportunity to rally the troops and pull together conservation deals."

Just look there in Parker's backyard, up Elk Creek or Goat Creek or Squeezer Creek. Or look closer to Missoula, to Primm's Meadow. Look at the tens of thousands of acres Plum Creek sold to the Blackfoot Challenge. Look at Wisconsin's Wolf River, at Florida's Phifer Flatwoods.

Across the country, Plum Creek has sold more than a half-million acres into conservation, Budinick said. All were timberlands ripe for real estate, and all are now protected from

development thanks to complex partnerships between communities and the company.

You can squabble over the price public conservation buyers have paid, Parker said, can debate how much Plum Creek has really returned to taxpayers over the years. But it's tough to argue the company hasn't spent time and money it really wasn't obliged to spend in order to make conservation deals possible.

The cooperative communication required for such deals hasn't always been perfect, Parker admitted, but for the most part it's worked.

At first, Parker said, the company was consistent about bringing land sales to her doorstep up front. Later, she said, the flow of information ebbed.

“But it seems to be a little bit on the uptick lately,” Parker said. “The exchange of information is more like it used to be.”

And that, Budinick said, is no mistake.

“We realize that times have changed,” the spokeswoman said. “We realize that maybe we need to be doing more to meet with people in the communities, to talk about what would be the best way to move forward.”

The company is even looking at a new protocol that would change corporate giving. Instead of sitting back to await grant requests, Budinick said, Plum Creek may soon be going out into communities, meeting with movers and shakers to determine where philanthropy would best be targeted.

“It's very important for us to actively engage with and cooperate with community stakeholders, especially as our business model continues to change,” she said. “We need to listen to them and to consider their perspectives as we manage our business.”

Nowhere is that more evident than in northern Maine, where the company has proposed real estate development on a scale never before imagined. The plans, not surprisingly, have faced stiff opposition from those who live, work and play in the North Woods.

“We met extensively with communities there,” Budinick said. “And not only have we met, but we have changed our plans big time. Big, big time.”

The result of those talks, she said, is the second-largest conservation easement in U.S. history.

“We did that based on feedback from people, because we went out and talked with them,” Budinick said.

And although some see such moves as no more than attempts at appeasement, attempts to grease the development skids by tossing the locals a few scraps, Parker for one, knows the company's efforts are well above and beyond what's actually required.

“They could just ram these real estate deals through as fast as possible,” she said. “But they haven't done that. They've slowed down, at least enough for us to have a shot at making conservation purchases. I don't exactly like what's happening, but it could be a lot worse.”

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