

August 16, 2024

**OFFICE OF THE HEARING EXAMINER
KING COUNTY, WASHINGTON**

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REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

SUBJECT: Department of Transportation file no. **V-2750**
Proposed ordinance no. **2024-0165**
Adjacent parcel nos. **131160-0370 and 131160-0360**

DRAKE RANDLE AND WILLIAM AND VIKKI JOHNSON

Road Vacation Petition

Location: a portion of 43rd Ave S, Auburn

Applicants: **William and Vikki Johnson**
4221 S. 294th St
Auburn, WA 98001
Telephone: (253) 334-1690
Email: Vikki_johnson@comcast.net

King County: Department of Local Services, Road Services Division (Roads)
represented by **Leslie Drake**
201 S Jackson Street
Seattle, WA 98104
Telephone: (206) 477-7764
Email: leslie.drake@kingcounty.gov

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Overview

1. This is a petition to vacate a short spur of 43rd Ave. S. coming off S. 294th St. The Department of Local Services, Road Services Division (Roads) recommends denying the petition. We conducted a remote public hearing on behalf of the Council. After hearing witness testimony and observing demeanor, studying the exhibits, and considering the parties' arguments and the relevant law, we recommend against vacation, at least in its current form, because the right-of-way abuts (and provides public access to and through) Camelot Park. Yet here the abutting neighbors sought vacation not to expand their property nor to block a public trail, but to eliminate consistent and disturbing activities in the road spur. Even if no appeal is filed here, this ordinance seems a good candidate to refer to committee to review potential solutions.

Background

2. In September 2021, then-neighbors Johnson and Drake petitioned to vacate the right-of-way. Ex. D3. The Council Clerk transmitted the petition to the County Road Engineer later that day. The Engineer analyzed the petition, sought stakeholder input, and completed her report by November 2022. Ex. D13. Exhibit D14 at 005 provides a visual:
3. By the time the Executive transmitted the ordinance to Council in May 2024, Mr. Randle had (out of frustration) sold his property and moved. Ex. 14. However, he submitted a letter in continuing support of vacation, pointing to daily disruptions from individuals loitering on the street portion of the right-of-way who play loud music, engage in narcotics and sexual activities, have been involved in numerous fights and even hit-and-runs, and left graffiti, trash, and abandoned stolen cars, with the police taking little action despite numerous calls. Ex. P1. Both Vikki Johnson and Roads attempted to contact the new owner of the Randle property but received no response.
4. Roads submitted a staff report among its 24 exhibits. Except as provided below, we incorporate the facts set forth in Roads' report and in proposed ordinance no. 2024-0165.
5. At hearing, Ms. Johnson clarified that she was *not* seeking to cut off *trail* access to the Park. Instead, she wants to curb public parking of *vehicles* on that road spur. The short, paved road spur leading to the trail, versus the walking path itself, is perhaps best depicted in exhibit D17 at 002 (after a fresh paint job for the north-south fence):
6. Ms. Johnson described constant loud music (at all hours), fights, fireworks, drug sales, drug use, open-air sex. She faces stiff resistance when she asks those occupying the right-of-way to tone it down. Afterwards, she has had to clean up fecal matter, used condoms, and soiled undergarments, among other waste.
7. Ms. Johnson has also had to constantly paint over the graffiti on her fence. Yet gang tags quickly re-cover what she has painted. A nearby high school volunteered to paint the fences, which they did, but they gave up after their work too was quickly graffitied over. Ms. Johnson has resigned herself to no longer repainting the fence. *See* exhibit A1 at 002, 007 & 009.
8. Ms. Johnson wants the right-of-way narrowed to just a walking path, or at least have vehicle access limited to the hours the park is actually open [currently 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.], as the situation grows especially dire at night. She emphasized how much time she spends trying to clean up the mess users of the right-of-way leave. She asked about having a gate they could close at night and re-open when the park reopens.
9. Julie Valencia lives across the street. She agreed that the neighbors are not exaggerating the problems, but she is against vacation. She does see some advantages to keeping the paved area itself—such as occasional neighborhood party overflow parking and the neighborhood's annual garage sale—yet her main concern seemed maintaining trail

access to the Park. She described the right-of-way as the main entrance to Camelot and the most open and accessible (versus other entrances partially obscured by bushes and trees). She noted that people use the path to cross the Park to reach public transportation that runs along on S. 294th St. She wants to see the County do something, other than vacation, to rectify the situation.¹

10. While not testifying at hearing, neighbor Taylor Hernickx submitted written commentary echoing Ms. Valencia's sentiments against vacation: the Park is a valuable community resource for exercise and dog walking, as well as a direct walking route to the nearby elementary school, not to mention people from the other side of the Park using the right-of-way to get to the bus that runs along S. 294th St. He too noted that the right-of-way attracts people who do not practice upstanding citizenry behaviors. He hoped that a solution could be reached—such as blocking off the parking area to vehicles or narrowing that vacation area—that would satisfy community concerns while maintaining trail access to and from the Park. Ex. P1.
11. Teya Hillerman has lived outside an adjacent Camelot Park entrance and has experienced what these neighbors have described—drug use, loud music, lighting dynamite, sexual intercourse, etc.—on her entrance as well. She described reaching out to various folks within the County about putting up some sort of barricade or gate to prevent nighttime parking [when the Park is officially closed]. She contacted her County representative, who directed her to Roads; Roads said it was a County park; and Parks declined to do anything and directed her to the Sheriff's line. Ex. P3 at 001. Ms. Hillerman noted that the Sheriff has been slow to respond, and when they do, those occupying the right-of-way can see them coming and temporarily tone it down until law enforcement moves on.
12. Sheri Hart leased the Randle property (see page 2 picture) for a year after he moved out. She too moved away in frustration. She described disturbances, like people blowing up trash cans in the right-of-way, that make it hard to work from home. She recounted watching people poop in the right-of-way, blasting music (especially late at night, long after the park officially closes), people doing donuts with their cars (which resulted in a car damaging her fence). Exhibit A1 at 003 shows one instance of fence damage. She depicted the right-of-way during nights and summers as “like New York City.” She has cleared up needles, other paraphernalia, and cigarettes butts. She too repainted the wood fence, only to see it quickly graffitied over.
13. Like Ms. Johnson, Ms. Hart has no concerns with the path itself; instead, it is “vehicle access, period” on the spur that creates the problems. While Ms. Hart agreed that nefarious activities occur at other Camelot Park entrances, including a murdered body

¹ Neighbor Jeremy Frank sent a letter opposing vacation opposing vacation. Ex. P2. He did not mention anything on the advantages or disadvantages of maintaining the road for the public *vehicular* access, and instead pointed to maintaining paths, access for “pedestrians and cyclists alike,” and the connectivity and accessibility harms that would result from vacation. Ex. P2.

dumped one entrance over,² she testified that the 43rd Ave. S. entrance (the one subject to this petition) is the worst. She attributed part of that to what Ms. Valencia also pointed to—this right-of-way path is the most accessible entrance.

14. When we probed Roads at hearing, Leslie Drake explained that Roads does not block off vehicular access to an improved area, that Roads would not want to take on the commitment of opening and closing a gate, that allowing neighbors to open and close a gate would create its own concerns, and that she saw no solution. She timely followed up with memo on the topic (discussed below). Ex. D25.

Legal Standard

15. Chapter RCW 36.87 sets the general framework for county road vacations, augmented by KCC chapter 14.40. There are at least four somewhat interrelated inquiries. The first two relate to whether vacation is warranted: is the [1] road useless to the road system and [2] would vacation benefit the public? If the answers to these are both yes, the third and fourth relate to compensation: [3] what is the appraised (or perhaps assessed) value of the right-of-way, and [4] how should this number be adjusted to capture avoided County costs? We analyze each of those below.
16. Turning to the first two, a petitioner has the burden to show that the “road is [1] useless as part of the county road system and [2] that the public will be benefitted by its vacation and abandonment.” RCW 36.87.020. “A county right of way may be considered useless if it is not necessary to serve an essential role in the public road network or if it would better serve the public interest in private ownership.” KCC 14.40.0102.B. While denial is mandatory (“*shall* not” vacate) where a petitioner fails to make that showing, approval is discretionary where a petitioner shows uselessness and public benefit (“*may* vacate”). RCW 36.87.060(1) (emphasis added).
17. In addition, KCC 14.40.0104.B.4 requires the County Road Engineer to study, “Whether it is advisable to preserve all or a portion of the right of way for the county transportation system of the future.” “Transportation system” is a broader term than “road system,” in that trails are a part of the County’s transportation system but not of its road system. Council has signaled, on both past road vacation decisions and in rejecting proposed code amendments that would have changed “transportation system” to the narrower “road system,” its continuing commitment to trails.

Analysis

Preliminary Matters

18. Unlike most vacation petitions involving rights-of-way that are essentially lines on a map, with no actual “road” ever being constructed, as depicted above there is that short spur

² See <https://www.yahoo.com/news/death-investigation-underway-body-found-184951406.html> for the news story on the killing. The news reported the body as being found around the 4300 block of S. 294th Street, but given the testimony and pictures, it appears it was a Camelot Park entrance approximately five houses east.

of actual pavement connecting the Park to S. 294th St. However, while we find (and other County entities that commented did not dispute) that the right-of-way is essential for access to and from the Park, the paved area is “useless as part of the county *road* system,” beyond providing maintenance and emergency vehicular access. Ex. D1 at 017 (Permitting noting the right-of-way provides pedestrian and maintenance access to Camelot Park in elementary school), at 018 (Parks noting public access to the Park), at 024 (Planning Section noting no long-range transportation concerns, so long as the current trail access is preserved), at 026 (Operations on drainage needing to be preserved), at 027 (Traffic Engineering has no objection to vacation).

19. However, Petitioners still have the burden to show that [2] “the *public* will be benefitted by its vacation and abandonment.” RCW 36.87.020 (emphasis added). While denial is mandatory (“*shall* not” vacate) where a petitioner fails to make that showing, approval is discretionary where a petitioner shows uselessness to the road system and public benefit (“*may* vacate”). RCW 36.87.060(1) (emphasis added).
20. Vacating the right-of-way *without* preserving public trail access would decidedly not be in the public interest, as Council has consistently expressed in its adopted codes, policies, and road vacation decisions. But again, eliminating trail access is not what Ms. Johnson wants to do here. So, the public benefit analysis is more involved here than past scenarios where a petitioner sought to cut off an existing (or even potential) public trail.
21. There is both a statutory and a policy component to the public benefit analysis. We are well-equipped to definitively answer the legal component, but not the “is this the best idea?” component.

Public Benefit as a Statutory Threshold

22. Even if vacation were implemented in a way that preserves the trail, along with the occasional maintenance and emergency vehicle access, the strongest benefits from blocking off the road spur from the driving public are essentially *private*—mitigating the untenable situation the abutting neighbors (the Johnsons on one edge, and formerly Mr. Randle, Ms. Hart and presumably the new owner of the Randle property on the other edge) have to endure—or, in Mr. Randle’s and Ms. Hart’s case, *had* to endure before the situation got so bad that they moved out. Yet private interests have been the motivating factor for *every* vacation we have reviewed to-date, as it is the owners of abutting properties seeking to acquire the property, not the County, who started the vacation ball rolling.³ We have not viewed RCW 36.87.020’s public benefit threshold as particularly high. Today’s petition easily meets the legal threshold.
23. In most vacation petitions to-date, the public benefit (as opposed to the benefit to the abutting owners acquiring the road) has—using the Performance, Strategy, and Budget model described below—amounted to a few thousand dollars in avoided County liability risk, eliminated management costs, and jettisoned maintenance costs, along with slightly

³ In theory, the Council can initiate vacation. In our dozens of vacations to date, it has always been abutting property owners seeking vacation. KCC 14.40.010.A; 14.40.0102.A. *See also* RCW 36.87.010.

increased property tax revenue. The carrying costs associated with the County keeping an unopened, unused right-of-way on its books are slight. And yet we (in our recommendations and Council in its decisions) have found that sufficient to meet RCW 36.87.020. Otherwise, vacations of rights-of-way the County had no use for would almost never be allowed; none of the dozens of vacation proposal to reach us ever arrived on our desk where the County was the impetus or driver of the vacation.

24. Here, however, because this is an actual opened road, the financial benefits to the County, using the Performance, Strategy, and Budget model, are on the order of \$15,585 each for the Randle and Johnson properties. Ex. D14 at 003-04. If anything, that might understate the fiscal benefit; given the frequent trash and other debris needing cleanup, along with various county officials having to field and respond to complaints, one can safely assume County carrying costs are higher here than for the typical road. There is more than enough “public benefit” to satisfy the statutory requirement.

Public Benefit as a Policy Matter

25. Thus, there is no bar to either a (i) partial-width vacation *reducing* the public right-of-way to whatever is required for nonmotorized public access and limited maintenance/emergency vehicle access or (ii) full-width vacation conditioned on preserving a public *easement* (across what would become private property) sufficient to accommodate those uses. That is a different question from whether vacation here is wise. “The long-standing rule in Washington is that road vacation is a political function that belongs to municipal authorities.”⁴ We risk venturing far beyond an examiner’s wheelhouse and into areas of Council expertise on this topic; an examiner is essentially an administrative law judge, not a senior policy analyst. So, we instead provide Council with some substantive food for thought and then a *procedural* recommendation.
26. If some type of vacation is warranted, no compensation would be due.⁵ The Assessor’s Office determined that adding the right-of-way square footage would not change the underlying value of either the Johnson or Randle properties.⁶ And as noted above the Performance, Strategy, and Budget model forecasts financial benefit of over \$31,000 for vacating the entire spur, which might understate the actual financial benefit to the County.

⁴ *Coalition of Chivilist Residents and Friends v. Okanogan County*, 34585-8-III (Wash. App. Mar 16, 2017) (unpublished) (citing binding precedent).

⁵ Where vacation is appropriate, we calculate compensation by [3] starting with the increase in property values the receiving parcel will garner from the extra square footage the (formerly) public right-of-way area adds to the parcel, a figure the Assessor generates. However, that is only the starting point, because [4] State and County law allow local legislative branches to adjust the appraised value to reflect the expected value to the public from avoided liability risk, eliminated management costs, and jettisoned maintenance costs, along with increased property taxes. RCW 36.87.070; KCC 14.40.020.A.1. Performance, Strategy, and Budget created a model for calculating these adjustments, updated annually. Roads then applies those figures to a given parcel.

⁶ In past cases with a similar no-value-added Assessor determination, given the counter intuitive nature of that zero-added-value determination and our background litigating property valuation disputes, we have asked a member of the Assessor’s Office to testify at multiple past hearings. And the consistent answer has always boiled down to the workings of the *mass* appraisal process the Assessor’s Office employs.

27. One complication, given the procedural posture, is that neither Roads nor Ms. Johnson were able to successfully contact the current owners of the Randle property to gauge their interest in the matter.⁷ That is not a bar to vacation, as we have previously explained.⁸ And because there is no compensation requirement here (see above), it would not be a force sale situation but more akin to a quit claim deed. Yet, without obtaining that current owner's input, it gives pause.
28. The petition we went to hearing on and developed a record for was a full-width vacation transferring the entire right-of-way to the abutting neighbors. Ex. D2 at 002-05. To the extent that the broad brush strokes of a (i) partial-width vacation reducing the public right-of-way to whatever is required for nonmotorized access and maintenance and emergency vehicles, or (ii) full-width vacation conditioned on preserving a sufficient public easement (across what would become private property) for those uses seems advisable, there would be many specifics and logistics to iron out to implement that approach while avoiding creating ambiguity or unintended consequences.
29. Moreover, if the Council determines that public vehicular use of the spur here causes sufficient problems to warrant a response, there may be non-vacation solutions that involve keeping the right-of-way public but limiting vehicle access. Roads explained persuasively at hearing why it should not take on the commitment of opening and closing a gate or allowing neighbors to open and close a gate. And it pointed to Road Standard 5.08, which we read as clarifying that, to block vehicle access, locked but removable bollards are the appropriate remedy (versus something like a gate).⁹ But we do not read that standard as *prohibiting* bollard-ing off the spur road here, so long as maintenance staff and emergency responders are able to remove the bollards. And as a quasi-judicial tribunal not engaging in *ex parte* communications, examiners are ill-positioned to explore such options post-hearing.
30. Yet even if those hurdles are overcome, and the finer details of how to retain nonmotorized access and limited vehicular access while blocking public vehicular access can be hammered out (either via a vacation or installing bollards), there is likely some public benefit to keeping the road spur open to the vehicular public. While much of the vehicular public use on the spur seems attached to nefarious uses, some people likely use it to park their vehicle to access Camelot for normal recreational reasons. And neighbors

⁷ Ms. Johnson testified that the current residents appeared to have limited English proficiency.

⁸ In [V-2727](#), we explained that because state and county law allows county legislative bodies to start the vacation process on their own (without any abutting owner participation), the requirement for a petition to include the owners of a majority of the frontage is not eliminatory but more a tool to winnow down the petitions the County has to expend resources studying. RCW 36.87.010; KCC 14.40.010.A. We found additional support in KCC 14.40.0104.B; when owners of the majority of frontage fail to join a petition, that failure “is grounds for” the County Road Engineer to report the deficiency to Council and end the review. Thus, the majority frontage owner piece is simply a threshold that gets the Engineer started on examining the merits of vacation. We concluded that even if “some property owners abutting the right-of-way do not join in—and even oppose—vacation should be explored in the engineer’s initial study, then thoroughly reviewed during the examiner hearing, and (if appealed) examined by Council [b]ut we do not put an expansive reading on a threshold that merely acts as a signal.”

⁹ Ex. D25. Road Standard 5.08 starts with, “When necessary to deny motor vehicle access to an easement, tract, or trail, except for maintenance or emergency vehicles, the point of access shall be closed by a line of bollards.”

occasionally use it for overflow parking. How much weight should those uses be given? Neighbor testimony about reprehensible activity in the right-of-way (some of it criminal) creating a seemingly untenable living situation was compelling, but we have no measuring stick to compare to other rights-of-way drawing similar unwanted activities or insight on how the County treats other public areas when such behavioral issues arise. Per hearing testimony, law enforcement responses to date have proven unsatisfactory to curb the problem, but with our seat on the bus we are not well-positioned to explore and weigh those either.

31. Thus, our only firm suggestion is a procedural one. To the extent Council sees a problem here warranting further action, and if some type of vacation might provide a tool in the tool kit for resolving that problem, denying this petition now seems unsound. Roads received the petition in September 2021, the Road Engineer finished her review in November 2022, and the Executive did not transmit the matter to Council until May 2024. Sending everyone back to the time-consuming petition drawing board seems unnecessary; instead referring the ordinance to committee to consider what (if anything) Council wants to do here seems the wiser procedural approach.
32. Mechanics-wise, if our recommendation is timely appealed, the ordinance will make its way to Council with the benefit of being flushed out by that appeal, a response to that appeal, a reply to that response, and a future memorandum from us. KCC 20.22.230; 20.22.240.B. If no appeal is filed, an ordinance concurring in our recommendation (here, to deny the petition) will go on the Council's agenda (consent agenda or otherwise). KCC 20.22.220.B.2. If Council wants to explore potential solutions, the matter will need to get referred to committee for further study. KCC 20.22.220.B.2.b.

RECOMMENDATION:

We concur in Road's proposed ordinance denying the petition as currently presented. Yet even if our recommendation is not appealed, we recommend that Council consider referring the matter to committee to review potential solutions.

DATED August 16, 2024.



David Spohr
Hearing Examiner

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO APPEAL

A party may appeal an Examiner report and recommendation by following the steps described in KCC 20.22.230. By **4:30 p.m.** on **September 9, 2024**, an electronic appeal statement must be sent to Clerk.Council@kingcounty.gov, to hearingexaminer@kingcounty.gov, and to the party email addresses on the front page of this report and recommendation. Please consult KCC 20.22.230 for the exact filing requirements. If a timely appeal is filed, the Examiner will notify parties and interested persons and will provide information about next steps in the appeal process.

**MINUTES OF THE JULY 16, 2024, HEARING ON THE ROAD VACATION
PETITION OF DRAKE RANDLE AND WILLIAM AND VIKKI JOHNSON,
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FILE NO. V-2750**

David Spohr was the Hearing Examiner in this matter. Participating in the hearing were Leslie Drake, Sheri Hart, Teya Hillerman, Vikki Johnson, and Julie Valencia.

The following exhibits were offered by Roads and entered into the hearing record:

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| Exhibit no. D1 | Roads Services report to the Hearing Examiner, sent July 2, 2024 |
| Exhibit no. D2 | Letter from Clerk of the Council to Road Engineer, transmitting petition, dated September 17, 2021 |
| Exhibit no. D3 | Petition for vacation of a county road, received September 17, 2021 |
| Exhibit no. D4 | Letter to Petitioners acknowledging receipt of petition and explaining road vacation process, dated September 27, 2021 |
| Exhibit no. D5 | Plat map |
| Exhibit no. D6 | Assessor's information for property APN 1311600360 |
| Exhibit no. D7 | Assessor's information for property APN 1311600370 |

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| Exhibit no. D8 | Vacation area map |
| Exhibit no. D9 | Letter from KCDOT to Petitioners acknowledging receipt of petition and explaining road vacation process, dated April 21, 2022 |
| Exhibit no. D10 | Email from Assessor's Office on valuation, dated October 25, 2022 |
| Exhibit no. D11 | Compensation calculation model for APN 1311600360 |
| Exhibit no. D12 | Compensation calculation model for APN 1311600370 |
| Exhibit no. D13 | Letter to Petitioners recommending denial, dated November 17, 2022 |
| Exhibit no. D14 | County Road Engineer's Report, dated November 17, 2022 |
| Exhibit no. D15 | Letter to Chair, recommending denial and transmitting proposed ordinance, dated May 7, 2024 |
| Exhibit no. D16 | Proposed ordinance |
| Exhibit no. D17 | Declaration of posting, noting posting date of June 21, 2024 |
| Exhibit no. D18 | Publication in the Seattle Times for July 3 and July 10, 2024 |
| Exhibit no. D19 | Affidavit of publication – to be supplied by Clerk of Council |
| Exhibit no. D20 | Photographs of subject vacation area and surround |
| Exhibit no. D21 | Bing street view image of vacation area, dated September 20, 2021 |
| Exhibit no. D22 | Map with aerial image, showing other entrances to Camelot Park |
| Exhibit no. D23 | Photographs of entrance to Camelot Park at 45 th Place South |
| Exhibit no. D24 | Photographs of entrance to Camelot Park at 40 th Place South |
| Exhibit no. D25 | Supplemental information on policies, submitted July 19, 2024 |

The following exhibits were offered by Vikki Johnson and entered into the hearing record:

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| Exhibit no. A1. | Comment and photographs of entrance to Camelot Park at 40 th Place S. |
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The following exhibits were offered by the public and entered into the hearing record:

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|-----------------|--|
| Exhibit no. P1. | Comment by Taylor Herinckx |
| Exhibit no. P2. | Comment by Jeremy Frank |
| Exhibit no. P3. | Email exchanges between KC and Teya Hillerman, submitted July 18, 2024 |

August 16, 2024

**OFFICE OF THE HEARING EXAMINER
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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

SUBJECT: Department of Transportation file no. **V-2750**
Proposed ordinance no. **2024-0165**
Adjacent parcel no(s). **131160-0370 and 131160-0360**

DRAKE RANDLE AND WILLIAM AND VIKKI JOHNSON

Road Vacation Petition

I, Jessica Oscoy, certify under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington that I transmitted the **REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION** to those listed on the attached page as follows:

- ☒ EMAILED to all County staff listed as parties/interested persons and parties with e-mail addresses on record.
- ☒ placed with the United States Postal Service, through Quadient-Impress, with sufficient postage, as FIRST CLASS MAIL in an envelope addressed to the non-County employee parties/interested persons to addresses on record.

DATED August 16, 2024.



Jessica Oscoy
Office Manager