



## GUEST OPINION

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By ROLLIE SAUER

This is about water, one of our most important and treasured natural resources on Orcas Island. This is also about keeping the rights and ownership of water here on the island and under public control.

As a member of the Orcas Highlands Home Owner's Association Board of Directors, on June 14, I presented a resolution to Olympus Properties, the owners of Rosario Resort and Rosario Utilities, LLC (RU), Washington Water Services (WWS) and to the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, stating that we have initiated an annexation process for RU, and have asked the Eastsound Sewer and Water District (ESWD) for their cooperation in this endeavor. Annexation involves having 10 percent of the registered voters living in the area served by RU and who voted in the last municipal election sign a petition requesting ESWD to annex RU. We also intend to seek the water rights that have been spun off into Orcas Water Holdings, LLC, a subsidiary of Olympus. If ESWD concurs with the request, the signatures on the petition are then validated by the county auditor, the resolution approved by the County Council and the initiative is placed on the ballot in the next election. Only those served by RU will vote on this ballot. Assuming a simple majority vote in favor, then ESWD would make a good faith offer to purchase the utility. If the offer is rejected, then ESWD would have the option to go forward with condemnation proceedings before an administrative law judge, aimed primarily at establishing a "fair market value". This process can take a year or two.

We think it is important that all residents of Orcas Island understand why we have taken such a step, and the far-reaching implications involved. We believe it is not advantageous to have RU owned by WWS, a California-based corporation. RU is currently seeking a 60-plus percent rate increase with the intent of being purchased by WWS. WWS has a history of going back for successive rate increases about every three years to maximize profits. We believe that local control of our rates is much more prudent.

More importantly, we are distressed to see the majority of the remaining water rights being locked up for speculative purposes by private investment bankers in an entity called Orcas Water Holdings, LLC. This water is owned by the state for the benefit of its residents. We do not believe that the anachronism of Robert Moran receiving water rights for a hydro-electric backup system for the Resort in the 1930's should allow Texas investment bankers three-quarters of a century later to sell the water by the gallon for the highest price the market can bear. We all know that island water is becoming scarce and precious. With the GMA directing future growth into the Eastsound UGA, their water issues are becoming critical. Just ask the East Orcas Water Supply Planning Committee.

This will be a long and arduous process, and will need the continued support of our citizens as we move through the legal and bureaucratic hurdles. Please join with us, and please request of your County Councilmen to provide a "fast track" for this to become a ballot issue. Let's keep ownership and control of water rights and utilities here on the island.

Rollie Sauer is an Orcas Highlands resident.