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For Immediate Release

Pierce County Adopts Cultural Resource Ordinance; Builders Warn of Rising Housing Costs and Delays

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On September 2, the Pierce County Council passed Ordinance No. 2025-522, establishing new cultural resource protections as part of its effort to raise categorical SEPA exemption thresholds. While the ordinance was amended to exempt minor ground disturbances and extend SEPA exemptions for infill development, the Master Builders Association of Pierce County (MBAPC) continues to hold serious concerns about the adverse impact these requirements will have on housing costs, construction timelines, and land availability in unincorporated Pierce County.

“Pierce County took an important step by raising SEPA exemption thresholds to accelerate housing approvals,” said Bill Sager, MBAPC President. “Unfortunately, Ordinance 2025-522 risks undermining the spirit of that exemption by introducing new regulatory hurdles, delays and significant expenses where they were intended to be alleviated.”

According to County estimates, cultural resource risk assessments could be triggered for up to 20% of new development projects, each taking 15–45 days or longer to complete. While this is a significant burden on its own, we anticipate that further delays will only accumulate as developers seek professional archaeological assistance from limited pool qualified personnel to conduct assessments. Further, the County currently employs one archeologist to determine when review is needed, and to then review data from applicable projects across all unincorporated lands, introducing another costly bottleneck from increasing requests and delayed permit reviews.

Compounding these concerns, the new requirements apply broadly to housing construction, commercial real estate, and even public works and infrastructure projects. This means critical road improvements, sewer replacements, low-income housing developments, and accessory dwelling unit (ADU) construction will all face added costs and delays when requirements are triggered. In some cases, these costs may be modest, however, MBAPC members know from experience that when ground surveys and probing are necessary, expenses and time quickly escalates, adding \$10,000, \$50,000, \$100,000 or even well over \$1,000,000 to a project, and 3 to 6 months of time to complete the work and study. It should also be noted that the majority of these studies result in the same permit conditions, which ensure protection of cultural resources, as are required without the study.

The Master Builders Association of Pierce County supports thoughtful stewardship of cultural heritage and is committed to compliance when culturally significant resources are discovered during construction. At the same time, the pre-emptive measures mandated by Ordinance No. 2025-522 must not result in widespread delays to private and public construction projects that serve urgent community needs. With 30% of Pierce County households considered cost-burdened, the association believes housing production must remain a top priority. MBAPC urges the County to identify low-risk areas for exemption to rely on current permit conditions, and to allow archeological oversight during site work as an alternative to expensive studies, in order to balance preservation with progress in housing attainability for the residents of Pierce County.

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About the Master Builders Association of Pierce County:

The Master Builders Association of Pierce County is a leading trade association representing over 800 members expanding to over 10,000 employees county-wide dedicated to serving the home building industry. With a strong focus on advocacy, education, and networking, the association promotes professionalism, innovation, and excellence in the local home building community.