

# Guide To Preparing a Rural Stewardship Plan

Benefitting the Rural Character of Island County



Island County Planning & Community Development

# Guide to Preparing a Rural Stewardship Plan



## Who is the Plan For?



Island County's Rural Stewardship Plan is for property owners within unincorporated Island County whose residential parcel is one acre or larger. A Plan can be developed for anywhere conservation practices will protect water quality and habitat – it's not just for land affected by wetlands. In exchange, Rural Stewardship participants qualify for front-of-line permit processing, and may choose either a reduction in property tax valuation, or a lowered land use intensity rating.

The Rural Stewardship Plan is best suited for landowners who can make a long-term commitment to manage their land in accordance with their Plan's requirements, usually for a period of more than 10 years. The Plan's set conditions are specific to the affected property; officially recorded on the land's title; and binding upon both the original applicant and future landowners.

## What's Involved?

Island County's Rural Stewardship Plan offers a broad range of conservation options for single family residential properties. Some are mandatory; others may be selected from a specific list to fit the landowner's goals and the property's characteristics. There is a flat fee for processing and recording a completed Plan. When not accompanied by a development proposal, review of a Rural Stewardship Plan is usually completed within 30 days and is not subject to a public hearing.

## What's Required

If your land **is** affected by a Wetland

Rural Stewardship  
Plan Application



Field Indicator  
Worksheet



Land Use  
Intensity Worksheet



Wetland  
Buffer Worksheet

If your land **is not** affected by a Wetland

Rural Stewardship  
Plan Application



Field Indicator  
Worksheet

Guidebooks for Rural Stewardship Plan and Wetland Identification include instructions. Throughout the application process, you may contact County Planning staff with questions or for more information.

## Conservation Benefits

The underlying importance of a Rural Stewardship Plan is greater protection of water quality and natural habitats. Participants are actively committed to ongoing stewardship of their land. Their agreement with Island County requires:

- Impervious surfaces and cleared areas will be kept to a minimum
- Only environmentally friendly fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides will be used
- Hazardous household products (and containers) will be safely disposed
- Outdoor lighting will not be intrusive
- Pet and livestock wastes will not contaminate water or soils
- Septic systems will be regularly maintained and inspected

### *Rural Stewardship Plan Goals*

1. Improve land and natural resources through voluntary actions and stewardship
2. Maintain or improve water quality and habitat functions
3. Promote rural character and rural living
4. Keep or enhance habitat for Protected Species, and Species and Habitats of Local Importance



In addition to the above mandatory conservation practices, landowners must also choose additional techniques that further benefit the natural resources on their site. Selective practices include reducing lawn size, constructing narrower driveways, using drought tolerant plantings, and other methods. Landowners may also designate a portion of their land as a private conservation easement to keep it in a natural state forever.

# Incentives for Conservation



## Enhanced Flexibility

A Rural Stewardship Plan provides landowners with a wide range of incentives and options. Each Plan is customized to the landowner's goals and their land's features. The level of any future development on the property is based upon site specific conditions, and mandatory and voluntary conservation practices. By agreeing to these requirements, applicants are afforded a higher degree of flexibility in how they use and develop their property, or they may opt to instead apply for a reduction in their property tax valuation rate.

## Front-of-line Permit Process

For property enrolled in the Rural Stewardship Plan, top priority is given to permit applications for residential structures and land use proposals. A County Planner will personally oversee moving those applications to the front of the line, and keeping them on a fast track. Of course, some time frames can't be shortened, such as when there is a public comment period for certain types of development proposals.

## Natural Resource Conservation

Island County's Rural Stewardship Plan encourages landowners to protect, preserve, restore or enhance water quality or habitat on their land through varied conservation practices. Find helpful links at our [website](#). You may also call or stop by the Planning Department's offices on Camano or Whidbey Islands.

## Reduced Property Taxes *or* Land Use Intensity Level

### *Property Taxes*

Island County's Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs) is a point-based program for landowners whose property contains specific open space or other resources, or who have an approved Rural Stewardship Plan. Property tax values of lands admitted into PBRs can be reduced by 10 to 90 percent, depending upon the property's score. An approved Rural Stewardship Plan is the first major step for landowners who choose to qualify for PBRs. Like the Rural Stewardship Plan, there is a separate application and fee for the PBRs program, and an official notice is recorded on the title that declares the tax reduction and all associated conditions.

Find the Public Benefit Rating System application [here](#).





## Land Use Intensity Level

When their property is affected by a wetland, some Rural Stewardship participants may prefer to reduce their critical area buffer requirements, in lieu of a lowered property tax rate. A reduced land use intensity rating helps landowners achieve their property development goals, while continuing to protect the water quality and habitat on their land through conservation and selective practices.

### Rural Stewardship Plan

Land Use Intensity may be changed one level

High



Medium

Medium



Low

## Rural Stewardship Process

Rural Stewardship Plans are handled within the Planning Department. When submitted separately from a development proposal, Rural Stewardship Plan reviews are not open to public comment. While this review may take up to 30 days, it is generally completed sooner.



# Getting Started



An approved Rural Stewardship Plan signifies that the property owners have studied the lay of their land, how rainwater moves over it, where the low-lying areas and high spots are located, where it's sunny and dry or shady and wet. Which birds and other wildlife inhabit the land, what plants and trees grow there, and how neighboring lands affect their property and vice versa. With this information, a landowner can consider how to use or develop their property in harmony with its natural resources.

This publication and the companion [Island County Wetland Identification Guide](#) contain instructions for completing the Rural Stewardship application. Forms, additional resources and information are available on our website or by contacting our business offices.

## Basic Information

The first section of the Rural Stewardship Plan application contains the landowner's property information from the property tax statement; persons needing additional assistance should contact a County Planner.

## Natural Features & Resources Assessment

The second section helps landowners identify natural features on their property, such as wetlands, streams, plants, significant land features, and habitats. These resources have varying levels of significance and importance. Applicants should utilize the *Island County Wetland Identification Guide* to assess their property's characteristics with the [Field Indicators Worksheet](#).

Applicants with property not affected by a wetland or wetland buffer can then move to the topography portion of Section 2. If the property contains or is affected by a wetland or wetland buffer, applicants must first complete the [Wetland Buffer Worksheet](#) before continuing to topography.

### Wetlands, Streams, Shorelines, Water Resources & Habitat

Rural Stewardship Plans help ensure that landowners give consideration to natural resources while planning for future development or to change existing land use.

Wetlands, streams, and shoreline features are valuable natural resources that filter pollutants from surface runoff before it flows into the Puget Sound or percolates into our aquifers. These same land features support habitats for plants and animals, besides contributing to the natural scenery of our islands. Some even help prevent flooding.

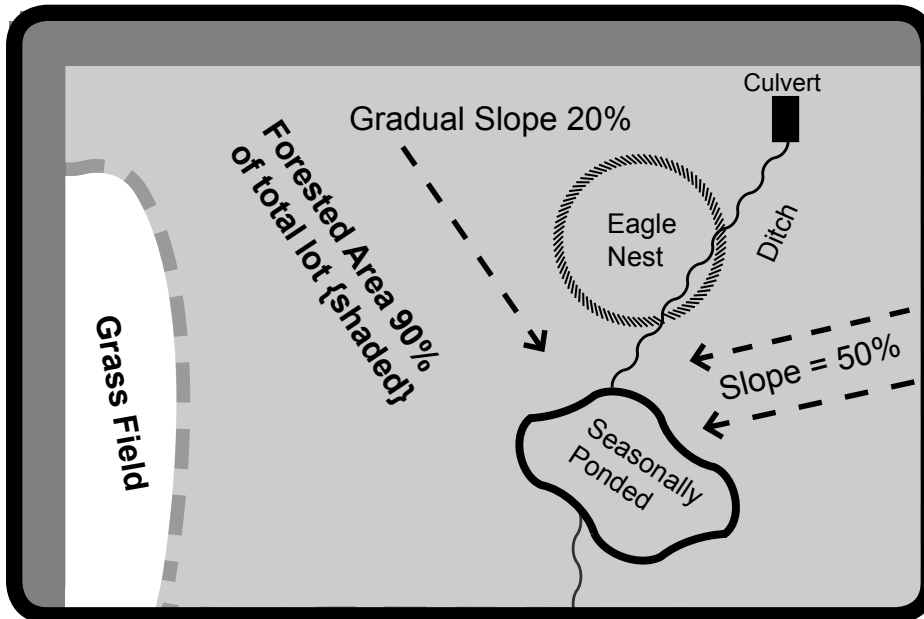
Habitats are part of the essential Camano and Whidbey Island ecosystems and support a diverse range of species and functions.

# Topography

This part of the application helps landowners describe their property's topography, with a section for a sketched map. Topography includes ravines, slopes, bluffs, and other areas where fluctuations in elevation occur. Topographical information can be used to better understand water flow, erosion, and sediment movement. Incline percentages of sloped areas should be shown on the map; photos of significant changes in land elevation should also be attached. (Camera angles should be shot from the bottom of the slope upwards, or as a side profile). If they prefer, applicants may use a separate sheet of paper for their map, no larger than 11x17 inches.



## Mapping Topography



Example of applicant's sketch with notes and locations of natural features. When practical, show dimensions. A similar sketch is required in Section 3 to show the land's existing and future uses, including structures.

## Features to Include

- Property Boundaries
- Wildlife Habitats
- Cleared Areas
- Drainage Ditches
- Ponds
- Wooded Areas
- Steep Slopes
- Pastures/ Meadows
- Streams/ Ravines
- Wet Areas/ Wetlands
- Bluffs
- Other Natural Features

# Goal Setting



In Section 3, applicants are guided through a series of questions to help define overall objectives for their land and how it's used, now and in the future. They then sketch a map showing existing land use and any plans for the future. If the property contains or is affected by a wetland or wetland buffer, the Land Use Intensity Worksheet needs to be completed before drawing the land use and goals map.

## Goals Assessment

### What Do You Want to Accomplish with Your Property?

*The exercise below will help applicants prepare their answers about property goals:*

1. What do you want to achieve?
  - For example, are you looking to conserve natural resources, maximize development space, sell your land in the future, etc.?
2. How much longer before you are likely to sell the property?
  - Will you sell in 2, 10, 30 years -- or never? How long you want to keep the property will greatly affect what benefits you utilize, as well as which conservation and development measures you choose.
3. Do you plan to eventually subdivide your property?
  - Just as with selling, subdividing will affect everything from location to size of development. Programs such as PBRS can be affected if subdivided portions are removed from the program.

### Land Use Intensity & Clearing

The intensity at which a property is developed and the amount of area that is cleared on the property, impacts natural processes and ecosystems. Intensity measures the overall amount of development, usually in square-feet of impervious surface or cleared area. *The exercise below will help applicants prepare their answers about current and future use of their land:*

1. How much land will be cleared in sq/ft? How much land has already been cleared in sq/ft?
  - By determining how much you plan to clear on your land in the future, you can gauge what the layout of your property will allow. The amount of clearing is an indicator of intensity. More clearing means greater intensity.
2. Will your development be served by septic or sewer?
3. Will your water come from a well or water system?
4. How far will your activity be from a critical area or buffer?
  - For some properties, developable areas are constrained by their small size and/or presence of critical areas such as wetlands.
5. How many sq/ft and what percentage of the property will be impervious?
  - Impervious surfaces do not absorb water. Examples: buildings, rooftops, concrete or asphalt parking, roads/sidewalks/driveways. Buffer



requirements can be lessened if total impervious surface is reduced.

6. How long & wide will the driveway be? What will it be made of?

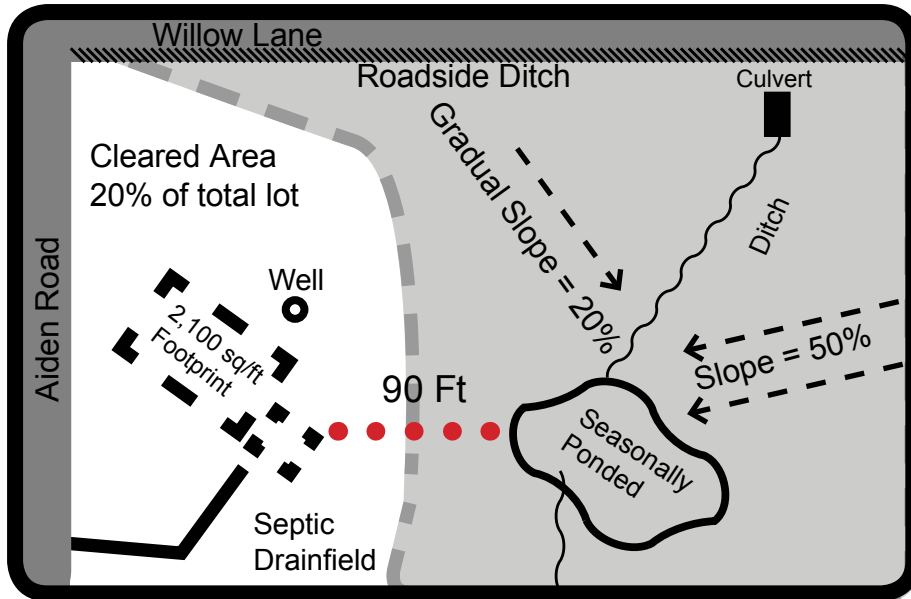
- Driveways are a large factor in interrupting hydrological functions by creating an impervious wall that blocks the natural movement of water across your site. (They also create breaks in habitat. The wider they are, the less likely wildlife will cross.) Narrowing a driveway can reduce the impervious surface, while still providing the same functional use.

7. What land use activities do you want to establish?

- Are you building a home, or do you want to establish a bed and breakfast? Agriculture, mini-storage, a water tank, or a pasture are examples of land use activities that need to be described. (Check to make sure that the zoning on your land allows for the proposed use.)

## Mapping Land Use Goals

This sketch, while similar to the topography mapping project in the previous section, includes structural uses. If they prefer, applicants may use a separate sheet of paper, no larger than 11x17 inches.



## Things to Include

- Property Boundaries
- Septic or Sewer System
- Water or Well System
- Existing Structures
- Potential Development
- Roadside Ditches
- Fences
- Grazing Areas & Paddocks/ Pasture
- Roads, Driveways, Parking
- Garden Areas/ Lawns
- Drainage Improvements
- Other Utilities

# Benefits of Low Impact Development (LID)



The purpose of Low Impact Development (LID) is to minimize development impacts by protecting, integrating, and maintaining predevelopment characteristics and functions on the land. Development impacts on surrounding habitats, water quality functions, and natural hydrology are then lessened. Conservation practices and some LID techniques can decrease impervious surfaces and help retain runoff and soil on the site. These methods help protect water quality and habitat.

## Implementing LID

This rendering shows examples of where and how LID can be implemented. Each Rural Stewardship participant will utilize site-specific LID techniques that are applicable to their property's characteristics and uses, in consultation with a County Planner.

1. Pervious pavement used for driveway
2. Rain water catchments used to irrigate hobby garden
3. Solar panels used to produce electricity for residence
4. Rain Garden to infiltrate excess runoff from impervious surfaces
5. Green roof over detached garage
6. Pervious interlocking blocks used for patio
7. Extensive forest retention
8. Native vegetation planted between drainfield and wetland buffer
9. Garden & compost bins

Applicable LID and selective conservation practices will be determined in consultation with a County Planner, prior to submitting a completed Rural Stewardship Application.



## Types

## Description

### Rain Gardens

Consist of shallow landscaped depressions with a soil mix and native plant selection adapted to local conditions. Storm water is conveyed into these depressions where the chemical, biological, and physical properties of plants, microbes, and soils remove or retain pollutants from runoff before it infiltrates into our aquifers or is slowly released into downhill streams, lakes or Puget Sound.



### Forest Retention

By preserving at least 65% of native vegetation and land to meet dispersion standards, properties can be self-sufficient in processing water flow by minimizing development impacts and using cost-effective LID practices. Forest retention exemplifies LID by preserving predevelopment hydrologic functions.



### Minimal Excavation Foundation

Uses a more surgical approach to earth movement through a combination of site preparation to prevent soil compaction; driven piles and connectors that limit soil disturbance; and integrated storm water dispersion systems. This allows storm flows to more closely approximate natural shallow subsurface paths under and around the foundation. Piles are engineered with corrosion protected steel, wood, or concrete.



### Soil Amending

Construction and heavy weight compacts soil, making it like an impervious surface which generates overland and shallow subsurface flows. Organic matter from compost, stockpiled on-site soil, or imported topsoil can be used to enhance water storage and attenuate storm flow.



### Permeable Paving

Pervious concrete and interlocking stones are designed to accommodate pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicle traffic while at the same time allowing infiltration, treatment, and storage of storm water. These pervious products work well for parking pads, pathways, sidewalks, driveways, and patios.



Section 4 lists Rural Stewardship mandatory and selective water quality and habitat conservation practices. All landowners must initial their agreement to each practice. Before indicating their acknowledgments, applicants first meet with Planning staff to consult about low impact development techniques and choice of selective practices. After submitting their application, there will be an approval conference between Planning staff and landowners. Final conditions will then be recorded on the land's title.



## Island County Department of Planning & Community Development

### Whidbey Island

1 NE 6th Street • PO Box 5000  
Coupeville, WA 98239-5000  
(360) 679-7339 (North/Central Whidbey)  
(360) 321-5111 ext 7339 (South Whidbey)

### Camano Island

121 N. East Camano Drive  
Camano Island, WA 98282  
(360) 629-4522 ext 7339