

**ISLAND COUNTY CONSERVATION FUTURES
CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD**

Date: April 14, 2019
To: Board of Island County Commissioners
From: Susan Bennett, Chair, Conservation Futures Citizens' Advisory Board
Subject: 2019 Conservation Futures Program Grant Recommendations

The purpose of the Conservation Futures Fund (CFF) program is to preserve, protect, maintain, improve, restore, and limit the future use of lands of public conservation importance through a variety of means, except eminent domain. These lands include shorelines, wildlife habitat, wetlands, farm, agricultural and timber lands that are under pressure from increasing urban development pursuant to Island County Code (ICC) 3.22.010 – ICC 3.22.060, Island County Resolution C-03-18, Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 84.34.020, RCW 84.34.210 and RCW 84.34.220.

Organizations that are eligible to receive Conservation Futures Funds include Island County government, cities, towns, special purpose districts, non-profit nature conservancy organizations (as defined in RCW 84.34.250), and non-profit historic preservation organizations (as defined in RCW 64.04.130). Eligible Acquisition projects will be reviewed by County Staff and the CFF Citizens' Advisory Board which will make recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners. The Board of County Commissioners will make a final determination on funding.

On April 1, 2019, the Conservation Futures Fund Citizens' Advisory Board (CAB) conducted a properly noticed public meeting in Coupeville, Washington to evaluate the Conservation Futures Fund (CFF) program applications for 2019.

The following seven CAB members participated, constituting a quorum:

- Susan Bennett
- Linda Kast Meehan
- Todd Peterson
- Penny Pfiester
- Dick Toft
- Kathryn Wells
- David Parent

Linda Kast Meehan, Chair, opened the public meeting. The first order of business was the election of CAB officers for 2019. The CAB elected Susan Bennett as Chair and Kathryn Wells as Vice Chair. Ms. Bennett acted as Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

Don Meehan and Stephen Bennett were the only citizens who signed the register. Mr. Meehan asked one question during the meeting.

Don Mason, CFF Program Coordinator, represented Island County support staff.

ACQUISITION PROJECT APPLICATION(S):

Three project applications were presented, two by Whidbey Camano Land Trust and one by Island County and Whidbey Camano Land Trust.

Finding

Pursuant to ICC 3.22.060, the following report, April 2, 2019 CAB public meeting summary/minutes and attached documents constitute the annual report to the Board of County Commissioners.

Penny Pfiester moved that the CAB recommend all three projects, Pearson Shoreline, Kettles Trails Expansion, and Strawberry Point Preserve Expansion, to be approved for funding by the Board of County Commissioners. Dr. Parent seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Project Ranking

After reviewing the project descriptions, budget and CFF cash flow, conducting site visits, and holding a public meeting to hear the applicants' presentations and public comment, the members of the CAB reviewed the proposed projects in relation to prescribed Acquisition Project Evaluation Criteria. Project ranking was as follows:

1. Pearson Shoreline
2. Strawberry Point Preserve
3. Kettles Trails Expansion

Below are the analyses of the projects in order of ranking, with reference to the acquisition project evaluation criteria:

Pearson Shoreline:

Conservation Values and Resources

This project protects ½ mile of natural shoreline and eelgrass beds, as well as 54 acres of upland forested feeder bluffs, for low-impact public use, fish and wildlife habitat, open space and bluff stability.

Appropriate Public Use and Enjoyment

This is a magnet for public use by land and sea. The property is located along the Cascadia Marine Trail, a Washington Water Trail, and the National Recreation Trail. A road that the previous landowner constructed provides hiking access to the beach and a cleared space is already available for a parking area and trailhead. Beautiful views may be enjoyed without hiking all the way to the beach, which may prevent overuse of the beach by humans.

This property was reviewed and enthusiastically recommended by the CAB in 2017 but the proposal was withdrawn when the offer was not accepted by the landowner. He passed away and his family accepted the proposal in 2019.

Plan Consistency and Partnerships

Protection of the Pearson Shoreline property is consistent with the Natural Resources and Parks and Recreation elements of the Island County Comprehensive Plan. In addition the Pearson project will help implement the County's Salmon Recovery Plan. The Pearson shoreline is located across from the mouth of the Snohomish River, and has been identified as a very high priority for conservation of forage fish, eelgrass and juvenile salmon. The Action Agenda of the Washington State Puget Sound Partnership identifies habitat protection and restoration as a region-wide strategic initiative. The agenda also emphasizes the importance of improving public access to Puget Sound.

Letters of support are enthusiastic from Whidbey Audubon Society, the Aquatic Restoration Program of Washington State Department of Natural Resources, and the Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee WRIA 6 Lead Entity, and the Washington Water Trails Association.

Potential for Loss

If the proposal is not accepted, the owners can sell view home sites, the beach will not be available for public use, and the habitat value of this property will degrade.

Assessment of Stewardship Viability

Whidbey Camano Land Trust will own and steward the property. Access by land will be from a gated parking area on a County road, down an existing unpaved road to the beach. The only other access will be by water for use by kayakers and other non-motorized boaters. Commitments from the WA Veterans Conservation Corps and WA Department of Natural Resources have already been secured to remove invasive vegetation, restore roads that will not be used as trails to native vegetation, and remove creosote-soaked logs from the property. Derelict equipment left on the property is already being removed.

Financial Strategies

Island County's funding is a mere 10% match; the remainder of the funding comes from already committed Federal and State grants.

In summary, the upland forest provides needed habitat for forest-dwellers and cavity-nesters; the beach serves small non-motorized boaters; the eelgrass, beach, and small coastal stream serves salmonids and forage fish; and the steeply sloping road/trail, while providing access to the views, may also prevent the beach from being overused by humans.

Strawberry Point Preserve expansion:

This project adds 10 acres to the existing Strawberry Point Preserve, owned by the Whidbey Camano Land Trust, plus an easement for an appropriately placed public parking area and a one-mile trail easement to the preserve through 90 acres of diverse habitat.

Conservation Values & Resources

The 90-acre property through which the trail easement would travel contains wetlands, mature, diverse forest, meadows, and valuable edge habitat, supporting species such as Sitka spruce, Pileated Woodpecker and Whidbey Island's only elk. The diversity of relatively undisturbed habitats in a small area is unique.

Appropriate Public Use and Enjoyment

Island County Comprehensive Plan Parks and Recreation Element 7 Section 7.4.4.2 defines the need for areas where residents can engage in a one-mile walk in nature within three miles of home. This project, also close to Oak Harbor schools and Skagit Valley College, provides such a walk and also enlarges the important wildlife corridor and green belt.

Plan Consistency and Partnerships

Support is documented from Sound Water Stewards, Silver Lake Parks Association (the nearby neighborhood), Tulalip Tribes, Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, Wild Fish Conservancy, Whidbey Audubon Society, and Whidbey Island Conservation District.

Potential for Loss

There is substantial potential for loss. Without this particular local match, the Navy will not put a restrictive easement on the property (equaling 42.5% of the purchase price), and the seller would then market the entire property, most likely for subdivision and development. Tract A, the 10-acre purchase adjacent to Strawberry Point Preserve, is only accessible by the trail easement through the 90-acre parcel (Tract B).

Assessment of Stewardship Viability

Whidbey Camano Land Trust is already committed to stewardship of the Strawberry Point Preserve, and will therefore steward the addition. The Trust needs the parking area to improve public access to the Preserve.

Financial Strategies

Conservation Easements are preferred by Island County as a minimal controlling interest. The Navy's restrictive easement and the willing buyer add to the attractiveness of the proposal.

In summary, with only a 10-acre parcel, a one-mile easement, and a parking area easement, this project more than doubles the size and habitat value of the Strawberry Point Preserve with a small expense, due to the Navy's restrictive easement.

Island County Parks Kettle Trails Expansion:

This proposal adds 45 acres to a highly used and valued County Park and connects Kettles to the Fort Ebey State Park. The 42 acre parcel for sale by Allito Properties includes a historic road from Coveland to Fort Ebey.

Conservation Values & Resources

The addition consists of mature forest including madrone, rhododendrons, and rattlesnake plantains, in an important habitat corridor. This area has a high risk of seawater intrusion into the aquifer, which would be increased by development.

Appropriate Public Use and Enjoyment

Moving the park access from the Highway 20 right-of-way to Libbey Road would improve safety and enable closing the trail on the highway right-of-way. Equestrians and bicyclists are not currently safe using this trail. Additionally, the project would create separate trails for equestrians and bicyclists on this section, further improving safety for each group.

The historic road between Coveland and Fort Ebey provides the opportunity for additional education about this historically important area of Whidbey Island.

Plan Consistency and Partnerships

Ms. Vogel, a public-spirited citizen, will donate 67 acres to adjoin Fort Ebey State Park, and three acres to connect that property and the Allito property with Kettles County Park, creating a large wildlife territory which will be welcomed by enthusiastic locals.

Assessment of Stewardship Viability

Support comes from the Whidbey Island Bicycle Club and Backcountry Horsemen of WA – Island County Chapter, who currently have Adopt-a-Park agreements for stewardship of the Kettles in place.

Potential for Loss

There are three active private offers for this property, which if accepted would fragment the forest and prevent connectivity for public and wildlife uses.

Financial Strategies

Considering the Navy contribution of the restrictive easement (93% of the purchase price) and the donation of a vital connecting 3 acres by Ms. Vogel, the cost to Island County is well worthwhile.

In summary, this proposal ties together two popular parks with excellent forest diversity and historic significance into a large wildlife preserve in a location identified as needing one.