

**ISLAND COUNTY CONSERVATION FUTURES
CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD**

Date: April 30, 2021
To: Board of Island County Commissioners
From: Kathryn Wells, Chair, Conservation Futures Citizens' Advisory Board
Subject: 2021 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 open space, wetlands, habitat areas, 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, nonprofit nature conservancy organizations (as defined in RCW 84.34.250), and nonprofit 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 27, 2021 the Conservation Futures Fund Citizens' Advisory Board (CAB) conducted a properly noticed virtual public meeting to evaluate the Conservation Futures Fund (CFF) program applications for 2021. The meeting was held and recorded via the Starleaf video-conferencing application.

The following seven CAB members participated, constituting a quorum:

- Susan Bennett
- Linda Kast Meehan
- Todd Peterson
- Kyle Renninger
- Joyce Richards
- Jake Stewart
- Kathryn Wells

Susan Bennett, Chair, opened the public meeting.

The CAB elected Kathryn Wells as Chair and Kyle Renninger as Vice Chair.

Les Gabelein attended as a member of the public but did not provide comments.

Brett Rebischke-Smith, CFF Program Coordinator, represented Island County support staff.

ACQUISITION PROJECT APPLICATION(S)

One project application was presented by Jon Decker and Ryan Elting of the Whidbey Camano Land Trust.

Finding

Pursuant to Island County Board of Commissioners Resolution C-69-19, the following report, April 27, 2021 CAB public meeting summary, and attached documents constitute the recommendations of the CAB to the Board of County Commissioners.

The CAB voted unanimously to approve funding for the Lone Lake Shoreline and Farmland Protection Project.

Project Review and Ranking

Most members of the CAB toured the project site on April 22, 2021 and all reviewed the applications and virtually attended the project presentation at the April 27th public meeting. The one member of the public did not provide comment.

Ranking was not necessary this year with only one acquisition project to evaluate. The CAB's analysis of the project, with reference to the acquisition project evaluation criteria, is detailed below.

Lone Lake Shoreline and Farmland Protection Project

This project would protect approximately 37 acres of prime farmland belonging to the Gabelein Family Trust with an agricultural conservation easement. The easement would remove four development rights. The property is located on the south shore of Lone Lake, near the city of Langley on Whidbey Island.

Conservation Values and Resources

Habitat and Water Resources

The Gabelein Family Trust's 37-acre property consists of open farmland used for raising cattle, and forestland that abuts other forested properties. The property's wetlands and forest serve as habitat for many species of birds, including Pileated Woodpeckers, a species of concern in our state, and the property serves as a habitat corridor for birds moving between Lone Lake and Deer Lagoon, an Audubon Important Bird Area. Other wildlife such as beavers, otters, western painted turtles, and amphibians have also been spotted on the property.

Protecting the wetlands and habitat that supports waterfowl will advance the goals of multiple plans and protects water quality downstream. Because climate change is predicted to increase the frequency of droughts, protecting wetlands and other bodies of water has become paramount.

A ditch (denoted as fish-bearing on the Island County Critical Areas Map) along the border of the property drains from Lone Lake to Deer Lagoon. Protecting this connection and corridor is a priority for Habitat Conservation and protection of the aquifer recharge areas as noted in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update.

The farm infrastructure supports both current and future agricultural activities, which limits the amount of potential new impervious surfaces on this large tract of land. If it were to be developed, the addition of impervious surfaces plus additional onsite septic systems could negatively impact the water quality of the ditch and Lone Lake, which has had numerous toxic algal blooms over many years. The easement will further, "restrict the overall amount of impervious surfaces," to protect the aquifer recharge processes of this area (aquifer susceptibility is rated moderate to high over the entire property).

The farm has a Conservation Farm Plan in place, which was developed in 2014. The CAB recommends that it be updated with Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) and that the easement's stewardship plan refer to the updated Farm Plan. The CAB also recommends that protecting surface water from runoff, using best management practices such as shoreline and riparian buffers, should be prioritized. The CAB further requests that periodic updates to the Farm Plan be written into the easement as conditions or activities at the farm change over time.

The CAB is pleased that the easement will not allow for commercial timber harvest of the forestland within the project area but wish to express that protection of the remaining forest and its ecosystem services is important, not only to preserve habitat but to protect water quality.

Working Farm and Agricultural

The Gabelein's generational family farm has been in operation since 1887. Such large, intact family farms are increasingly rare in Island County, and are essential to the rural character and local food system of our islands.

The family's current beef and hay operation is successful, and they have plans for expansion and diversification.

Most of the soils of this property are classified as "prime farmland if irrigated". Prime farmland is limited and should be stewarded to sustainably provide food and fiber for our area. Protecting

this land with a conservation easement and managing it with guidance from Whidbey Island Conservation District will ensure that this valuable resource will support the local food system for many years to come.

As a potential future use, the CAB suggests that the Gabelein family may consider helping train and incubate new farmers as another public benefit.

Appropriate Public Use and Enjoyment

The viewshed of the Gabelein family's farm is the primary method by which the public may "use and enjoy" the property. The property itself will remain private, but the pastoral views of the farm from the Lone Lake public access point and Bayview Road epitomize the rural beauty residents and visitors of Island County enjoy about these islands.

Plan Consistency and Partnerships

The Lone Lake Shoreline and Farmland Protection proposal is consistent with multiple local, state, and national plans. It meets many of the Island County Comprehensive Plan goals by protecting forest, wetlands, and aquifer recharge areas; by preventing the degradation of lands and water by development that, by its nature, increases the risk of stormwater pollution (and potential septic pollution as systems eventually age and fail); and by preserving historic and agricultural lands such as this property.

This proposal would preserve rural character, open space, and viewshed, while also facilitating this historic farm's ongoing agricultural enterprises that support the local food system.

Protection of the property aligns with state plans to protect critical wetlands and the upland forest, and with national and international plans that protect habitat for waterfowl and shorebirds.

Support for the protection of Lone Lake's water quality is strong within the local community and the project is further supported by the Whidbey Audubon Society and local individuals.

Potential for Loss

Lakeside homesites are highly desirable on Whidbey, as evidenced by the dense development surrounding lakes in the area. Development around Lone Lake has occurred rapidly and members of both the current and previous generations of the Gabelein family have been approached by developers. The current family members are ready and willing to place the farm under a conservation easement now to prevent the loss of this farm. Development pressure will only continue in future, and protecting the farm, its resources, and habitat now will eliminate the risk of future family members potentially deciding to subdivide or sell.

Assessment of Stewardship Viability

As grantors of a conservation easement, the Gabelein Family Trust will retain maintenance responsibilities of the farm. The family has demonstrated their commitment to keeping the farm in operation and has been working with Whidbey Island Conservation District to manage it in ways that protect soil and water quality. The Whidbey Camano Land Trust will work with WICD to ensure that the best management practices recommended in an updated farm plan will be part of the easement's stewardship plan and will monitor the property to ensure that easement requirements are being fulfilled.

As noted previously, the CAB asks that periodic farm plan updates be written into the easement to ensure that the best management practices evolve along with the property.

Financial Strategies

Acquiring a conservation easement engages not only the Land Trust and its resources, but also the landowners in the long-term maintenance and protection of this valuable property. While Conservation Futures Funds (CFF) account for 94% of the acquisition costs (6% is coming from private donations), an easement such as this remains a cost-effective strategy to protect land with such high economic, resource, and ecological values.

Conclusion

Removing four development rights and placing this 37-acre farm with 1,400 feet of Lone Lake shoreline under a conservation easement will prevent the degradation of prime farmland, the loss of one more large family farm, and protect:

- water quality both in Lone Lake and downstream,
- wildlife habitat,
- wetlands,
- forest, and
- rural character and scenic views in south Whidbey.

As long as the landowners, the Land Trust, and WICD work together to ensure that best management practices match the needs of the environment now and into the future, the CAB believes that the Lone Lake Shoreline and Farmland Protection Project will serve Island County residents well.

Final Notes

The protection of forest lands adjacent to the Lone Lake Shoreline and Farmland Protection Project's 37-acre property would protect an important habitat corridor in this area. While the section of forest included in the project is important, its habitat values would be significantly reduced if the adjacent forests were removed.

This project sparked much discussion amongst the CAB on topics ranging from how the current CFF criteria value forest land; the challenges of having limited CFF applications and project sponsors; the scope of application review of the CAB; CFF program management and monitoring; and other potential suggestions to increase program transparency, awareness, stewardship, and long-term sustainability. The CAB voted unanimously to schedule a follow up meeting in May 2021 to discuss these ideas and will present the findings to the Board of Island County Commissioners for their consideration.