



# ISLAND COUNTY PLAN FOR PARKS AND HABITAT CONSERVATION

Operations & Funding Analysis  
(Discussion Paper)

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# OPERATIONS & FUNDING ANALYSIS

## 1. INTRODUCTION



In Spring 2010, Island County and the Whidbey Camano Land Trust (WCLT) formed a collaborative partnership to develop a Parks and Habitat Conservation Plan for Whidbey and Camano Islands. In a context where many different jurisdictions are involved in providing parks, recreation opportunities, and habitat

conservation services, the plan will identify Island County's "niche" in managing parks and habitat conservation areas. The plan will include policies and strategies for making the best use of existing County resources, including partnering with other providers to ensure that parks and habitat conservation areas remain vital assets for the community. In addition, the plan will address declining funding, which has made it difficult for the County to provide and adequately care for parks and habitat conservation areas on Whidbey and Camano Islands.

### Document Purpose

The purpose of this document is to raise questions about the County's current and future role in protecting habitat and providing park land. Currently, there appears to be no direction or clear set of directions regarding the role that Island County Parks and Public Works should play—in relationship to other providers—in providing and maintaining habitat, parks, and recreation resources.

The County's vision, mission and guiding principles must be defined in order to set parameters for the management, acquisition, disposition, and maintenance of County-owned parks and habitat conservation areas. These elements will be discussed with the Board of Commissioners and the Project Management Team to identify the County's niche. It is only after this niche is identified that the team will be able to develop and prioritize specific policies, strategies and actions to achieve the community's vision for parks and habitat conservation.

The discussion with the Board and the PMT will address the following questions:

- What is the County's role in providing habitat conservation areas? To what extent is the County in this business and willing to dedicate resources to support it?
- What is the County's role in providing parks and recreation facilities? To what extent is the County in this business and willing to dedicate resources to support it?
- What is the County's strategy for managing, maintaining, and/or operating parks with recreation facilities and habitat conservation areas? Where will funding come from?
- To what extent should the parks and habitat conservation system be self-supporting? Is the County willing to consider revenue-generation strategies such as resource harvesting, land leasing, user fees, property divestment, etc., to achieve its funding goals?
- What is the best approach for continuing the successful partnership with the Land Trust? How can the County balance its own funding and operation needs with its desire to work with the Land Trust to protect habitat and connect people with nature?

To help answer these questions, this document provides an overview of existing County services and operations related to parks and habitat conservation areas. It presents case studies as examples of how other agencies provide these services. Finally, it proposes a vision and mission to assist in a discussion of operations and management strategies for the County's parks and habitat conservation system.

## **2. EXISTING COUNTY SERVICES**

The Island County Government provides a variety of public services for residents to improve their quality of life. These services are guided by the County's existing mission, vision, and guiding principles, set forth below.

### **Island County's Mission & Vision**

*Mission:*

Quality services for a quality life.

*Vision:*

We exemplify sustainable, healthy, safe, and prosperous, rural island communities. Through widespread collaboration, we steward our natural environment, celebrate our heritage, foster our community spirit and promote citizenship.

### *Guiding Principles:*

- Provide for the long term health and safety of the people, the economy and our natural resources.
- Assure customer service and promote operational excellence and efficiencies of Island County.
- Promote active participation in government.
- Fulfill our constitutional responsibilities, holding ourselves to a high standard of accountability, transparency, ethics and fairness.
- Maintain agricultural and recreational opportunities while strengthening our economic vitality.

The mission, vision and guiding principles provide overall direction on service provision. They indicate that the County values environmental stewardship, recreation, and protection agricultural lands as well as the County's rural heritage. All of these elements can be advanced through appropriately defining the County's current and future role in providing parks and habitat conservation areas.

### **Mandated County Services**

As part of ongoing budget shortfall discussions, Island County went through a process of evaluating services to determine whether they are mandated, essential or non-mandated.

- ***Mandated*** refers to a program or service that the County is required to provide under state and federal laws.
- ***Essential*** refers to those programs and services that while not legally mandated, would be difficult to do without. For example, the County is not mandated to have computer systems; however, it is essential to have effective computer systems in order to provide efficient, cost-effective services.
- ***Non-mandated*** refers to everything that is neither mandated nor essential.

For Public Works, mandated activities were identified as County roads construction, maintenance and preservation; surface water drainage and management; and solid waste management. Non-mandated services included County parks, boat ramps, ball fields, tennis courts, paths and trails, Four Springs Park, and grounds maintenance at County facilities. No parks-related services were considered "essential."

On the other hand, planning for Critical Areas (Regulations) and Shoreline (Master Program/Regulations) are considered mandated. Protecting food and drinking water safety, protecting shellfish, and salmon recovery efforts are also mandated. But these efforts are funded through other

departments, and it is unclear if the County recognizes the role that the Parks Department can play in these initiatives.

If most Parks services are considered by the County to be non-mandated and non-essential, how critical is the parks and habitat system's contribution to the County's vision and guiding principles? Does the County consider itself to be in the business of providing recreation opportunities, promoting environmental stewardship, and protecting farm lands—and if so, to what extent? Furthermore, if these services are non-mandated and non-essential, should they be self-supporting? Insights into these questions can be found by looking at existing County operations.

### 3. EXISTING PARK OPERATIONS AND FUNDING

Island County operates a network of more than 3,370 acres of parks and habitat conservation areas. The County's park and habitat system is classified in three categories, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Island County Park/Habitat Land by Classification

| Classification         | # of Sites | Acres          | % of Total  |
|------------------------|------------|----------------|-------------|
| Developed Parks        | 23         | 31.2           | 1%          |
| Hybrid Parks           | 18         | 299.8          | 9%          |
| Natural Resource Areas | 26         | 2,829.7        | 84%         |
| Subtotal               | 67         | 3,160.7        |             |
| Undesignated           | 42         | 211.3          | 6%          |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>109</b> | <b>3,372.0</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Source: Island County, 2010

As noted in the table, the County provides approximately:

- *30 acres of developed parks.* Developed parks are primarily focused on the provision of recreation or other developed park uses, although some of these sites may include remnant natural areas, such as stands of native trees or waterfront. Freeland Park, Dave Mackie Park (also known as Maxwellton Beach), and the Maple Grove Boat Ramp are examples of developed parks.
- *300 acres of hybrid parks.* Hybrid parks provide developed recreation areas—such as sports fields, boat ramps, or campgrounds—and protect natural resource areas. Parks such as Rhododendron Park, Dan Porter Park, and West Beach Vista are examples of hybrid parks.

- *2,800 acres of habitat conservation areas.* Habitat conservation areas are primarily focused on the protection of natural resources, such as forests, beaches, wildlife and water resources. These areas may include facilities such as trails, picnic tables and shelters, kiosks, and parking. In some cases, conservation areas may have no facilities at all. Camano Ridge, Saratoga Woods, and Putney Woods are examples of habitat conservation areas that have non-motorized trails. Strawberry Point, Smugglers Cove, Swantown, and Monroe Landing are also examples of Conservation Areas with limited or no public use.
- *200 acres of undesignated sites.* Undesignated sites are County-owned or County-held properties that have not yet been designated for a particular use. Most of these sites are less than an acre in size, and many are not named. Eighteen of these sites are tax-title properties, which the County is holding until back taxes are paid.

While most County acreage (84%) is focused on natural resource protection, only 1% supports strictly developed park uses. Another 9% combines developed recreation uses with habitat protection. Many of these developed or hybrid parks have facilities that support passive park uses (e.g., picnicking, off-leash dog areas) and outdoor recreation (e.g., camping, boating, fishing, hiking, swimming, beach access), but not as many traditional recreation opportunities (e.g., playgrounds, sports fields, and sports courts). A habitat analysis of the County's system further revealed that approximately 77% of all parks and habitat areas are forested, and 12% protect shoreline/tidal habitats. Far less acreage protects agricultural/pasture lands (1%) or freshwater habitat (3%).

## Parks Expenditures

In stark contrast to its large landholdings, Island County has a meager budget dedicated to park maintenance, habitat management, and system operations. While the Parks and Habitat Conservation Plan is a long-term planning effort with ramifications that will extend far beyond current financial circumstances, an examination of the County's budget can help identify short and long-term priorities, opportunities, and constraints for park operations and habitat conservation.

Table 2 presents the total expenditures for the Parks Department since 2005. Total expenditures include actual expenses associated with maintenance and operations, including salaries, wages, and benefits. As shown in the table, the budget increased from 2005-2008, but then dropped substantially in 2009 and again in 2010. In 2010, the Parks

Department has had 30.7% less funding than it had in 2005. On top of this decrease, another 30% budget cut has been proposed for 2011.

Table 2: Parks Department Operating Budget History

| Year            | Total Expenditures | % Change |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------|
| 2005            | \$278,280          | --       |
| 2006            | \$286,799          | +3%      |
| 2007            | \$307,451          | +7%      |
| 2008            | \$365,843          | +19%     |
| 2009            | \$242,126          | (34%)    |
| 2010 (budgeted) | \$195,688          | (19%)    |
| 2011 (proposed) | \$136,000          | (30%)    |

Source: Island County (2005-2009 Actuals)

These budget cuts are due to what the County calls “a sustained, long-term financial crisis.” This economic situation continues to worsen despite cutting expenses in the last two years by \$4.2 million county-wide, which is about 20% of the Current Expense Fund. Also between 2008 and 2010, the County workforce was reduced by 60 positions, including the loss of one Parks Technician position and an Open Space Coordinator. In addition, the hours of the remaining two Parks Technicians were reduced.

Most of the Current Expense Fund is fed by a local sales tax, real and personal property taxes, and a 2% lodging/tourism tax.<sup>1</sup> Grants, including private grants and gifts, are also put into this fund.<sup>2</sup> In the past, Island County has relied mainly on the Current Expense Fund to support the provision of parks and other services, but these traditional funding sources are no longer sufficient to sustain basic County services.

In response to the budget crisis, the Board of County Commissioners put the Proposition 1 Levy for Retention of Basic Public Safety and Other Essential Services on the ballot for a special vote on 8/17/10. Proposition 1 would have helped pay to retain public safety services and other “essential” services (such as public health). While no parks related services are considered “essential,” it was felt that the passage of Proposition 1 would have prevented further cuts. The operating levy failed.

<sup>1</sup> Proceeds from this tax go toward County-wide tourism promotion.

<sup>2</sup> In 2009, private grants and donations contributed \$28,516 to Parks and Recreation Funding. However, the source(s) of this funding is unclear.

## Parks Staffing

As noted above, the budget cuts recorded over the last several years have affected parks staffing. From 2005-2008, the Parks Budget funded 6.05 full time equivalencies (FTEs), with each FTE based on 2080 hours per year. According to the County, these included:

- 1.0 FTE Parks Superintendent
- 3.0 FTEs Parks Technicians (2 Whidbey and 1 Camano)
- 0.8 FTE Parks Technician - Whidbey
- 0.5 FTE Summer Parks Technician - Camano
- 0.75 FTE Four Springs Site Manager

In 2009, cuts left County parks staff with:

- 2.0 FTEs Parks Technicians (1 Whidbey and 1 Camano)
- 0.5 FTE Parks Technician - Whidbey
- 0.25 FTE on Camano (3-month summer position)

In 2010, staff funded through the Parks Budget includes:

- 1.88 FTEs Parks Technicians (hours reduced to 37.5 per week)
- 0.25 FTE on Whidbey (3-month summer position)

In 2011, parks staffing will be less than 2.0 FTEs, based on the budget under consideration. Current administrative staff for parks is not funded through the Parks Budget.

## Maintenance Level of Service

As noted above, the Parks Department has limited funding and staffing resources for operating and maintaining the park and habitat system. To gauge the County's level of service, maintenance costs and staffing are further evaluated below. Quick comparisons are made to other County/District systems to provide context for the findings.

### *Maintenance Costs per Acre*

For the purpose of evaluating the cost of parks maintenance on a per acre basis, we used the figure of 1,807 acres of park land to represent the land under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department.<sup>3</sup> Based on this acreage, Island County allocated less than \$108 per acre in 2010 to maintain the system. For a general comparison, Pierce County Parks and

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<sup>3</sup> This represents just half of the County parks and habitat inventory. It does not include leased School Trust Lands (332 acres), other properties maintained by the Parks Department (County 31 acres; other providers 6 acres), acreage managed through Public Works (934 acres), or unassigned sites (294 acres).

Recreation Services (P&RS) is responsible for nearly 3,880 park acres, two-thirds of which are classified as resource conservancy parks and undeveloped parks. In 2008, Pierce County P&RS spent approximately \$1,200 per acre for maintenance.

Jurisdictions typically spend more on developed parks than habitat conservation areas. Counting only the 331 acres that have been classified as developed or hybrid parks,<sup>4</sup> the County allocates \$591 per developed acre for maintenance. In comparison, Pierce County spent approximately \$3,258 per developed acre in 2008, which left them with a backlog of deferred maintenance projects in developed parks. While Pierce County is not an ideal comparison to Island County, it too is considered to be drastically underfunded as a county park system. Yet, Island County is not even close to providing a similar level of funding. For most county park systems, maintenance costs typically start at \$3,000 per acre, increasing to \$5,500 for more developed systems. Without more maintenance funding, Island County is severely limited in amount of develop park facilities it can provide and maintain.

Also severely underfunded, Linn County (Oregon) spent \$1,084 per acre to maintain developed park land in 2007. This left no funds for the rest of the park system, which included 707 acres of natural areas and undeveloped park land. In its 2008 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the County proposed allocations of \$2,000 per acre for developed parks, and \$250 per acre for undeveloped parks and natural areas.<sup>5</sup> While these expenditures represented a substantial increase from Linn County's existing budget, they were recognized as half of what comparable communities were spending and half of what was recommended for basic hazard removal in natural areas.

While natural areas do cost less to maintain than developed park land, staffing and funding is needed to manage, restore and maintain natural resources. Some agencies dedicate substantially more money than Island County does toward the stewardship of significant or critical natural resources. For example, Metro Parks Tacoma proposed the following amounts for greenspace maintenance in 2006, based on the ecological value of the resource to be protected:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This also includes landscaped areas around buildings, for which the Parks Department is responsible (e.g., Camano Campus, Courthouse Campus, District Court and North Whidbey Family Resource Center).

<sup>5</sup> Source: Linn County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Source: MPT Strategic Parks and Program Services Plan, 2006.

- High Ecological Resource Value (\$2,000 - \$2,500 per acre)
- Moderately-High Ecological Resource Value (\$1,500 per acre)
- Moderate Ecological Resource Value (\$500 per acre)

### *Maintenance Staffing per Developed Acre*

Another way to evaluate maintenance level of service is from a staffing standpoint. Currently, Island County funds 2.13 FTEs for the maintenance of more than 331 developed park or hybrid park acres. This means each full-time Island County staff person is responsible for maintaining more than 155 acres. In comparison, maintenance staffing usually takes care of 12 to 20 developed acres per FTE in most county park systems. These calculations specifically exclude undeveloped parks, natural areas, and open space for a more accurate comparison.

In Island County, volunteer groups reduce County costs and staffing by “adopting” and maintaining some park and habitat areas. Currently, the County provides little staff support for the oversight and direction of volunteer projects. From a long-term perspective, however, volunteers are anticipated to play a large role in the management and maintenance of specific parks and habitat areas, including Saratoga Woods, where they would be managed by the Land Trust. As noted in the 2010 Saratoga Woods Preserve Management Plan, “Island County’s parks budget is very small. There is a huge need for continued community support through both volunteer labor and donations to maintain [Saratoga Woods] in perpetuity. The Adopt-a-Park Program will be an important tool to organize volunteer support (12).” However, the plan also notes that the Friends of Saratoga Woods Preserve (FOS) was created to assist with the management, funding and advocacy. This group was very active for several years, but gradually became less active. The group has no formal organization and is no longer functioning as a support organization for the property (5).” While volunteers will continue to play a role in providing labor and funding for County parks and habitat areas, it is hard to quantify their impacts on long-term maintenance level of service.

At the writing of this memo, the draft 2011 budget is undergoing review. The County is projecting a further decrease in revenue (-4%) in preliminary budget documents. To address the projected revenue decrease, the Parks Department is anticipating a 30% cut and has been given direction to complete only emergency repairs with limited mowing and trash pickup. This likely requires closing some parks and restrooms and eliminating some porta-potties, trash cans, and outdoor lighting.

## Miscellaneous Funds

Although County staffing and parks maintenance is extremely underfunded in Island County, the Parks Department budget isn't the only funding source for parks maintenance. Aside from the County's Current Expense Funds, there are three "Miscellaneous Funds" with monies for park expenditures, such as maintenance and additional staffing. These include:

- ***Cornet Bay Dock:*** Supported by the moorage fees at Cornet Bay Dock, this fund covers the salary, wages and benefits for one part-time staff, plus maintenance and operations funding for this site.
- ***Four Springs Lake Preserve:*** Supported by the rental fees for park grounds and facilities, this fund covers the salary, wages and benefits for one part-time staff, plus maintenance and operations, and at times, some capital funding.
- ***Camano Island Boat Ramps:*** This new fund established in 2010 is supported by ramp fees at three sites on Camano Island: Utsalady Boat Ramp, Maple Grove Boat Ramp, and Cavalero Beach. The fund covers the maintenance and operations associated with these sites, as well as cost for a Parks Technician to collect the fees (approximately 4 hours per week).

Understanding these funds is particularly important in evaluating the full cost of supporting the habitat and park system and in identifying the role that revenue-generating facilities and features can play in offsetting staffing and maintenance costs. For this reason, they are described separately below.

### *Cornet Bay Dock*

Cornet Bay Dock, near Deception Pass, charges moorage fees at two different rates for 40 slips, which do not include electricity. Fees are \$300 per year for the first 20 slips, which tend to go dry at times. Fees are \$350 per year for the second 20 slips, which only dry out during extremely low tides. According to staff, there has been some discussion about raising the fees to \$350 and \$400 respectively.

Table 3 summarizes dock revenue and expenditures since 2005, which included operations and capital.

Table 3: Cornet Bay Dock Revenue and Expenditures

| Cornet Bay Dock | Gross Revenue | Expenditures |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| 2005            | \$6,426       | \$38,622     |
| 2006            | \$4,434       | \$5,118      |
| 2007            | \$11,484      | \$8,654      |
| 2008            | \$13,495      | \$6,316      |
| 2009            | \$13,469      | \$9,517      |
| 2010 (budgeted) | \$14,000      | \$9,000      |

Note: Expenditures in 2005 included capital improvements.

The primary expenditure for the dock is the cost of the dock manager, whose pay is based on only 17 hours per month.

### *Four Springs Lake Preserve*

The facilities at the Four Springs Lake Preserve are used for private rentals, and occasionally, for special community events (e.g., the 2006 Evening of Music at Four Springs). Until recently, this site was also used by a church group for a fee of \$1,000 a month—as part of a long-term arrangement.

For private rental, Four Springs Lake Preserve includes four separate rental areas: the Main House, Lawn, Meadow Room, and Barn. The basic fee structure for Four Springs House is an inclusive one, based on a seven-hour package. The fee includes an Event Monitor plus chairs and tables for up to 90 guests. Current rates are noted below:

#### Weekday Rates

- **Full Property:** \$950 for 7 hours, \$156 per additional hour.
- **House/Meadow Room:** \$650 for 7 hours, \$107 per additional hour.
- **House:** \$350 for 7 hours, \$57 per additional hour.
- **Meadow Room:** \$400 for 7 hours, \$66 per additional hour.
- **Barn:** \$150 for 7 hours, \$25 per additional hour.

#### Friday Evening Rates

- **Full Property:** \$950 for 7 hours, \$156 per additional hour.
- **House & Meadow Room:** \$800 for 7 hours, \$131 per additional hour.
- **Barn:** \$200 for 7 hours, \$33 per additional hour.

#### Saturday or Sunday Rates

- **Full Property:** \$1050 for 7 hours, \$172 per additional hour.
- **House/Meadow Room:** \$900 for 7 hours, \$148 per additional hour.

- **Barn:** \$275 for 7 hours, \$45 per additional hour.

Table 4 summarizes revenue and expenditures for the Four Spring Lake Preserve since 2005.

Table 4: Four Springs Lake Preserve Revenue and Expenditures

| Four Springs    | Gross Revenue | Revenue Supplement from Expense Account | Expenditures |
|-----------------|---------------|---|--------------|
| 2005            | \$47,675      | 7,929                                   | \$40,376     |
| 2006            | \$45,544      | 12,889                                  | \$63,950     |
| 2007            | \$45,283      | 20,652                                  | \$59,270     |
| 2008            | \$64,330      | 23,750                                  | \$67,147     |
| 2009            | \$31,794      | 22,247                                  | \$44,709     |
| 2010 (budgeted) |               | \$30,000                                | \$29,993     |

Source: Island County

Note: These numbers are based on County budget data. The Gross Revenue plus the Supplement do not equal the amount of Expenditures.

These monies fund a 10 hour/week position for an Event Coordinator/Site Manager, who spends this time marketing the facility. Also, in exchange for living in an apartment at the Main House, the Site Manager is required to spend an additional 20 hours per week monitoring events and performing other in-kind labor. According to County staff, the Site Manager position is entirely funded by the rental fees collected at Four Springs (although it was funded through the Parks budget as recently as 2008). Because the buildings have generated less revenue in recent years, the hours of this position have decreased. At the same time, the site supplement has increased—presumably to fund maintenance and operations (although this is not clear from County budget documents).

### *Camano Island Boat Ramps*

In July 2010, fees were instituted at three boat ramps on Camano Island to discourage high-volume use, particularly from off-island visitors. According to County staff, fees are \$5/day for County residents and \$15/day for non-County residents. In addition, annual passes are available at a cost of \$30 and \$90 respectively. To collect fees, the County installed fee boxes and provided envelopes. Approximately \$12,400 was collected in the first three months of this program (July-September 2010). This money was applied to porta-potty servicing and trash pickup at the three boat ramps where the fees were collected.

## Other Parks Revenue (Potential/Actual)

In addition to the three separate funds noted above, the County has several other facilities with a capacity to generate revenue. At this time, only Rhododendron Campground is operated as a revenue-generating site. However, some other sites are supported by volunteer labor and maintenance assistance.

- ***Rhododendron Campground:*** Rhododendron Campground is a primitive campground on Whidbey Island with ten pay campsites, vault toilets and fresh water. The site is open from April to November, on a first-come, first-served basis. A site caretaker occupies one of the campsites during the summer months, providing monitoring of the site to discourage inappropriate behaviors and use. Camp fees are \$10 per night, and staff indicate there are plans to increase the fee to \$15 per night. According to County staff, the campground typically generates \$3,000-\$4,000 per season, but can generate as much as \$5,000 in a good year.
- ***Rhododendron Ballfields:*** At Rhododendron Park, there currently is no field use fee in place, although the County provides field scheduling and use of the lighted fields, concession stands, and associated facilities. The Central Whidbey Little League has historically scheduled work days to improve the park and prepare the ball fields for games in exchange for use of the fields. Recently, they have painted structures such as the concession stand and assisted with other improvements.
- ***Dave Mackie Ballfield:*** The ballfield at Dave Mackie Park on Whidbey Island includes a softball field, grandstand and concession stand (with water/electric service) that can be reserved at no cost. Currently, it is not reserved frequently because there is a mounded septic drain field in right-center field that interferes with play. A Juniors baseball team has expressed an interest to County staff in using the field this spring as their home field. The organization has recruited volunteers to renovate the field and stands and is willing to buy some materials. Because the potable water well is expensive to maintain<sup>7</sup>, the restroom is only open for June, July and August. A porta-potty is in place for March, April and May.

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<sup>7</sup> The well at Dave Mackie Park costs \$185 month for testing, plus electricity use costs \$50-60 a month.

- ***Dave Mackie Slughouse:*** The Slughouse is a log shelter with water and electricity. Along with the nearby open lawn, the shelter can be reserved for events accommodating as many as 100 people. The County currently does not charge for use of the facility or for making reservations.
- ***Dave Mackie Park:*** The Maxwellton Association sponsors a Fourth of July parade that draws around 10,000-15,000 people to Dave Mackie Park each year. There is no facility use agreement for this annual event. The County has provided porta-potties for the event, because the level of attendance exceeds the capacity of the septic system in the park. The Maxwellton Association has been responsible for clean-up from the event.
- ***Kettles Property:*** Both Fort Ebey State Park and the County-owned Kettles Property are used for the Cooking in the Kettles Mountain Bike Race. The race utilizes trails on the Kettles Property, which is managed through Public Works. There no charge for site use.
- ***Boat Storage:*** Small boat storage is allowed at the Maple Grove Boat Ramp and the Utsalady Boat Ramp. For example, 22 small boats are left on the beach at the Utsalady Boat Ramp. According to County staff, complaints from nearby residents are causing the County Board to consider the future of boat storage, including appropriate rates, collection methods, and monitoring.
- ***Park Reservations:*** In the past, the County has made reservations during the summer months for private parties at parks. According to staff, between eight and 12 reservations have been made for parties of 10 to 200 people. Although reservations were made, there are no fees for the use of these sites.

## Other Funds

In addition to the Current Expense Fund (which includes the Parks Budget) and the Miscellaneous Funds (which includes Cornet Bay Dock, Four Springs and Camano Island Boat Ramps), the County Budget separates other types of funding as well. These include Capital Funds and Public Works Funds, which are described below.

### *Capital Funds*

Capital funding for parks and habitat conservation projects primarily comes from three sources:

- **Capital Improvements (REET 1):** The Real Estate Excise Tax (REET 1) has historically been used for building improvements and construction in Island County. According to County staff, this fund is not typically used to support parks and habitat services.
- **Capital Facilities (REET 2):** REET 2 funds, when available, have been divided to support parks, facilities, and drainage. According to County staff, REET 2 has contributed as much as \$500,000 annually toward capital projects in parks and habitat conservation areas, but as little as \$25,000 to \$50,000 in some years. Currently, no REET funding is available. This funding has supported a variety of park projects, such as boat ramp improvements at the Cornet Bay Dock.
- **Conservation Futures Program:** Conservation Futures funds are generated from property taxes to acquire lands of conservation importance and protect them in perpetuity. These lands include open space, wetlands, habitat conservation areas, farm and agricultural lands, and timber lands that are under pressure from increasing urban development (ICC 3.22A.010). Application is open to qualified nonprofits and local government agencies.

Conservation Futures funds have been used to permanently protect numerous properties with high conservation value. Examples of properties owned by Island County that have been funded by this program are: Swantown Lake, Four Springs Lake Preserve, Double Bluff, Greenbank Forest, and Iverson Spit. Futures funding has also been applied to purchase conservation easements on Hoypus Hill, Wilbert Trail and prime farmland.

A percentage of Conservation Futures funds may be used for maintenance and operations, but only for properties that have been purchased using Conservation Futures funds, e.g., Double Bluff, Greenbank Forest, etc. There are a few caveats, including that projects proposed for M&O funding must directly benefit the features(s) and purposes for which the property or conservation easement was obtained. In addition, these funds may not be used to supplant existing maintenance and operation funding in an applicant's budget (per RCW 84.34.240).

### *Public Works Funds*

Public Works Funds can be used for development and maintenance of Public Works sites, including 934 acres at 9 sites that support habitat

conservation and recreation uses. As part of Public Works Funds, the Paths and Trails Fund includes \$130,000 in revenue for 2010. Of this, \$100,000 is anticipated to support trail maintenance and operations, and \$30,000 will support trail development (capital outlay). These paths and trails funds are associated with County road funds and not parks monies. Consequently, none of these funds are used on Parks Department properties. These funds can only be used for non-motorized trails (as established in Island County Code) or non-motorized transportation facilities such as bike lanes, pedestrian transportation paths, multi-use trails, etc. While these funds are not used for recreational trails, non-motorized trails and pathways still support recreation opportunities and connectivity in Island County.

## Existing Operations/Funding Summary

Analysis of existing operations and funding results in the following key findings:

- **County Budget:** The structure of the County budget makes it difficult to get a true picture of the cost of the parks and recreation services. Having multiple accounts and funds makes it harder to track total revenue and expenditures, and creates the impression that “miscellaneous funds” are extraneous to the budget for parks and habitat. These multiple accounts also limit how funds are reinvested in the system, since the revenue is intended to support the site where it is collected.
- **Existing Parks Budget:** It is clear that the Parks Department budget is insufficient to support ongoing operations of the system. By any measure, the level of funding and staffing for maintenance and operations is low. With the existing low level of funding, the Parks Budget is neither able to accommodate an expansion of the system nor adequately maintain the lands and facilities that the County already owns.
- **Volunteers/In-kind Labor:** While the budget is quite low, the County has been effective at using its resources to obtain labor assistance to support staffing. This includes providing living quarters and space for the Four Springs Site Manager and the Rhododendron Camp Host and relying on groups such as the Central Whidbey Little League and Friends of Camano Island Parks (FOCIP) for volunteer labor.
- **Revenue Generation:** The County’s park and habitat system currently generates revenue—even without making much of an effort to do so. The boat ramp fees on Camano Island raised

\$12,400 in three months by trying to discourage non-residents use due to capacity issues and insufficient parking.<sup>8</sup> Not counting in-kind services, the County now generates anywhere from \$60,000 to \$100,000 annually at four fee-based sites—which is as much as one-third or one-half of the entire Parks Budget. Increasing fees at these sites and taking advantage of revenue-generating opportunities at other sites could substantially increase funding, provide better stewardship of public resources, and increase stability.

- ***Fee Structure:*** There is no County policy on fees for parks and habitat conservation areas. A County fee policy is needed. It should include pricing guidelines that take into consideration cost recovery goals and public benefit. User fees should be implemented and adjusted according to this policy. The policy should address the reasons for which fees are being charged, where they are charged, and how they support County park and habitat services. For example, the County should consider whether the primary purpose of the fees is to discourage non-resident use, raise revenue, recover the cost of facility maintenance and staffing, pay for utilities or damage, or some other reason. The context of these fees should be considered as well (e.g., the impact on tourism). Once a fees policy and structure is developed and adopted, the application of facility-use fees should be consistently implemented.

#### **4. MANAGEMENT & FUNDING STRATEGIES**

Island County has insufficient funds to manage and maintain its parks and habitat conservation areas. This section presents various management and operations strategies that have been used by other public agencies to address similar financial challenges. The goal is to foster a discussion of some management alternatives to the current mode of operations. Not all of these options are well-suited for Island County, and each would need to be considered further before it is recommended. Discussion will help determine what types of strategies (or combination of strategies) are a good fit for Island County.

Strategies are discussed in the following areas:

- ***Broadening the Market:*** Tourists represent an obvious market for Island County. However, the County currently focuses services on County residents, with little effort to appeal to tourists (in its

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<sup>8</sup> Non-residents were required to pay higher fees for boat ramp parking.

parks and habitat areas). Looking for more opportunities to serve tourists could potentially generate more money for parks and habitat conservation areas.

- ***Using Current Resources to Generate Revenue:*** With 3,372 acres of park and habitat conservation areas, the County already has a land base and facilities that could be used to generate revenue. In addition, specialized facility development could be targeted to generate money in the future.
- ***Developing a New Tax Base:*** Creating a special district would provide dedicated revenue for parks and habitat.
- ***Taking Parks off the General Fund:*** In some systems where General Fund dollars are scarce, public agencies have moved to an enterprise or business-oriented model to make the entire system more or completely self-supporting.

## Broadening the Market

Identifying the County's market is important to determine 1) who should be served; and 2) whether there is an untapped group who will pay to support the system. Since the County currently focuses its services on residents, tourists represent a market that could be expanded.

Tourism is important in Island County. Not only do tourists contribute to the local economy, but visitors to parks and habitat conservation areas already contribute revenue to County parks (e.g., at the Camano boat ramps and Rhododendron Campground). To understand the context of visitor spending and the potential for increasing park revenue, this section presents information about Island County tourism, as well as examples of programs that could expand revenue for Island County.

### *Trends in Recreation/Tourism*

Given current economic conditions, national park and recreation trends indicate that many people are staying closer to home for vacations. Whidbey and Camano Islands are well positioned geographically to be a near-home destination area for Seattle-Tacoma residents. Not only are the islands close enough for a day trip, but its island geography and protected natural areas create unique opportunities for multi-day vacations and nature-based tourism.

According to a Washington State Business & Tourism Development report, the top two reasons tourists visit northwest Washington is for sightseeing and outdoor recreation. It estimates that 72% of visitors to northwest Washington are from the Seattle-Tacoma area and are visiting

to take advantage of opportunities for hiking, wildlife viewing, festivals and events.<sup>9</sup> Of those who stay overnight, 11% are reported to prefer RV camping and 10% prefer tent camping. While camping is a less expensive alternative to staying in hotels/motels, the revenue it generates for a region can be substantial. In 2008, the total economic impacts associated with use of public campgrounds amounted to \$60 million in the Western Region of Washington, which includes Island County (Table 5).

Table 5: Visitor Spending by Type of Traveler Accommodation (Washington Western Region)

| Accommodation Type | 1991                 | 2000                 | 2008                |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Public Camping     | \$36 million         | \$44 million         | \$60 million        |
| Private Camping    | \$81 million         | \$111 million        | \$171 million       |
| Private Home       | \$449 million        | \$693 million        | \$1.08 billion      |
| Vacation Home      | \$43 million         | \$56 million         | \$80 million        |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>\$609 million</b> | <b>\$904 million</b> | <b>1.39 billion</b> |

Source: Statewide Travel Impacts Study, 2009

By taking advantage of its parks and habitat system, the County could be making greater efforts to increase tourism-related profits.

### *Tourism Revenue Examples*

Using parks and habitat conservation areas as revenue-generating resources can help pay for County operations, while also contributing to the local economy. There are many ways that Island County could increase its tourism-based revenue, while providing enhanced recreation opportunities for tourists and local residents. A few examples are described here.

- Charging Tourism Taxes:** Island County has a 2% tourism/lodging (hotel/motel) tax that is reinvested in tourism marketing and promotion. In 2009, Island County's share of the hotel/motel tax was \$115,404. This tax revenue has increased 60 percent since 2000.<sup>10</sup>

In some places, the transient lodging tax includes a portion that is dedicated to parks and recreation. For example, in the City of Medford, Oregon, hotel/motel and rental car taxes were increased to provide funding for parks and recreation—specifically for a new sports park. This provided the Medford Parks & Recreation

<sup>9</sup> Northwest Washington 2001 Visitor Profile

<sup>10</sup> Washington State Department of Revenue

Department with dedicated funding to build, program, and manage its U.S. Cellular Community Park (USCCP) to host regional and national sports tournaments that bring visitors to town. Not only does it boost the local economy, but it targets tourists directly to support parks funding. Based on survey analysis compiled by the Medford Recreation Division, USCCP generated an estimated \$6.5 million in local business in 2009 based on 37 tournaments. The 448 teams from outside the Rogue Valley were estimated to have spent \$2.9 million.

An increase in Island County's lodging tax, with a dedicated portion for the Parks Department, could help County parks and habitat areas play a larger role in attracting tourists.

- ***Setting Event Pricing Strategies:*** A variety of special events, festivals, and farmer's markets draw visitors to Island County each year. Many agencies position themselves to host various types of community and cultural events. However, each agency may have a different strategy for reaping rewards from these events. For example, Cycle Oregon is an annual biking event that attracts approximately two thousand riders each fall. For the 2009 ride, the City of Grants Pass amended its Development Code to allow bicyclists to camp for two nights at Riverside Park. (The code originally prohibited camping in all city parks.) The City was quite interested in the economic benefits that the event would bring to local restaurants and businesses. In Medford, Cycle Oregon paid the city \$2,182 so that participants could camp at Fichtner-Mainwaring Park for one night, plus an additional \$1,100 for use of the Jackson Park parking lot. To pedal through BLM lands in the Medford District, the Bureau of Land Management indicated it would charge Cycle Oregon \$10,990 for the commercial use of the route.<sup>11</sup> The point is that different agencies had different policies and fees for park/facility use for large events, and were prepared to respond when event organizers inquired about venues and pricing.

Island County currently does not charge for park and facility rentals, or events at County parks. For example, at the Maxwellton Fourth of July Parade at Dave Mackie Park, the County provides porta-potties at no cost and collects no fees. Depending on circumstances, the County may want to play different roles at events and festivals and charge fees accordingly. Prices may vary depending on the types of participants (residents vs. non-

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<sup>11</sup> Efforts were made to reduce this amount, and it is unknown how much was paid.

residents), the degree of public vs. individual benefit, and other factors. The County may charge site use fees, institute vendor fees, charge for parking, charge gate fees, or pursue a variety of other options. In light of the ongoing struggle to operate the parks and habitat system, however, the County should at least consider recovering its costs.

- ***Capitalizing on Recreation Trends:*** Outdoor events and activities, such as competitive races, geocaching, and volksmarching, are becoming increasingly more popular. More and more agencies are taking advantage of fitness trends, for example, by hosting competitive triathlons, marathons, running and biking races that draw tourists—including participants and spectators—to an area. In hosting these events, many agencies require that all costs (including administrative time and maintenance) are covered—or they allow another entity to host the event and charge site use fees.

For example, the popular Seattle Cyclocross bicycle racing series is held at various locations in the Seattle region every fall. The race promoters partner with private land owners and public land agencies, generating revenue through special event fees and land use, plus supporting the local economy. During the 2010 season, Seattle Cyclocross held races at Lakewood's Fort Steilacoom Park, Seattle's Beverly Park, Silver Lake Park in Everett and Maris Farms in Buckley. This type of event is comparable to Island County's Cooking in the Kettles, a mountain bike race held annually at Fort Ebey State Park and on the Kettles Property (which is managed through Public Works). Currently, Island County receives no revenue from this event.

- ***Marketing/Branding County Assets.*** Island County's abundant natural resources make it a unique resource in a relatively accessible location. Part of capitalizing on the tourist industry is determining how to market these resources. It involves identifying assets (or creating a brand) for which the County could be known. This may capitalize on the area's scenic beauty or recreation potential.

For example, through partnerships with the local community and area businesses, Oakridge and Westfir, Oregon, have implemented successful marketing campaigns that have made them a hub for mountain bike tourism. Mountain Bike Oregon has become a major economic resource for the former logging towns. Between 2006 and 2008, over \$35,000 was raised for local charities, the City park fund, trails fund and other community

resources. Mountain Bike Oregon has become a success story, partnering with the County to receive tourism grant funding from local lodging taxes to support an annual biking event.<sup>12</sup>

Island County's scenic resources also have potential for attracting the film and TV industries. Locally, Seattle Filmworks helps private land owners and public agencies market themselves to film and TV producers. The group offers an incentive program to reduce costs for film companies and create opportunities. The short-term contribution from the film crew and long-term impacts from the potential increase in tourism can create unlimited possibilities for area parks and the local economy, as seen with Twilight fans in Port Angeles and Forks, Washington.

For Island County, this type of management strategy would target tourists (not residents) to raise funds for the system. It most likely would combine event/program charges and facility use fees with a dedicated portion of the lodging tax for parks and recreation. In terms of passing costs on to tourists, residents could pay substantially lower fees or even receive annual passes, providing free admission to amenities such as boat launches and trailhead parking.

## Using Current Resources to Generate Revenue

Another management and funding strategy to consider is the use of the County's land base and resources to generate revenue. Examples of this are noted below.

### *Sustainable Harvest of Natural Resources*

If managed differently, the natural resources within Island County Parks and habitat could generate revenue. For example, Custer State Park, in South Dakota, has one of the only remaining bison herds in the United States. However, the park can only support sustainably about 1,500 bison. Every year, for the past 45 years, the park has hosted a bison roundup which attracts thousands of visitors. After the roundup, the surplus bison are auctioned off to private ranchers and breeders. Costs range from around \$500 for a heifer calf to more than \$2,000 for a two-year old bull, and the auction generates a significant amount of revenue for the state park system. The bison auction is one component of a diversified revenue stream at Custer State Park, which has elements such as gate fees, lodging and camping operated by concessionaires, activities such as gold-panning, and hunting (including 10 mountain lion tags).

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<sup>12</sup> [www.mtbikeoregon.com](http://www.mtbikeoregon.com)

Island County similarly has many natural resources. Like Custer State Park, the challenge is to figure out if the resources themselves present a means to fund their sustainable management. For example, the County could investigate whether sustainable forest management could improve the forest stand while generating revenue at selected parks and habitat areas. Active management, including timber harvest, can be compatible with conservation goals if it is done under clear restrictions.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is the gold standard for ecologically-based forest management. In short, FSC certifies forests and/or forest managers as having met high standards for 10 principles that include:

- Compliance with laws;
- Community relations and workers rights;
- Multiple social and environmental benefits; and
- Conservation of water, wildlife, soils, and fragile ecosystems.

Timber harvest under FSC certification is not like conventional harvest. Clearcutting is not done, or is limited to small patches of a few acres or less. Trees are grown to older ages. Sensitive areas are set aside and protected from harvest.

Tens of thousands of acres of land in the Northwest are being managed successfully under FSC certification. A "chain of custody" links harvested timber to final products, which are either custom milled or sold in retail outlets. Examples of forests currently being managed under FSC certification include: Girl Scout and Campfire Girls properties in Oregon and Washington, including Camp Sealth in the San Juan Islands; and municipal watersheds, including Corvallis and Astoria, Oregon.

Financial returns on FSC certified lands are modest. A mature lowland mixed conifer and hardwood forest could net about \$25-\$75 per acre per year based on 20-year harvest intervals.<sup>13</sup> The County currently manages more than 2,500 acres of upland forest (Douglas Fir/Western Hemlock Forest). Assuming 40% (1,000 acres) could be sustainably harvested, an estimated \$25,000 - \$75,000 could be generated per year based on Island County's existing acreage.<sup>14</sup> This net estimate accounts for the cost of logging, permits, transport, and management.

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<sup>13</sup> These estimates are conservative, since logging costs are much higher on islands than on the mainland.

<sup>14</sup> The 1,000 acres is used for cost estimates only. Small parcels, old growth forests, regenerating forests, unique resources, sites purchased with Conservation Futures funding, and sites with easements, DNR restrictions, or access issues would not be harvested.

Like timber, sustainable harvesting may apply to other forest products, such as salal and mushrooms, or tidal resources, such as shellfish harvesting.<sup>15</sup> Mitigation banks are also providing local governments with another opportunity to generate revenue, while protecting wetlands.

Regardless, some individuals and groups in Island County may object to forest management. However, the community's perspective may be changing as ecologists and agencies realize that not managing forests, particularly when they are smaller areas in a matrix of developed land, may be more detrimental than sustainable forest management. Like thinning a bison herd to ensure the health of the ecosystem, selective harvesting can protect a forest from fire and disease. Logging may also be needed for land conversion/restoration to return an area to native habitat. Either way, the County should consider some type of forest management strategy for its 2,500 forested acres, as it currently does not have the funds or staffing to take care of this resource.<sup>16</sup>

### *Leasing Public Lands*

Land leases present another opportunity to expand recreation in Island County, while generating money or offsetting operations costs. Leased parks and habitat areas may include small areas, such as community garden plots, or larger parcels, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). They may involve individuals, such as a horse-owner who rents pasture space, or businesses, such as a concessionaire running a ropes course, boat rental, or a marina. A few examples of land leasing options are noted below.

- ***Partnerships with Concessionaires:*** The Jackson County Sports Park, near Medford, Oregon, offers a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities by allowing six concessionaires to develop and operate facilities. These include motorsports facilities, shooting sports facilities, and sport fields. The County has a lease agreement with each facility operator that sets different terms based on the size and scale of the operation. The leases include details such as lease amounts (\$1 - \$39,000 annually), capital investment requirements (\$2,000-\$8,000 annually), utility charges and irrigation assessments (partial to full payment), maintenance requirements (partial to full maintenance), and special

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<sup>15</sup> Further investigation would be needed to determine if existing County-owned tidelands have sufficient value for shellfish cultivation, given that 50% of the harvest goes to Tribes.

<sup>16</sup> A more in-dept analysis that takes into account market considerations would be needed for accurate costing. Most commercial-type forests on the island have only been harvesting alder for many years because the conifer market is so low.

requirements such as subleases, scheduling, restricted uses, and concessions (with a % going to the County). In addition to concessionaire facilities at this site, the County also operates an ATV/OHV (all-terrain vehicle/off-highway vehicle) area with an annual gate fee. Improvements to the ATV/OHV facility are made in partnership with a local ATV/OHV club. These operations allow the park to support several fishing ponds, trails, wetlands, and critical habitat areas—some of which are now protected further through the establishment of mitigation banks.

While motor sports may not be ideal for Island County, concessionaires can be tapped to help develop and operate facilities such as marinas/boat moorage, rental cabins, outdoor ropes courses, wedding/retreat venues, outdoor amphitheatres, nature/interpretive centers, etc.

- ***Agricultural Leases.*** As food planning becomes more widespread, many jurisdictions are partnering with food providers to create farm parks, which can support food production and education. Examples of public parks with Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), include Luscher Farm in Lake Oswego (operated by a private farmer), River Road Reserve in Grants Pass (operated by the Josephine County Food Bank), and Bayside Park in Arcata, California (operated by Humboldt State University). These CSAs operate by selling shares for produce, eggs, goat cheese, etc. Share costs may run from \$600-\$900, with half shares and even working shares available (with discounted prices for working on the farm.) While the parks departments in these examples may not charge for land use, the CSA typically includes ancillary uses that support the farm mission and also generate profits. Luscher Farm, for example, includes Community Garden plots (for a cost), a Children's Garden, Backyard Wildlife Habitat Gardens, the Oregon Tilth Research and Education Center (with fee-based programs), wetlands, and the original Queen Anne style farmhouse (reservable) and gambrel-roof barn (where fee-based special events are held). In addition, CSAs provide local jobs and also care for the land under agricultural production (meaning that the agency doesn't have to maintain it).

Beyond CSAs and agricultural extension centers, farm parks also present opportunities for horse stabling, pasture leases, crop production, hay production, livestock production, equestrian concessionaires/trail rides, etc. For example, Dorris Ranch (located in Springfield, Oregon) is owned by the Willamalane Park and Recreation District, but operated by a non-profit as a commercial hazelnut farm and living history site. In addition to

hazelnut sales, events, school tours, self-guided tours, and facility/ground rentals support this site, which also protects the natural area surrounding the orchards.

If it is a County priority to protect its agricultural heritage, the County may want to consider some type of farm park. As noted in the brief description of the current inventory, current parks and habitat conservation areas tend to be forested and not agricultural lands, with one or two smaller exceptions. There is 28 acres of pasture on the Scenic Heights Trust Land property and 8 acres at Swantown Lake. If agricultural lands are to be priorities for future acquisitions, their revenue-generating potential should be considered.<sup>17</sup>

- ***Hunting Clubs.*** Approximately 10 miles northwest of Portland, Sauvie Island includes 26,000 acres of mostly farmland and wildlife refuge. However, it is also home to premier Oregon waterfowling. On the island, the Sauvie Island Duck Club (SIDC) provides club members with access to several acres for private hunting. Three types of memberships are available: Day, Weekend, and Season at a cost of \$200, \$750, and \$2,000 respectively. Parking is available, but currently the site has no other amenities.<sup>18</sup>

In Island County, Deer Lagoon was a popular hunting area until nearby development created conflicts with nearby homeowners. While hunting is a controversial topic in Island County and not suitable for many parks, shooting sports provide a consistent revenue source for many park agencies, even under current economic circumstances. Having a concessionaire operate a public gun club at one specific park site could help meet hunting demands and generate revenue to cover the cost of this service.

### ***Fee-based Facilities***

In this economic climate, rare is the agency that does not charge for use of specific facilities. Like other forms of entertainment, recreation is primarily fee-based for many types of activities. This is especially true where the benefit or use of the facility is individualized or applies to a specific group, like a sport team. Agencies may apply different pricing strategies for facility use, but many charge in some manner for use of

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<sup>17</sup> As with each of these examples, further market research will be needed to determine if the island can support a County-owned CSA, farmer's market, equestrian concessionaire, etc.

<sup>18</sup> The site has plans for the future construction of a small lodge to provide members with lockers and bathroom facilities.

camp sites, boat launches, sports fields, picnic shelters, indoor facilities, boat moorage, boat storage, water access/beach parking, and specialized recreation opportunities, such as ropes courses, batting cages, etc.

Island County either does not charge or charges very little for use of its facilities, even when staff is involved in scheduling use or providing special accommodations for facility use. For comparison, examples of facility-use charges are noted below.

- **Campgrounds:** Washington State Parks charges \$19 - \$24 for a designated campsite served by nearby domestic water, sink waste, garbage disposal, and flush comfort station. Utility campsites, with electricity, are available for \$25 - \$33. Primitive campsites are \$12 - \$14 and may not have any amenities. These sites may be accessible by motorized/non-motorized vehicles and water trail camping. In each case, the State charges higher prices or an additional fee for popular destination parks and select premium campsites. It also adds a fee (\$10) for extra overnight vehicle fee, and a shower fee (50 cents for a three-minute shower).

For the convenience of using their Central Reservation System, a non-refundable reservation fee is imposed. This includes \$6.50 for reservations made online and \$8.50 for reservations made with a phone call. The reservation fee does not cover changes to or canceling a reservation. There is an \$8.50 fee for changes/cancellations made online, and a \$10.50 fee for phone changes/cancellations. Advanced reservation of a group camp area costs \$25 (non-refundable), with facility fees based on \$2.32 per person per night.

Snohomish County Parks utilizes an on-line system developed and maintained by the Reserve America Corporation. This system enables on-line reservations for facilities like cabins, yurts, and campsites, but it also allows registrations for activities like summer camps. To support the cost of this system, on-line reservations and registrations are assessed a non-refundable 6.5% fee, plus 50 cents per transaction.

Online reservation systems are particularly useful for off-island visitors, who want a camp site guaranteed when they arrive. As long as people are willing to pay for the service, it makes sense to provide it. Many people are also willing to pay substantially more to stay in simple cabins and yurts. These types of facilities quickly generate enough revenue to offset the cost of their construction. Group campgrounds, and equestrian camp sites (such as those at

Silver Falls State Park in Oregon) provide additional camp options for revenue-generation.

- **Boat Moorage:** The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission manages more than 40 marine parks in Puget Sound that together provide more than 8,500 feet of public moorage space. Overnight dock moorage runs 50 cents per foot (\$10 minimum), but an annual moorage permit can be purchased based on a fee of \$3.50 per foot, with a minimum of \$50. However, State Park moorage is based on a maximum stay of 3 consecutive nights.

Permanent moorage, especially at public marinas, is harder to find and is more costly. The Oak Harbor Marina offers a variety of moorage services, with varying costs. The City fee for an uncovered 24-foot moorage slip with no electricity runs \$130.53 monthly (which includes a 12.84% leasehold excise tax, but not the \$1.05 monthly environmental compliance fee).<sup>19</sup> Annually, this equates to \$1,560 in fees. The Port of Poulsbo charges \$116.88 monthly (\$1,402 annually) for an uncovered 24-foot slip with no electricity, plus charges \$25 to be on their waiting list (currently 34 people long).<sup>20</sup> In both cases, per-foot charges create higher fees for longer slips.

- **Entry/Facility Use Fees:** Scoggins Valley Park/Henry Hagg Lake, near Forest Grove, Oregon, is owned by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and maintained and operated by Washington County. The Park features numerous picnic areas, two boat launches, a stocked fishing lake, hiking trails, and observation decks for wildlife and bird watching. Entry fees are required, with daily (\$5-\$6), seasonal (\$50-\$55), and senior citizen passes (\$35) available. It costs more to enter with a boat.

Four group picnic sites are available for reservation. Prices vary according to the requirements and purpose of the reservation. General reservations require a refundable security deposit, plus a non-refundable reservation fee, based on the site selected and the number of people in a group. Small Group Picnic Areas have reservation fees running from \$150-\$200, with cleaning/security deposits of \$55-\$175. Large Group Picnic Areas have reservation fees running from \$210-\$350, with cleaning/security deposits of \$85-\$235. Special Use Event Reservations are needed for commercial film shoots and large scale events. These require a

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<sup>19</sup> Source: City of Oak Harbor Marina Services, [www.oakharbor.org](http://www.oakharbor.org).

<sup>20</sup> Source: Port of Poulsbo, <http://portofpoulsbo.com>.

refundable security deposit, a non-refundable reservation fee, and additional charges based on the event. The site has food and boat rental concessions as well. In addition to supporting water sports and general recreation activities, the park supports nature interpretation and protection.

Adjacent to the park, but not managed by the park, is the Tree to Tree Adventure Park, featuring aerial ropes courses, zip lines, and tree top obstacles. Privately-owned, this “extreme sports” course offers a unique experience outside of the normal fishing, boating and hiking activities that are that so popular at the lake. Admission fees range from \$25 to \$39 per person.

Each of these examples suggests that the County could generate more money from its land base and facilities. As noted in the Hagg Lake example, there may be multiple opportunities to charge facility-use fees that cover facility maintenance and improvements, plus provide some funds for habitat protection. Like the collection system at the three Camano boat ramps, parking and trailhead fees require little staffing to implement.

## Developing a New Tax Base

By Washington State Law, there are four types of special districts for parks and recreation:

- ***Park and Recreation Districts (Ch. 36.69 RCW)***. This type of district was enabled in 1958 to provide parks and recreation services in counties. The two existing districts in Island County (North and South Whidbey) are Park and Recreation Districts. The maximum levy is \$0.60 per \$1,000 of assessed value.
- ***Park and Recreation Service Areas (RCW 36.68.400 - .620)***. This type of district was established in 1963 to allow counties to form service districts in unincorporated areas. There are no PRSAs in Island County. There is one in King County, one in Snohomish County, and one that includes area in both King and Snohomish County. As with Park and Recreation Districts, the maximum levy is \$0.60 per \$1,000 of assessed value.
- ***Joint Park and Recreation District (RCW 36.69.420 - .460)***. This type of district allows multiple counties to establish a joint district. For example, the Prescott Joint Park and Recreation District serves Walla Walla and Columbia Counties.

- ***Metropolitan Park Districts (Ch. 35.61 RCW)***. Metropolitan Park Districts were first allowed for first-class cities in 1907. In 2002, all cities and counties gained the ability to establish metropolitan park districts, and these may include portions of multiple cities and counties. After 2002, some previously established park and recreation districts dissolved to establish Metropolitan Park Districts. For example, in 2004 the [Key Peninsula Metropolitan Park District](#) was established in Pierce County to replace the dissolved Key Peninsula Park and Recreation District. Two levies, one up to \$0.50 and a second levy up to \$0.25 may be implemented, with the total not to exceed a combined total of \$0.75 per \$1,000 of assessed value. There are no Metropolitan Park Districts in Island County.

There are a variety of reasons to establish a special purpose district for parks and recreation. The primary advantage is the dedicated funding for parks and recreation. When cities and counties provide park and recreation services, there are a number of competing priorities for General Fund resources, including public safety. A corollary advantage for overall service provision needs is that a park district's dedicated revenue would free up General Fund resources currently used for parks for other service needs, including public safety, roads, and planning.

While there are a number of advantages, there are also potentially some disadvantages of establishing special purpose districts for parks and recreation. While a park district would provide stable funding, establishment of one with a tax base would result in an overall increase in taxes for the Island County residents within the district boundaries. In Island County, where citizens recently voted against an operating levy, it may be very difficult to establish new taxes, especially for recreation. However, voters may be more likely to approve funding specifically for habitat conservation, which appeared to be a greater priority according to participants in public involvement activities carried out as part of this planning process.

In the State of Washington, parks and recreation districts are primarily focused on traditional recreation services – parks, ballfields, swimming pools, recreation centers, recreation programs – although features such as trails, environmental education centers, and open space preservation lands may be part of the portfolio of services. Island County's existing park system is primarily forested (77% of the park system). The two park districts on Whidbey Island and the cities provide traditional park and recreation services. There may be areas within the County that desire more traditional park and recreation services than the County can provide, and a district or service area may be a solution for those areas. However, residents indicated through the public involvement for this

planning effort that their highest priorities are nature preserves/conservation areas, water access, nature-based recreation, and trails.

While the existing parks and recreation districts in Island County and the State of Washington tend to focus on the traditional “active recreation,” perhaps a district focused on natural area, coastal, or agricultural land preservation would be a better fit for Island County. In California, there are Open Space Districts established specifically for the purpose of preserving and managing natural areas. The Marin County Open Space District was established in 1973 and provides stewardship for more than 15,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands including hills, woodlands, meadows and wetlands. The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, established in 1990, is funded by a voter-approved quarter cent sales tax. The district protects more than 83,000 acres of land. This district is an Open Space Authority, and it was one of the first to preserve agricultural lands. The RCW statutes governing park districts and service areas do not appear to prohibit establishing a district primarily focused on conservation and stewardship of open space lands rather than traditional “active recreation”.

To this point, Island County has considered special districts in a recreation context, where it envisions a new district for the areas not supported by the North Whidbey or South Whidbey Parks and Recreation Districts. In light of the fiscal challenges facing the County, the County Board of Commissioners recently asked the South Whidbey Park and Recreation District to consider acquisition or management of a few County properties within the District’s jurisdiction, specifically those which may be better suited to the District’s purpose and resources than the County’s.<sup>21</sup> This request is part of an important step in re-focusing on a specific service niche for Island County. The difficulty is that other jurisdictions may not be able to take on sites that don’t fit the County’s mission and vision.

## Taking Parks off the General Fund

Jackson County, Oregon is located on the Interstate 5 corridor in southern Oregon. About 52% of Jackson County’s 2,800 square miles is owned by the federal government, and the County historically received a significant portion of its revenue from timber sales. Federal aid for timber-dependent counties helped cushion the loss of timber revenue, but was a short term solution.

Jackson County responded to the loss of federal funds by reorganizing and restructuring how it provides services. As part of this restructuring,

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<sup>21</sup> September, 2010.

the County established the Recreation Enterprise Fund, and began accounting for its extensive parks system in this fund. The operation of parks and recreation services in Jackson County is funded completely on an enterprise basis. The park system as a whole is treated as an enterprise, with some sites generating a profit, others requiring a subsidy, and the services as a whole not receiving any support from the General Fund.

The Jackson County Parks and Recreation program operates eleven County Parks that focus on outdoor recreational activities, such as picnicking, camping, fishing, boating, water-skiing, swimming, water sliding, river boating, hiking, rock climbing, cycling, motor sports, target shooting, music concerts and festivals, bird watching, nature hikes, and equestrian activities.

Because of its management strategy, Parks and Recreation strives to make each park as self-supporting as possible. To accomplish this, it employs a revenue strategy of facility-use fees, grants, entitlements, revenue generating events and concessions contracts, along with volunteers, social agency cooperation, public/public and public/private partnerships. Ongoing reorganizations and cost containment strategies are employed to provide a variety of recreational experiences at the lowest cost.

For Island County, similar efforts would require a different mindset about the way it manages its parks, habitat areas, and facilities. Currently, most revenue-generating sites are accounted for separately, making it difficult to manage systematically. In addition, there is no business plan or even a directive to be entrepreneurial.

Another consideration: if Island County strives to make each park site self-supporting, it may mean that the County would need to decline acceptance of lands with conservation easements that restrict development and use. This is an important issue as the County and the Land Trust determine how the recently acquired Trillium Property (654 acres) should be managed in the future.

According to the Land Trust, Island County and the Land Trust have management agreements in place for previously donated properties, whereby the Land Trust funds and handles all site maintenance and management, unless there is a major violation of the conservation easement that the Land Trust retains on these properties. As per this arrangement, the Land Trust monitors of the jointly held conservation easements at no cost to the County. With regards to the Trillium property, the Land Trust agreed to raise a stewardship fund of \$50,000, and they are developing the needed infrastructure to secure the site and

eliminate liability issues. The Land Trust also has agreed to create a site management plan and to coordinate volunteer efforts. They will submit grant applications to pay for needed recreational infrastructure, such as parking areas and signs, as well as for forest health management.

This strategy could work successfully if the Land Trust adapts its role to be a stronger land manager and operator. The \$50,000 stewardship fund translates into about \$76 per acre, less than may be needed for hazard removal and general upkeep in one year. In the long term, far more funding and, potentially, specialized staffing will be needed to maintain and restore this site. If the arrangement works successfully for both the County and the Land Trust, the County may want to consider having the Land Trust take over management, maintenance and operations of other habitat conservation areas that the County cannot afford (which is another way to remove parks from the General Fund). Depending on the roles the County and the Land Trust want to play in the provision of parks and habitat conservation areas, this may option may be preferable to land disposition or divestment.

## **5. PROPOSED VISION**

A new management strategy for Island County's parks and habitat conservation areas is recommended to address current funding constraints. Although economic conditions are slowly improving, the reality is that Island County has not had enough funding to sustainably take care of its resources for years. A new land management strategy is needed to improve both current and future operations.

This new management strategy should be based on the County's vision for parks, recreation, and habitat conservation. Public feedback on this planning process indicates support for the following vision and mission, which are proposed here for discussion:

### *Proposed Vision for Parks and Habitat Conservation Areas*

We envision a sustainable, self-supporting system of parks and habitat areas that promotes recreation, heritage preservation, environmental conservation, and connectivity as integral to a livable community.

### *Proposed Mission for the Parks Department*

Provide quality recreation and habitat for the benefit of Island County residents and tourists through sustainable management of our parks, trails, and conservation areas.

### *Proposed 2030 Vision for San Juan County*

San Juan County developed a similar vision for parks, trails, and natural areas: We envision an interconnected, integrated system of parks, trails,

and natural areas that provides easy access to the water and natural areas; facilitates safe, non-motorized travel throughout the community; celebrates island culture, character, and a healthy environment; and is delivered through well-funded, efficient county programs and innovative partnerships.

San Juan County also identified their core values, which are noted below for discussion:

- ***Quality of Life:*** We value the role parks, trails, and natural areas play in maintaining the health and well-being of our community.
- ***Accessibility:*** We value creating, enhancing, and expanding opportunities for the community to access our parks, trails, and natural areas.
- ***Natural Integrity:*** We value maintaining and protecting the natural integrity of our unique island environment.
- ***Stewardship:*** We value being responsible stewards of the natural environment and providing well-maintained facilities and spaces for future generations to enjoy.
- ***Sustainability:*** We value taking a sustainable approach to operations and facility development that provides adequate funding to meet community needs while protecting the integrity of our natural resources.

Island County's vision and mission for parks and habitat conservation will be discussed in an effort to identify the County's niche in providing park and habitat conservation services in the context of other providers. The vision, mission, and niche will become the basis of a needs assessment and recommendations for enhancing the park and habitat system.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS/NEXT STEPS**

In the next few weeks, the Island County Board of Commissioners and the Project Management Team will be asked to review the County's vision and mission for parks, recreation, and habitat conservation. Meetings will be held with both groups on December 8, 2010, to discuss refinements to these elements. Feedback from these meetings will help identify the County's niche for providing parks and habitat services.

Based on the County's niche, a park and habitat conservation needs assessment will be completed this winter to analyze County needs for parks, recreation facilities, and habitat areas. Priority needs, along with

directions and recommendations for operations and management, will be incorporated into the County's Plan for Parks and Habitat Conservation. A draft plan is anticipated to be available in late Winter/Spring 2011.

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