

The Island Guardian

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By And For The People



By Lincoln Bormann

I had a meeting three years ago where the Department of Natural Resources floated the idea of trading all their remaining trust lands in the Islands, nearly 800 acres, to a developer (that individual is now in court, liquidating all property he has).

At the time, DNR said he would probably work with us to set some of the land aside. These were Lopez Hill and Odlin South on Lopez and Mitchell Hill on San Juan among others. At that same time, the Medina Foundation had divided up Turtleback into residential lots for resale to the highest bidder.

It was a critical moment with many of our enduring natural places under imminent threat. Needless to say, I didn't take the DNR offer very well. I wrote an opinion piece entitled "A Perfect Storm" outlining the situation.

What followed though no one could have predicted. Thousands of people opened their wallets for Turtleback. The Land Bank bonded \$10 million. Dozens of people wrote or called their legislators about Lopez and Mitchell Hill. They organized into groups to fight for those places in the Islands where it was still possible to feel wildness, to hike, ride or bike on wooded trails. Each setting became an issue of personal importance, a definition of why we live here.

In the business of conservation, success is always hard fought and often elusive. I have personally watched pristine forests ride off on the back of eighteen wheelers. I have seen pavement and rooftops appear where there had been marshes and native prairie. But in these efforts to keep a few places for all of us, we are on the verge of complete victory. We all know about Turtleback. If you haven't hiked it yet, summer is beckoning.

Of the others, the legislature allocated \$5,000,000 for Lopez Hill in 2007. These were funds dedicated to conservation that could have easily gone to other communities. This past week the County Council signed a 50-year lease with the state. It will remain a refuge for Islanders, possibly forever if we can find a way to buy the remainder.

Our congressional delegation has requested \$6,000,000 for the National Park Service to buy Mitchell Hill. The acquisition is one of the top priorities for NPS in the nation and the President's budget allocates money to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the vehicle for this type of project. If all goes according to plan, the Land Bank will make the initial purchase toward the end of the year and transfer the property early next year. English Camp will grow by more than 300 acres. This one isn't done yet, so call your senators and representative and tell them not to let up!

This year, even in a disastrous economy, the legislature approved \$600,000 for a county lease of

40 acres of Odlin South. Again this money would have gone somewhere else without county residents advocating for conserving our lands. The site hosts an aspen grove and headwaters of a creek flowing into Upright Channel. The forty acres is just a portion of it, but it is a start.

In these efforts, our community is the embodiment of the often-cited quote from Margaret Meade, "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." As I am walking out in the woods we now share and pass a fellow Islander, these will be the words on my mind.

(Lincoln Bormann is the Director of the San Juan County Land Bank)