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Land Bank aims to meet your needs



a hiker at Upright head looking over the water.
Contributed photo

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Whether you're interested in bird watching, mountain biking, sunning on the beach or quiet relaxation under the trees, there is a San Juan County Land Bank Preserve, which aims to meet your needs on Lopez.

Several of these preserves were slated for sale, some as subdivisions. Now they belong to the citizens of the county, to be enjoyed for their natural beauty rather than their real estate value.

In 1990, San Juan County voters approved funding for the Land Bank through a 1 percent real estate excise tax. In 1999, by nearly a 73 percent majority, the Land Bank was renewed for 12 more years. This tax is paid by purchasers of real estate in the county.

Since its inception in 1991, the Land Bank has acquired 179 acres on Lopez and secured conservation easements on another 474 acres.

Whether through conservation easements, long term leases on Department of Natural Resources properties and outright purchases, the Land Bank helps to protect special properties like Upright Head, The Spit in Fisherman Bay, Weeks Wetland, Watmough Bay, Lopez Hill and Hummel Lake. Most recently, the Land Bank worked to secure a long term lease of Odlin South.

But acquisition is only part of the story. Once protected good stewardship becomes the Land Bank's primary goal. Fortunately for Lopez there is one person here who puts these pieces together and makes it all work.

Tim Clark serves as the steward for the Lopez preserves. Among his duties are to scout out, build and maintain trails, create signage, monitor use and meet the neighbors. He also restores habitat and removes noxious weeds. Clark recently completed new signage on Lopez Hill, the highest point on the island, which helps hikers, horseback riders and mountain bikers navigate numerous trails on this 400-acre piece of property. Partnering with other Lopez public land managers, Clark's goal is to get creosote logs removed from the Spit, Weeks Wetland and many other beaches through the state Department of Natural Resources. "The people of Lopez are very lucky to have public access to some of the finest places on the island," said Clark. "However, we need to remember that this situation came about only through a lot of hard work and is maintained by a number of dedicated volunteers. We all do our part to make this a better place to live, for now and the future."

This fall voters will again have the opportunity to vote to renew the Land Bank. The Land Bank funds collected are set aside expressly for the purpose of preserving the natural heritage of the San Juan Islands with 10 percent or less set aside for administrative purposes.

"The county ordinance governing the Land Bank requires periodic renewal of its funding by local voters," said Lincoln Bormann, Land Bank director.

Decisions about how to spend Land Bank funds are made by a volunteer commission of seven citizens representing the islands. Lopez is represented by Nancy Greene and Tom Cowan. Bormann said he would like to see the Land Bank secure more conservation easements on farm properties.

"As we move forward," Bormann said. "It will be with a renewed emphasis on protecting the rural character and farming legacy of the island."

For now the Land Bank continues its work and Lopezians continue to enjoy the breathtaking landscape. Clark welcomes questions and comments as well as volunteer help. He can be reached at 468-2010.