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Land Bank buys San Juan Historical Museum easements for \$200,000; funds will help restore heritage buildings

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The San Juan County Land Bank has purchased historical preservation and open space conservation easements on a portion of the San Juan Historical Museum property for \$200,000.

The allocation was unanimously approved Dec. 8 by the San Juan County Council. The money, proceeds from the 1 percent excise tax on real estate sales, will help the museum restore and maintain three buildings, which date to 1894.

Some of the money has already been spent; the farmhouse — the centerpiece of the museum — received a new foundation this summer.

The easements require that the farmhouse, the carriage house and the root cellar remain authentic, and that the open space around the buildings remain open and accessible to the public.

Other buildings on the property — the 1894 county jail, the 1891 Scribner cabin, the milk house and the barn — are not included in the easements.

Land Bank Director Lincoln Bormann said the farmhouse, carriage house and root cellar are the three significant buildings remaining from the once expansive 445-acre James King farm. The layout of the three buildings "represents how this historic farmstead was laid out."

The museum has considered moving the county jail to its parcel next door, where the resource center is, to better present the original layout of the farmstead. The move would be allowed under the easement.

Museum executive director Kevin Loftus said he hopes the Land Bank money will spur more giving to preserve the site, which is used for cultural, educational, entertainment and historical events.

Without the easement proceeds, the farmhouse would not have received a new foundation. Posts supporting the floors had rotted and museum officials had made the dining area floor off-limits.



Other museum buildings are in dire need of restoration work, and despite the easement proceeds the museum's finances are still precarious. The museum receives funding from county and town lodging taxes, memberships, memorial donations, and museum tour admissions.

The museum also receives a \$1 per book royalty from sales of "Friday Harbor," the book it co-authored with Mike and Julia Vouri. The museum and the Vouris are co-authoring another book, about San Juan Island.

Bormann said the site is worth saving.

"If you look at old photographs, you see that farms came right up to the edge of town," Bormann said. "The King farm is a perfect example of that. The town has grown up around it, and there is no other really good example, no other historic farmstead in town. It's a natural."

Vouri said James King claimed the site in 1877; his farm grew to 445 acres by 1900. Eighty acres were reserved for crops, the balance for grazing. The farm included an orchard of 300 fruit trees.

"The farm represents the period of time between the joint occupation and the collapse of agriculture as a way of life on the islands. This was a going proposition. It fed a family," Vouri said.

"You can go there, and everything you'd want to see from a late-19th century farm is there — the farmhouse, the carriage house, the root cellar. It's not located out of town, it's a historical resource that's right there."

The Friday Harbor Town Council endorsed the easements in a letter to the Land Bank in spring 2007. Museum board members told the council that the museum did not generate enough income to keep up with costly repairs. They said it's worth the investment: Besides being the last remnant of the once expansive King farm, the museum is a venue for community events and provides open recreational space in a neighborhood that has transitioned to urban, they said.

Bormann agreed.

"This property is definitely historically significant for the town. There are not many significant properties left, really. There are a few scattered around. This was clearly identified by the town as a priority to preserve, and the easement does that."

Bormann called the easements an "insurance policy" — if the historical society, which owns and operates the museum, ever ceased to exist, the site would continue to be maintained to historical standards.

The Land Bank has easements on the Roark House on Argyle Avenue. Those easements governs what can be done with the home's exterior and two interior rooms, and protects a spring in the back yard. Indigenous artifacts dating at least 4,000 years have been found near the spring.

The Land Bank also has easements on property on the corner of Argyle Avenue and Malcolm Street, requiring future development to follow the town's historic preservation guidelines.

In addition, the Land Bank proposes buying historical and conservation easements at 150 Nichols St., site of a proposed permanent farmers market.