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## Share your thoughts about Turtleback plan | Guest Column

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By Eliza Habegger

As the season turns and we hope for just a few more golden days of sun, perhaps you will find yourself on Turtleback Mountain Preserve, soaking up its calm and majesty. We are fortunate to have this property available to the public.

The Land Bank has been working to complete a management plan that will guide the care of Turtleback for years to come. A first Draft Management Plan was issued for public comment this spring. Through community meetings on Orcas, San Juan, and Lopez, a special Land Bank Commission meeting on Orcas, and an eight-week written comment period, the Land Bank heard from more than 100 individuals and organizations.

The Land Bank Commission and staff reviewed and discussed public input, and presented a revision to our partner, the San Juan Preservation Trust. These actions have created a Revised Draft Management Plan.

This was not an easy task. Public opinions regarding the management of the mountain were many, passionate, and often in conflict with each other.

Some citizens felt that deer hunting should be permitted; others were against the idea. Many were passionate about horseback riding, while many others were adamant that pedestrian access only should be permitted. Some citizens advocated that trails should be open for mountain biking. And some believed that Turtleback should be a nature sanctuary, with little or no public access at all.

As a result, the Revised Draft Management Plan designates three zones on the mountain: one for pedestrians, one for multiple use, and one dedicated to Turtleback's other, silent users — its resident plants and animals. It makes a pledge to work with all citizens with respect, seeking ways that pedestrians, equestrians, and mountain bikers can all enjoy Turtleback, remaining mindful of the Land Bank's "low-intensity" requirement for recreation.

While public meetings focused on recreation, we have not forgotten the softer voices and the many other reasons citizens gave so selflessly to save Turtleback. Its expansive forests, wetlands, flora and fauna, stately Garry oak trees, and native grasslands are to be cherished and protected for future generations. They harbor rarities including golden eagles, sharptail snakes, and native wildflowers. Thoughtful stewardship and restoration of these biological treasures remain of utmost importance.

The Revised Draft Management Plan, if approved, is just the beginning. While the Land Bank has years of experience with pedestrian trails, there is much to learn about the safe and sustainable management of other users and their unique needs. The management of Turtleback presents a significant undertaking for Land Bank staff. The Plan notes that it will take time and the commitment of many to successfully implement a multiple use trail system — and that it is indeed a priority.

We invite the public to read the Revised Draft Management Plan, available at the Land Bank's office (378-4402) or on [www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land\\_bank](http://www.co.san-juan.wa.us/land_bank).

For the draft to become final, the Land Bank Commission must hold a public hearing and decide whether to advance the plan to the County Council. Then the council will hold a public hearing in consideration of adopting it. The Land Bank's public hearing will be held on Oct. 10 at 10 a.m. in the Hotel Dining Room, Orcas Hotel, on Orcas Island (next to the ferry landing), and the County Council's will be scheduled soon thereafter.

The public is invited to attend and testify. Tell us if we're setting the right course for Turtleback.

— *Eliza Habegger is land steward for the San Juan County Land Bank.*