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Neighborhood groups could learn from preservation

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Residents of the Griffin Neighborhood Association are joining with the Capitol Land Trust to find ways to preserve critical lands and the rural nature of the Steamboat Island, Totten and Eld Inlet area of northwestern Thurston County.

The unique partnership marries two organizations that are equally committed to the preservation of wildlife habitat and special, environmentally sensitive areas that are disappearing with population growth and development.

This is a terrific partnership that should serve as a model to other neighborhood groups interested in the preservation of sensitive lands.

LAND TRUST

The Capitol Land Trust, under the expert leadership of executive director Eric Erler, has been around for 22 years. It's one of 1,200 nonprofit land trusts spread across the country that use voluntary tax-advantaged methods to permanently preserve open space — generally through outright property purchase or through conservation easements that serve as an encumbrance on a property deed in perpetuity.

Since 1987, the Capitol Land Trust, through a series of grants and contributions, has protected 3,200 acres, preserving fish and wildlife habitat along shorelines, and locking up forest lands, prairies and wetlands. Erler and his staff identify natural areas in South Sound that merit stewardship, then work with land owners, elected officials, conservation groups and financiers to permanently preserve those properties. Sometimes it's a shoreline easement, at other times a one-acre wetland, or sometimes entire farms.

The Griffin Neighborhood Association, which parallels the boundaries of the K-8 Griffin School District, can trace its origin to the point years ago when Oyster Bay neighbors got together to oppose a tavern proposed for their rural neighborhood.

The neighborhood association, governed by a 15-member board of directors, serves as the information center for the estimated 6,250 residents living between Mud Bay and Mason County including the 10-mile-long Steamboat Island Peninsula, Eld and Totten inlets.

FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The scheduled topic of discussion at Saturday's annual association picnic was the partnership with the Capitol Land Trust.

Residents were asked to contribute \$300 a year for each of the next five years to ensure that the land trust will focus its efforts on protection of the shorelines, forests, meadows and wetlands critical to the environmental health and rural charm of the Steamboat Island Peninsula region.

Superior Court Judge Chris Wickham, a member of the neighborhood association board of directors, said Saturday's goal was to sign up 50 individuals willing to make the financial commitment. That would send \$15,000 a year to the land trust.

Erler said the dollars will be used on staff time dedicated to land purchases and conservation easements in the Griffin area.

The Capitol Land Trust already has done a lot of work in the area, having conserved six miles of marine shoreline on Eld Inlet and 1,000 acres within the Eld/Totten watersheds.

Dave Schuett-Hames, president of the Griffin Neighborhood Association, said area residents have long been concerned about preservation of their rural environment.

As a volunteer organization, however, the homeowners association does not have the financial resources or staff to work toward that goal. Preservation targets that are important to Griffin residents have been identified as top priorities for the land trust.

The partnership allows Griffin residents "get going" on the goal of preserving special areas in their rural neighborhood, Schuett-Hames said. "We need to get this going while opportunities to preserve land are still there. Clearly opportunities that existed 10 years ago aren't there today."

The beauty of this partnership is the fact that it's not government bureaucrats stepping in to preserve sensitive properties through onerous regulations or mandates. It's neighbors working with a well established conservation organization with a solid reputation to preserve and protect those special places in their own neighborhood.

Like we said, this is a model other rural areas should adopt.