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Land trusts make every donated dollar count

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Two land trusts formed in South Sound in 1989, a move that has paid dividends for fish, wildlife and clean water from the upper Nisqually River watershed to the muddy tide flats of Eld Inlet.

In the past 21 years, the Nisqually Land Trust and Capitol Land Trust have preserved in perpetuity nearly 7,000 acres of river shoreline, estuaries, wetlands, mature forests and other habitat that otherwise could be pockmarked by development, logging and assorted human activities that crowd out the critters and contribute to sprawl.

The land trusts always work with willing sellers. Regardless of political persuasion or social standing, it's hard not to like a land trust.

The skilled staff and volunteers who support the two land trusts accept land donations and conservation easements, acquire land with the aid of state and federal grants, and conduct fundraisers.

Last weekend, I attended fundraisers involving both groups. The events were as different as night and day, but they had one thing in common: They both raised money to help protect more of South Sound's natural spaces.

First was the evening of March 12 at the Prosperity Grange. More than 120 people, mostly members of the Griffin Neighborhood Association, gathered for a festive night of music donated by the Celtic band, Gaelica, fresh clams donated by Chelsea Farms on Eld Inlet and Fish Tale Ale from Olympia's popular brewery.

Proceeds from the pre-St. Patrick's Day party pushed the neighborhood association over the top in the pledge it made with the Capitol Land Trust last summer to raise \$15,000 a year to support conservation efforts in the Steamboat Peninsula area.

During a music break, Capitol Land Trust executive director Eric Erler reminded the crowd that the land trust has protected more than 3,800 acres, much of it in Totten and Eld inlets, which frame the Steamboat Peninsula.

He also said every \$200 raised is enough to leverage funds for protection of 1 acre. By my seat-of-the-pants calculation, my partner and I helped protect about 0.14 of an acre that night.

The next night it was off to Saint Martin's University Worthington Center for the Nisqually Land Trust's 18th annual Auction and Dinner Gala.

This is the main fundraiser of the year for the Nisqually Land Trust, which has purchased some 3,000 acres of habitat in the watershed and helped protect 74 percent of the river shoreline. Within the next month, the land trust should close on a deal to buy 600 acres of mature forestland in the upper watershed, not too far from Mount Rainier National Park, Nisqually Land Trust executive director Joe Kane said.

The goal over the next 10 years it to help restore the once-great steelhead run to the Mashel River, a major Nisqually tributary, and boost the land trust's portfolio to 30,000 acres, Kane told the more than 250 people in attendance.

"We gotta think big," he said.

A silent auction and dinner was followed by a live auction featuring one of the top-notch auctioneers in the state – the Nisqually watershed's own Larry Schorno.

At 67, Schorno has spent his entire life along the river as a McKenna rancher and farmer. He learned the art of auctioneering by attending livestock auctions and has honed his skills over the past 35 years.

As always, Schorno poured his heart and soul into the auction, fueled by his love of the river and admiration of the land trust mission. His daughter, Cindy Schorno, spelled him a couple of times so he could catch his breath.

"It takes a tremendous amount of energy," Larry Schorno said.

At times a comedian bantering with master of ceremonies and fellow land trust founding board member George Walter and at times as frenzied as a Pentecostal preacher, Schorno pushed the auction bids higher and higher.

In a roomful of familiar faces, Schorno had no trouble egging on friendly bid competition.

A couple cases in point: Seven nights in a beach side condo on Kauai's north coast valued at \$2,000 sold for \$2,700. A limited-edition print by Nootka Indian artist Patrick Amos titled "Kingfisher" brought in \$600. It was valued at \$250.

"Larry can make a 10 percent to 20 percent difference in the bids," Kane said.

Lacking the financial firepower to play with the big guns firing in the live auction, we played in the silent auction, picking off a framed print of snow geese in flight by Texas wildlife artist Al Barnes and a night for two at the Cedar Loft Cabin in Ashford, along with dinner for two at the historic Copper Creek Inn.

Every \$113 raised is enough to leverage funds for purchase of 1 acre of land in the Nisqually watershed. So we helped to protect about two acres.

There. We helped support both South Sound land trusts last weekend and had a lot of fun in the process.

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For more information about the Steamboat Conservation Partnership, go to www.griffinneighbors.org. For more on the land trusts, go to www.nisquallylandtrust.org and www.capitolandtrust.org.