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The Northern Light

Blaine and Birch Bay's Community Newspaper

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Conservation group purchases land in Birch Bay, aims to turn it into a park

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A map of 4656 Drayton Harbor Road. Photo courtesy of Whatcom Land Trust.

By Stefanie Donahue

After years of work and anticipation, the team at Whatcom Land Trust announced that they've purchased 11.5 acres of land in the Drayton Harbor Watershed in Birch Bay. Moving forward, they hope to secure additional grant funding and eventually turn it over to Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2 for public use.

The land is located at 4656 Drayton Harbor Road and contains a three-bedroom home and two sheds; it's adjacent to where California Creek drains into Drayton Harbor and offers access to the shore.



*Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2
director and Birch Bay State Park ranger Ted Morris.
Photos by Stefanie Donahue.*

The Whatcom Land Trust closed the sale on June 30 and paid \$405,000 with a bridge loan from The Conservation Fund through its land conservation loan program, said Whatcom Land Trust conservation director Gabe Epperson. A number of partners also came forward to work with the land trust on the purchase, he said, including the Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2 which stepped up as a willing partner and significant funding source.

It's the first time the land trust has leveraged conservation funding to finance a land purchase, he said, but partnering with land owners, public agencies and corporations to manage the land once it has been acquired is nothing new for the Bellingham-based organization. Teddy Bear Cove and Point Whitehorn Marine Reserve, for example, were all acquired by Whatcom Land Trust and later transferred to various groups to manage, Epperson said.



The residential property at 4656 Drayton Harbor Road.

Whatcom Land Trust has sought after the property since 2009. At the time, staff with the organization attempted to purchase it and convert it to a nature preserve, but was never able to obtain crucial funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Epperson said. Last fall, the property owner approached the trust again with hopes it would become a public asset.

Now with three years to pay off The Conservation Fund loan, Whatcom Land Trust is after a funding from a variety of sources, including from The Washington Wildlife Recreation Program and Aquatic Lands Protection grants. Since they have the parks district on board, they can focus on obtaining funding for recreational use, Epperson said. Eventually, they'll start fundraising locally to leverage donations from the public.

To donate or learn more about Whatcom Land Trust, visit whatcomlandtrust.org.

Looking ahead

On a warm afternoon in July, Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2 director Ted Morris walked through the property with a gleam in his eye. For him, the land transfer will be a big step forward for Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2, which kicked back into gear in 2006 after sitting stagnant for years.

The land transfer will take place after the land trust pays off the loan and obtains a conservation easement, which Morris estimates will take the full three years. It will be the first physical property the parks district has maintained on its own, he said.



Ted Morris explores a shed on the property.

Currently, the parks district operates its activity center and office out of a property leased from Whatcom County at Bay Horizon Park, located at 7511 Gemini Street in Birch Bay.

“Without Whatcom Land Trust, we might not be able to purchase and conserve this piece of property on California Creek or other properties in the district,” Morris said in an interview with the group. “The ability of the land trust acquiring the land and then having the park district manage it for the public good is a perfect partnership.”

Despite years to go, Morris already has a vision for the land, which is, in part, influenced by his 42-year career working for state parks as a park aide and now the ranger at Birch Bay State Park.



California Creek.

“We want to restore it to more of a natural state,” he said. “[At the moment], we’re just trying to put the puzzle together.”

The California Creek Estuary, located in the Drayton Harbor Watershed, is a hot spot for fall fishers looking to catch Coho or silver salmon in the fall and can only be accessed by foot or in small water crafts, not by a boat launch. Blue heron, bald eagles and migratory waterfowl roam the area, which is home to Alder trees, thick grass and blackberry bushes. On the land, a mowed path reaches through the backyard and leads to two old sheds and a length of untouched grass.

With water, sewer and electric hook-ups already installed, the site has the potential for restrooms, a small park and a boat launch, Morris said. Eventually, he’d like to see an interpretive trail on the site that connects to a walking and biking trail spanning from Birch Bay to Blaine.

“To me it seems like water quality and public access to our natural areas are probably the two main issues of this area,” Morris said about Drayton Harbor to Whatcom Land Trust. “As the population of Blaine and Birch Bay increases, we have to do a better job of managing growth and working to preserve the natural areas that are still intact. If we can’t keep this area healthy, it won’t do us much good in the future.”



POSTED BY [STEFANIE DONAHUE](#)