

Saving Trillium: an amazing story of ‘yes, we can’

In February 2010, the Whidbey Camano Land Trust signed an ‘Option to Purchase’ agreement with a bank. The goal was to buy 654 acres atop a ridge on Whidbey Island and turn it into a community forest—providing wildlife habitat, protecting the upper section of three watersheds, and creating a public place for non-motorized recreation. The amount to raise? Formidable. The deadline? June 2010. Yikes! 120 days to raise over \$4 million. The conclusion? ‘We had to try.’ Skeptics asked -- In this economy? Is it even possible?

The foreclosed property had quite a history on Whidbey Island. Logged multiple times during the last century, it was sold to investment developers in 2002. Both the logging and proposed dense development had sparked vigorous community protest. But, since the land was in private hands, the protest didn’t make much of a difference. As the bottom fell out of the real estate market, the developers fell behind on the loan payment and the bank took it over in the Fall of 2009.

The Land Trust had just completed its 25th anniversary celebration, a year of effective outreach in the precarious 2009 economy, raising awareness about the history and critical importance of grassroots-based land protection. Now, facing the largest single fundraising project in its history, the Land Trust drew from all the lessons and blessings of that outreach year and entered the adventure of the impromptu capital campaign.

Key board and staff convened an initial meeting to build a plan, recognizing that the normal process and rules of capital campaigns wouldn’t apply. No time. No long, silent, connect-with-major-donor-and-secure-major-donations effort followed by a very public campaign. No, everything had to happen at once. Committees were organized, each taking a major section of the campaign. With determination, they worked to create and grow community buzz, find donors of all sizes, and make the deal happen. They designated a campaign coordinator, created campaign materials, and enlisted a small army of workers to tell the story in dozens of ways and ask for support. After one month of preparation, the Land Trust went public with this incredibly ambitious goal and asked everyone who cared about land, clean water, and wildlife to help make it happen.

The community stepped up—organizing fund raisers, contacting media, and asking friends and colleagues to donate. Donations and pledges came in. The June deadline came and the Land Trust negotiated a three-month extension. Initially euphoric, the island community, board and staff seemed tapped out and a bit discouraged. But during that time, a Land Trust staff member made a successful contact with a cub reporter at the Seattle Times. Her front page story on August 3 opened a whole new chapter in the campaign. As the word spread through the internet, hundreds of donations flooded in from across the country. Inquiries from major donors made the goal seem possible. On September 29, the deal closed for \$4 million.

The final tally was impressive—102 endorsers, 27 letters to the editor, 86 newspaper articles, three television stories, radio coverage, a gardening talk show, and over 625 Facebook fans. In just six months, the Land Trust received well over 1,500 donations, from groups and individuals, and built a broad, diverse community to save this forest for wildlife and the public.

At the celebration a month later, speakers reflected on the amazing accomplishment. The economy made the effort difficult and the conclusion all the more remarkable. Yet, it was the economy that created this opportunity and gave the community the chance to save what it valued. Everyone's effort mattered; each contribution made a difference.

In 2011 the Land Trust partnered with Island County to place a conservation easement on the property that permanently removed the development rights and ensures public access. Since then, the positive impact the property has on the community only continues to grow. Trail systems have been added and additional trailheads and increased accessibility are in the works. Restoration efforts continue to increase the health and habitat of the forest. The land is now saved for clean water, for quiet recreation, and to make sure that wildlife have a home.