

Islanders speak out, Land Trust listens

By Ben Slade

Last Tuesday, the St. Simons Land Trust concluded a series of five meetings soliciting the public's input into the long-range plan for land conservation on our island, something we call a Greenprint.

What we heard from island residents during those meetings was a concern about the future of their island in terms of its natural and scenic values and character. We were also heartened to learn that they'd like to be a part of the solution of protecting those values. For that reason, the discussion included how a more aggressive and effective land conservation effort could be financed.

Currently less than 5 percent of our island's total land area, 575 acres, is in publicly owned or protected green space, including parks. Half of that land area (Fort Frederica, Bloody Marsh) is owned by the National Park Service, while another 145 acres has been preserved by the Land Trust. Less than 1 percent of our total land area is devoted to public parks, and all of those parks are located in the southern portion of the island. Young people on the island who want to play soccer competitively must go to Jekyll Island or Brunswick.

Nationally, most communities try to preserve at least 20 percent of their land area in open space and parks that are within easy access of every child and adult. We have a long way to go.

The Land Trust's vision for the future of St. Simons, following significant public input, contains these elements:

- a. Completion of our trail system linking all areas of the island and particularly a system of trail-side parks
- b. Creation of a blueway, a system of water accesses that will enable kayakers and canoeists to enjoy the waters and marshes that surround our island
- c. Preservation of the tree canopies along our major arteries
- d. Expansion of passive parks and nature trails, as well as creation of a multi-purpose athletic field complex where children and adults can enjoy field sports like soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, rugby and track activities
- e. Protection of marsh edges and creeks from the adverse impacts of development
- f. Use of land conservation to promote more responsible and less dense development on the island.

As we discussed in all these meetings, if we, as caring residents of St. Simons Island, want these initiatives to happen, we have to be willing to help pay for them. The Land Trust simply cannot raise the amount required from our generous donors, nor can we attract federal and state financial participation without local public funding devoted to land conservation. We want to see an active discussion begin among a wide range of islanders on how we can all be part of the solution. Then we can all reap the benefits of preserving the many unique qualities that St. Simons Island has to offer us, our children, our grandchildren, and future generations to come. What a legacy we can leave our island!

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