



When I look to the future, past the horizon of what my eyes will see, to 50 to 100 years from now, I want to know there will be habitat for wildlife, there will be nature trails kids can walk to from their home, and the natural character of the Skagit will survive. – Big Rock Campaign Supporter

Expanding Big Rock Park: An Opportunity for the Generations



Our community has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to **expand and re-open beloved Big Rock County Park** - a Skagit Landmark. Located above the beautiful Nookachamps Valley on the eastern edge of Mount Vernon, Big Rock Park's 13 acres have become cut off from public access, as it is surrounded by private land. Skagit Land Trust is poised to reverse that and **expand the park five-fold**. This will protect wetlands, a creek, a regenerating native forest and provide permanent public access to low-impact trails through the forest and to the rocky summit.

We need your help to make this vision a reality.

If this project is successful, it will not only restore public access to Big Rock, but will expand the park to **protect 63 additional acres of prime habitat** on the edge of growing Mount Vernon. A park for people to walk or bike to from Mt. Vernon's dense neighborhoods. A park for fish and wildlife. A park that honors a culturally important landscape. A park for the generations – past, present and future.

Skagit Land Trust must raise \$400,000 by December 2023 to ensure the expansion and permanent protection of Big Rock. Those funds, in addition to **partnering with Skagit County Parks on a state grant**, will allow this project to fully succeed.

In 1995, Skagit Land Trust facilitated the original gift of 13 acres at the top of Big Rock from Dr. Richard and Holly Hoag to Skagit County Parks to create a nature park for the community. The Trust placed a Conservation Easement on the land to ensure the property would always be protected. Sadly, the public has been cut off from this beloved park for a generation.

Skagit Land Trust has worked with the County for nearly 30 years to find ways to expand the park and ensure access. We now have our best, and last chance to do this.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Members and Partners,

Every few years, board and staff take time to refine our longer-term goals in response to the evolving needs of our community. We do this after engaging you in discussions or surveys and undertaking our own analysis. In 2019, we added these goals to others in our core:

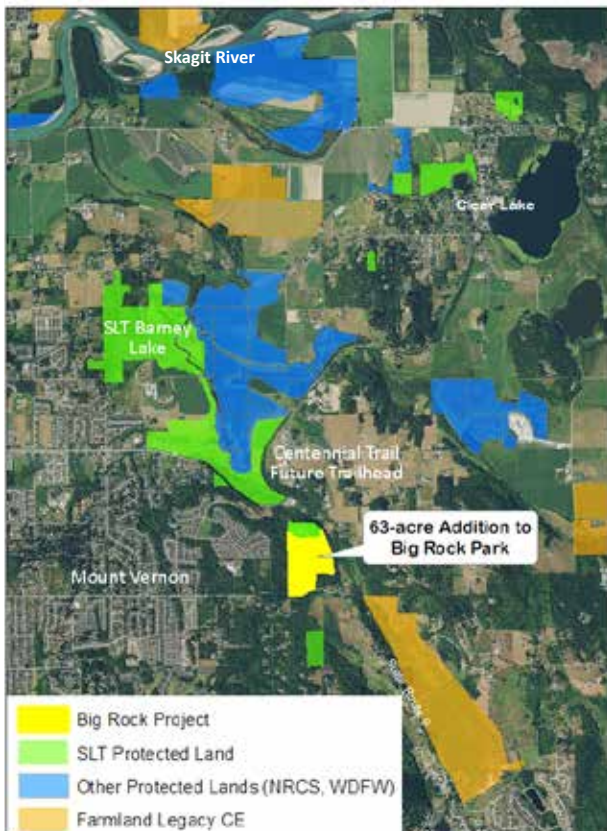
- Prioritize Climate Change Solutions
- Expand Protection of Lands that Allow Movement of Wildlife
- Further Integrate Education and Public Access - and in particular with communities underrepresented in nature-related activities

We are thrilled to introduce the “Expand Big Rock County Park” project to you. It exemplifies these goals and how they can work together. Our partnership to expand Big Rock County Park is a “YES In My Backyard” project. Urban density and accessible nature can, and should, coexist.

Increasing density in cities and towns while providing nature parks is a carbon friendly and desirable way to absorb inevitable local population growth. Not only do parks increase urban quality of life, in summers natural parks can be substantially cooler than nearby paved areas. They encourage walking and confer other health benefits. They store and filter water in drier times and absorb excess surface runoff in wetter ones.



Big Rock’s significance goes far beyond its rocky summit footprint. Big Rock forms a crucial link in an ecological corridor of lakes, wetlands, forests, streams, farms and open space connecting Lake Creek and Big Lake to the Skagit River in the Nookachamps Valley. Preserving connected corridors is vital to ensuring the survival of a diverse range of native birds, fish and wildlife near urbanizing environments.



This project furthers our commitment to increasing education and public access to nature. Big Rock park will be next to several diverse and youth-filled urban neighborhoods of east Mount Vernon. These neighborhoods rank as priority areas for more parks close by. In many urban areas, 50% of residents’ primary access to the natural world is via parks. Experiencing wild areas is particularly meaningful.

Big Rock’s cultural and historical value to the Coast Salish people adds to the importance of our partnership to get the land protected for all generations. Unfortunately, the chance to save wild nature often slips away as our urban edges expand. Very soon, it will be too late to protect a place as unique as Big Rock. I urge you to join us to ensure that Big Rock is a permanent sanctuary for people and wildlife. **As one supporter said, our descendants are going to say “Thank goodness they had the foresight to protect Big Rock!”**

Handwritten signature of Molly Doran

Molly Doran, Executive Director

Protecting Big Rock Matters – Here’s Why



Looking north from Big Rock towards the Barney Lake wetlands, Skagit River, and the Salish Sea in the distance

and connecting native habitat as Mount Vernon grows around it.

It Will Protect Native Fish & Wildlife Habitat, Forever:

Big Rock pokes up from the Skagit Valley as a rock island, hosting unique plant and wildlife communities. It is an anchor in a nine-mile-long Nookachamps Valley system of native wildlife habitat, lakes, wetlands, farms and open space that runs from Lake Creek and Big Lake to the Skagit River. The slopes and base of Big Rock that are part of this park expansion hold creeks, wetlands, rocky outcrops and regenerating native forests. They connect to the extensive valley ecosystem. The rock itself is unique – many other rock outcrops in the Nookachamps have been ground down for quarries. If protected, this land and valley ecosystem will be a green heartland, protecting

It Secures Public Access for Trails and Viewing Areas:

Big Rock County Park has been closed to the public for years because there is no legal public access to it. It has taken decades, but we now have a chance to ensure permanent public access to an expanded Big Rock Park with a trailhead, parking, and trails for low-impact use such as hiking, photography, nature education and birding. Permanently protecting Big Rock’s adjacent forest and wetlands will provide long-desired access and allow nature to thrive as the city grows. Countless generations will be able to visit this stunning viewpoint of Mount Baker and the Nookachamps. The forest will re-establish itself and become old growth one day.



Scott Schuyler, Upper Skagit Indian Tribe’s Policy Representative for Natural & Cultural Resources, and his daughter looking south from Big Rock, the Nookachamps weaves through protected farmland in the valley to the left, finally reaching Big Lake.

50 years from now, when Mount Vernon has developed on all sides of Big Rock, an expanded park will be a rare haven for both wildlife and people.



It Is a Culturally Significant Landscape:

Big Rock is a central location in the history, stories, and traditions of the ancestors of the Coast Salish people, in particular, the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe. Their ancestors include the Nook-a-chah-mish who lived in the Nookachamps River Valley. Historically Big Rock was called “Yudwasta” (of the heart). It looms large in the Legend of The Star Child. Several villages and camps were located near Big Rock. Upper Skagit Indian Tribe staff support this project and are helping with history and site interpretation to tell its important cultural history.

It Supports Smart Growth:

Prioritizing housing and growth in our cities is a carbon friendly way to absorb population growth and support affordable housing. People also need easy access to nature in their backyard. However, as our cities have grown, studies show that access to open space, trails and nature has fallen behind. Big Rock is within 10 minutes



of growing, diverse, and mixed-income neighborhoods in east Mount Vernon. As the infrastructure and trails are created, an expanded Big Rock County Park will be within walking distance of a school and adjacent to the Centennial Trail. Public transit will eventually reach the proposed park entrance. Big Rock is perfectly situated to be a park that helps people appreciate the natural world. If this opportunity is not taken, it will be impossible in the future to secure this much land for a nature park this close to the city.



Hikers on the top of Big Rock, looking west towards homes on the edge of Mount Vernon.

What Needs To Happen



In early 2023, the property was about to be sold and carved up for exclusive lots. Skagit Land Trust deemed this land such a critical part of our community's future that we agreed to purchase the property to get it off the market and try to protect it. The Washington Opportunity Fund assisted with a generous loan and we borrowed from our internal reserves. However, this is a temporary solution. Skagit Land Trust must pay back its loans. **The land is not yet protected** forever. If we cannot raise these funds, we will have to sell part, or even most of, the 63-acre addition to pay back loans.



Big Rock County Park in 2001 and hopeful expansion in 2023

Skagit County Parks Department is seeking a \$1 million grant from WA State Rto help purchase the land from the Trust in 2025. If awarded, this grant, and \$400,000 more in committed County funds, will cover 70% of the project cost. **Skagit Land Trust only needs to raise \$400,000 to ensure Big Rock County Park is permanently expanded and protected.**

For only \$400,000 we can create a nature park in the center of future urban growth. **In years to come, it would be impossible to secure this much land** for a nature park no matter how much it is needed.

We are asking our community to help us protect all of Big Rock for current and future generations of people and wildlife. What we are not able to protect today, will be gone in the future.

If you want to help ensure Big Rock is protected, please make a gift today to Skagit Land Trust's Big Rock Fund with the envelope found in this newsletter. There is a space to note that your donation is for Big Rock. Let us know if you plan to make a gift from an IRA, Donor Advised Fund, or with stock.

Thanks to a generous group of donors, the Trust has \$100,000 in matching funds. Your gift today will go TWICE as far to protect this remarkable property.

Visit skagitlandtrust.org to learn more, watch videos about the project, listen to the story of Star Child, sign up for a tour, or make a gift online.



Wildlife & native plants found throughout the property

Conservation Easement Allows Landowner to Protect Restoration

When Chris Farrow and her husband David were trying to decide where to live after retirement, they made a list. It included ten “Must have’s” they wanted to find in their next home. They searched the country but kept returning to Northwest Washington.

“The home that we found here in Skagit County had twelve must-have’s, including a magnificent view of Mount Baker,” says Chris. “So, we stayed.”

Chris and David set to work, removing blackberry from their property south of Big Rock, and giving the native forest room to grow. “There was no way that anyone could have convinced me that in 15 years a meadow full of blackberries could become a woodland, but it happened,” she says.

Watching the benefits of that restoration spurred Chris to learn more about protecting 19 acres of forest and wetlands on her property. This spring, a conservation easement was completed on her land. The easement, donated by Chris and held by Skagit Land Trust, permanently conserves important wildlife habitat, including 420 feet of Gribble Creek. In the late fall Coho salmon return to spawn in this cold creek.



Salmon return each fall to Gribble Creek on Farrow’s property.

“Watching them push their way upstream, fight over their redds, and complete their lives has been fascinating,” says Chris. “I’m also aware that the speed in which their carcasses disappear indicates that there are a great many creatures in the woods dining on fresh salmon.”

The Farrow Conservation Easement is one more piece in the puzzle of protection across the nine-mile-long Nookachamps Valley ecosystem that runs from Big Lake to the Skagit River. Chris hopes her land will be part of a green belt sanctuary for wildlife and plants.

“Anyone reading this newsletter understands the increasing threats to our forests, our water, our air and our planet. We all need to protect what we love now,” she says. “Donating a conservation easement on this property is my small way of living my words.”

Chris encourages others to reach out to the Trust if they are interested in protecting their land.

“The process can seem lengthy but it’s worth the time. Skagit Land Trust will work with you to find the best path to protection. In my case, I retained ownership and the freedom to sell the property if I need. However, there are now lengthy and detailed covenants that restrict and/or prevent any further development going forward.”

If you would like to learn more about doing a conservation easement for your own property, please reach out to Conservation Director Michael Kirshenbaum, michaelk@skagitlandtrust.org, or call 360-428-7878.



Chris has stewarded her land for the benefit of native plants and wildlife.



Views of Mount Baker above the regenerating forest. Photo by Chris Farrow



A path through the protected forest on the property; views of Mount Baker; Gribble Creek. Photos by Chris Farrow

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Skagit Land Trust conserves wildlife habitat, agricultural and forest lands, scenic open space and shorelines for the benefit of our community and as a legacy for future generations.

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Join Us For Our Open House on the Land at Big Rock
Learn more & RSVP Online - www.skagitlandtrust.org

Sunday, October 1st 10am-3pm



Come see the vision for an expanded County Park at Big Rock. Talk with Trust staff, board members, and County representatives to learn how this partnership is working to make Big Rock County Park five times larger. Take in the views of beautiful Nookachamps Valley corridor, the top of Big Rock, and Mount Baker. Learn about the importance of the wetlands and regenerative forest on the property and see you you can help us protect this beloved place. Visit skagitlandtrust.org to learn more and RSVP.

The lands conserved and protected by Skagit Land Trust have been inhabited and stewarded by numerous tribes and Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We recognize and respect the inherent, indigenous, and treaty rights of the Coast Salish People who have deep and abiding connections to these places. We seek to partner with local tribes as we conserve and care for these lands and waters.