

Final Report: Public Discussion on the San Juan County Land Bank

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<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JhqcsVupgZPwqG8c9AxEF-y8Kyjyvsq67EJsn3tH58/edit?usp=sharing>

Background

This document is a report on a conversation amongst hundreds of local citizens in the San Juan Islands about the Land Bank and issues of land use and conservation.

The Citizens Conservation Land Bank was voted into existence in 1990 with the mandate to “preserve in perpetuity areas in the county that have environmental, agricultural, aesthetic, cultural, scientific, historic, scenic or low-intensity recreational value and to protect existing and future sources of potable water” ([San Juan County Land Bank](#)). Over the past 31 years, the Land Bank has acquired almost 5000 acres of land across 36 preserves located on San Juan, Lopez, and Orcas Island. These acquisitions are funded by a Real Estate Excise Tax, authorized by the voters of San Juan County, paid by the purchaser at a rate of 1% of the selling price, as well as donations from individuals and organizations.

The Land Bank is governed by a director and an advisory board of commissioners who assist the director in the management of the land bank. This commission is composed of volunteers, appointed by the County Council, who serve four year terms. As laid out in the San Juan County Ordinance Chapter 16.54 the following are key powers and duties of the Land Bank Commission: to develop stewardship and management plans for each acquired interest not inconsistent with or detrimental to the purpose/rationale which justified its acquisition; to supervise the management of the property interests acquired; to recommend to the County council a revenue allocation formula for the long-term use of LBC funds; and to negotiate real property purchases or trades.

In meetings and discussion within the community, issues around the Land Bank’s land management, governance, and acquisition of land have been raised. Ongoing community debate has been centered around multiple areas including the management and leasing of the 600 acres of working agricultural land across the three islands, forestry management, public access, and organizational transparency. These specific issues also raise general questions about where the Land Bank should focus efforts and how policy should be formed to best serve the community and environment.

This conversation was designed and initiated to allow the community input in the processes they fund. It was run as part of an independent study through Spring Street International School and an internship with the 501c3 The Computational Democracy Project.

A link to the automatically generated report from the Polis platform itself, which includes statements which were moderated into the conversation, and all votes on those statements, is available here: <https://pol.is/report/r7bhuide6netnbr8fxbyh>.

Methodology

This conversation was run through Pol.is, an online tool used to gather open ended feedback from large groups of people. This method was well suited to these issues as Pol.is allows organic, authentic feedback while retaining minority opinions, exactly what organizations require in order to reflect communities they serve, and what is so often missing in general surveys created and mediated by organizations themselves.

Pol.is allows discussion participants to shape the conversation as it evolves. In contrast to a traditional survey where the questions, and, as a result, topic agenda, is set by the organization, Pol.is discussions are created by the participants themselves. This allows bottom up, open-ended feedback from the people, again, contrasting the top-down control commonly employed ([ParticipatedDB](#)). The Pol.is platform allows participants to enter statements related to issues being discussed ([Computational Democracy Project](#)). Other users can then express their positions on those statements by clicking either “agree,” “disagree,” or “pass” in response, as well as submitting their own statements for others to respond to, in real time ([Civic Hall](#); [Roam Research](#)).

Initial statements referred to as “seed statements” form the foundation of the conversation. These statements create a baseline for participants, setting the tone of the conversation which is built upon as participants engage in the discussion. These are necessary as without seed statements, initial participants don't have anything to vote on, and might leave a conversation without engaging” ([The Computational Democracy Project](#)). These initial statements were produced by multiple stakeholder community organizations and individuals to ensure opinion variation and legitimacy. The following organizations contributed seed statements (individual contributors are anonymous): The Orcas Island Community Foundation, The San Juan Preservation Trust, OPAL Community Land Trust, The Seadoc Society, West Beach Farm, The Washington State University San Juan County Extension, and The San Juan County Land Bank. 72 seed statements were contributed, and 60 were accepted into the conversation.

The discussion opened July 1st and was distributed through multiple channels. The following organizations posted the discussion on their website or facebook page or sent it to email lists: San Juan Island Chamber of Commerce, Lopez Island Chamber of Commerce, Orcas Island Chamber of Commerce, San Juan Island Library, Lopez Island Library, Orcas Island Library,

San Juan Islands Stewardship Network, The Terrestrial Manager's Group, The Orcasonian, The San Juan Update, The San Juan Islander, Lopez Rocks, OPAL Community Land trust, San Juan Community Home Trust, San Juan Island Trails Committee, Lopez Island Trails Committee, Friends of the San Juans, The San Juan Preservation Trust, and The San Juan County Land Bank. Additionally, ads were posted on the San Juan Update, San Juan Islander, and Orcasonian. The discussion was also spread through individual networks and Facebook pages.

As conversation owner, Kaj Litch moderated the discussion ([The Computational Democracy Project](#)). As statements enter the system after being submitted by a participant, the owner has the opportunity to approve or reject them, either adding them to the conversation or not including them.

Statements moderated out fell into one of three categories: spam, irrelevant, or duplicative.

- Spam statements such as “ho;dfghjyio” (statement 202) were removed.
- Irrelevant and off-topic statements such as “Don’t have one” (statement 190) and “I drive a tesla” (statement 153) were also removed.
- Finally, duplicative statements that repeated an idea already expressed were removed. For example, “Land Bank Commission needs more diversity” (statement 151) was removed as “The Land Bank Commission needs more diverse representation” (statement 140) already existed in the discussion and conveyed the opinion with greater clarity.

Additionally, some statements were copied, broken-up, and re-submitted if they contained multiple ideas as these confound analysis. Most of the moderated statements were on the topics of Land Bank governance, land management, and acquisitions. The full raw statement data can be accessed [here](#) – all statements including those rejected in moderation are available to be viewed.

Results

Demographics

Some statements in the conversation are not about opinions, but they are about the demographics of the participants themselves. It is important to note, when interpreting these demographic comments, that not all participants vote on all comments, and the conversation itself was not a random sample of the population. As self-reported by agreeing and disagreeing on the following statements, we can ascertain a rough breakdown of the demographics of the conversation:

- 44% of respondents live on San Juan Island
- 33% live on Orcas Island
- 16% live on Lopez Island
- 2% live on Shaw Island
- 84% own real-estate in the San Juan Islands

- 89% have their primary residence in the San Juan Islands
- 87% are registered to vote in San Juan County
- 27% attend Land Bank meetings
- 21% volunteer with the Land Bank

Opinion Groups

*all percentages shown reflect those out of the total respondent population, and those in each group, who were shown and voted on the statement described – this varies between statements. All statement statistics referred to are available to be viewed [here](#) in the full data report.

The public fall clearly into two distinct groups in terms of their opinions on big picture issues:

- Group A, with 266 members, believes wholeheartedly in the importance and continued relevance of the Land Bank (95% of Group A agreed) with a majority agreeing that the institution listens to the served community (66% of Group A agreed), effectively manages properties (61% agreed), and retains transparency and direction (62%).
- Group B, with 96 members, believes the Land Bank is irrelevant and unresponsive (60% of Group B agreed), inefficiently run (72% of Group B agreed), preserves are poorly managed (84%), and the institution lacks transparency and accountability (89%).

These groups represent two sets of statements, one that is favorable to the land bank as an operating institution, and one set of statements that is highly critical of it. These two main sets mutually identify the main stakeholder groups with regard to the institution itself, but, interestingly, do not correspond to every issue area. That is to say, there are many issues on which these stakeholder groups, who have varying allegiances or criticisms of the land bank as an institution, differ amongst themselves.

Further Opinion Groups

Considering an analysis of all participants who voted more than 7 times across all statements submitted, Principal Component Analysis was performed on the matrix of statements * votes, rendering an embedding of which participants voted similarly.

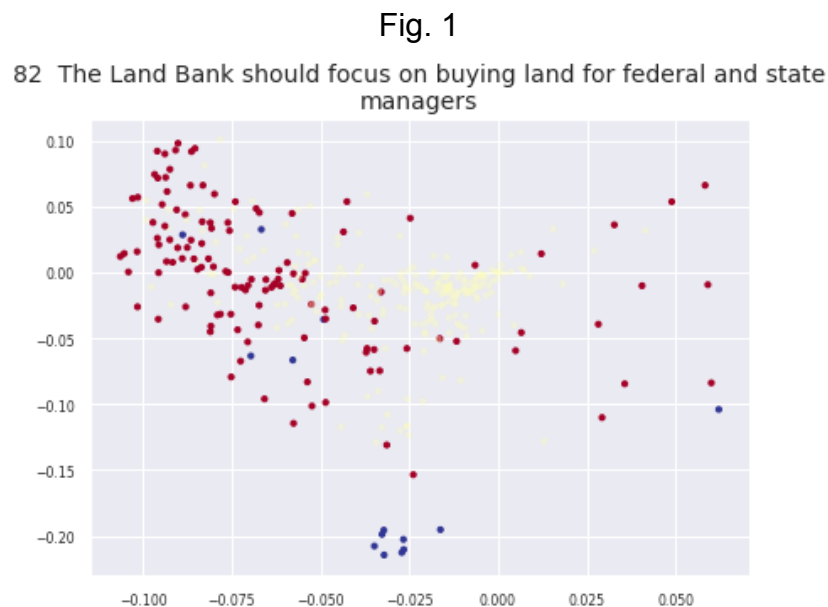
27.1% of the variance is captured on the first PC and 8.4% on the second.

This deeper analysis reveals more nuanced opinion groups.

Group 1:

The following statements define this opinion groups position as they voted uniquely in comparison to the general populous (see fig.1):

This opinion group believes in a minimal role for the Land Bank on specific issues. They collectively disagree that the Land Bank should actively manage it's most at-risk forests to reduce wildfire risk (statement 163) and that wildfire hazard reduction strategies such as canopy thinning, ground and ladder fuel reduction are appropriate on some Land Bank properties (164). Additionally, they agree that the Land Bank should focus on buying land for federal and state managers (82). Their opinion is clearly independent on this issue. The following figure shows the PCA analysis of voters who voted more than 7 times on this issue. Voters are clustered based on how similarly they voted across issues. Red indicates disagreement and blue agreement. The blue cluster bottom-center is the described opinion group.



This opinion group also defined itself with consistent voting behaviour with regard to issues of Land Bank commission representation. They disagreed that the commission needs more diverse representation (108) including an organic, sustainable, or regenerative farmer (110) and indigenous representation (111).

Finally, this group held unique opinions on food production, disagreeing that preserving working farmland for food production is important for the resiliency of island

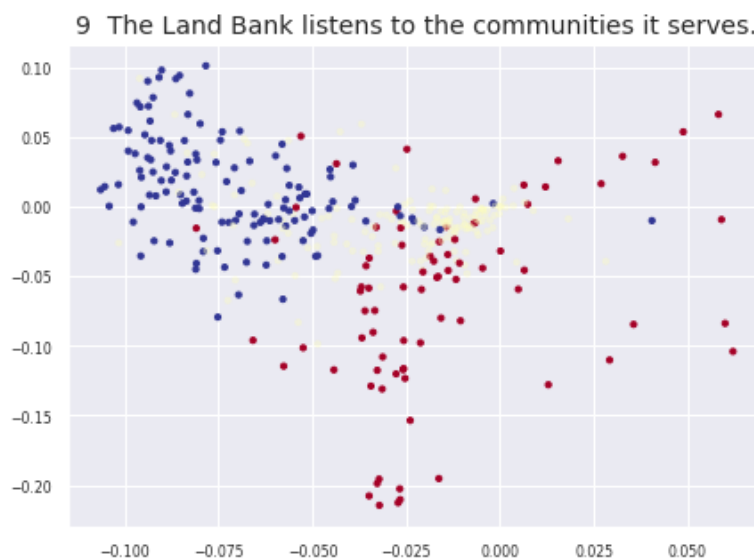
communities (113) and that purchasing food from local island farms is an important step to reduce carbon emissions (126).

Group 2:

The next opinion group identified by PCA were defined by their support for the Land Bank on specific issues that other supporters were less decided on.

This group of voters agreed that the Land Bank listens to the community it serves (statement 9) as shown in the figure (upper-left quadrant).

Fig. 2



This group's support for the Land Bank is apparent in the following statements. They disagree that there is a lack of transparency in the Land Bank's decision process and some conflict of interest (statement 19), that there should be a change of leadership at the Land Bank (24), that Land Bank commissioners act like board members of a for-profit land management company (161), and that the Land Bank has too much land under its control to effectively manage (107), agreeing that the Land Bank does an excellent job of managing its properties (72).

Sub-groups within Group 2

This group is further divided in two on agricultural issues.

Group A:

The first sub-group disagree that the Land Bank lacks the appropriate knowledge/skill set to oversee agriculture and farm operations (statement 23), that Agriculture on Land Bank properties should be done with extreme caution due to the inherent conflict between short-term profit and resource damage (31), and that Agriculture has taken on an out-sized role in Land Bank operations, detracting from more essential and valuable efforts (248).

Group B:

The second subgroup is in opposition on these same agricultural issues. Instead, agreeing that agriculture has taken on an out-sized role in Land Bank operations (248) and that the Land Bank mandate should lean towards ecological restoration and management and away from agricultural management (198).

Areas of General Consensus

A unique strength of Pol.is is the development of new ideas that would often otherwise be obscured by invested parties (politicians, researchers, organization leadership). These statements are often where common ground is found and people across different groups are united.

The full data report can be found [here](#).

Point of Consensus 1: **Organizational Transparency and Community Engagement**

One theme, which appeared multiple times in submitted statements and generated consensus across participants, was that of Land Bank transparency and responsiveness to community interests.

Five statements called for greater organizational transparency, stating that further opportunities for community involvement and greater insight into commission processes and decision making is necessary. A simple statement of this idea, “The Land Bank should operate with transparency”, drew the highest percentage of ‘agree’ votes of any statement in the discussion, with 94% of all participants agreeing and 4% unsure.

As a publicly funded organization, the Land Bank has a responsibility to reflect the community they serve. Public meetings, surveys, and discussions like this embody this necessity, and the importance of continued outreach and transparency was highlighted

by statements generating support across the board, advocating for responsiveness to community ideas (85% of total respondents agreed this should be a priority), visible and engaging leadership (79% of respondents agreed), youth education on the Land Bank (71%), greater efforts to increase accessibility to public meetings to include a greater diversity of island residents (68%), term limits for Land Bank Commissioners (62%), further incorporation of community opinion before taking action with public funds (61%), and an ever-evolving role in our community for the Land Bank (62%).

Respondents in both groups A and B were similarly in favour of measures to ensure transparency and accountability.

Point of Consensus 2: **Preservation and Public Access**

There is consistent agreement that public access and recreation should remain a key part of the Land Bank's work (78% of total respondents agreed). It is commonly held that the Land Bank should work actively with community trails organizations to enhance the county's trail network and appropriate public access (84% agreed) as there is a shared belief that preserves and trails benefit everyone (88%).

Additionally, a majority believe that natural resource stewardship should be central to all Land Bank property management (83%), and that protecting land for native plants and animals should remain a high priority in the Land Bank's mandate and work (86%). The challenge therefore for the Land Bank and future policy lies in balancing conservation and public access efforts and how they are prioritized, informing an effective use of the unique ability of the Land Bank to fill the gap between land trust and parks provider. A majority of respondents share the opinion that thoughtfully structured access to Land Bank properties is compatible with preserving the natural habitat (88%). It is also held, however, that there is value in pure preservation without public access (87%), and many believe new preserves should prioritize habitat protection over public access (57%), or be limited to low intensity activities such as hiking (66%), with high-intensity activities such as mountain biking remaining only a minor component of Land Bank recreational opportunities (79%).

Point of Super-Majority Agreement: **Property Management**

There are multiple areas of majority agreement with regard to Land Bank property management.

Issues around agriculture and the management of agricultural land were split, and, generally, indecisive. However, there were a few areas of majority agreement. The

public generally agreed that streamside forest buffers should be protected or planted on every Land Bank Preserve with a stream (65% of total respondents agreed), agricultural land that has encroached on wetlands, streams, or other critical watershed lands should be rewilded (66% agreed), and some farmed areas should be restored to native habitat (60%).

With a wider lens, many agreed that Agriculture on Land Bank properties should be done with extreme caution due to the inherent conflict between short-term profit and resource damage. 65% of both groups identified earlier agreed with this statement, and 55% believe the Land Bank should continue to lease farmland to local farmers.

There was also general agreement around natural resource protection on Land Bank properties. It was agreed that the Land Bank should always take into consideration care and maintenance of wetlands and soils (89%) with soil health as a guiding principle of its agricultural lands (73%). Additionally, as water availability is increasingly critical in the county, many agreed that Land Bank should have a voice in helping to defend our aquifers from development (77%) and put more effort into protecting water resources (61%). The summative statement “Farmable soils and associated water must be protected and improved to mitigate climate change and provide for food security in the future” garnered strong support (78%).

Point of Majority Agreement: **Diverse Representation**

One final point of general agreement within the public is that the Land Bank requires greater diverse representation on the commission. The following statements received majority support:

- The Land Bank Commission needs more diverse representation (48% of respondents agreed).
- The Land Bank needs Indigenous representation on the Commission (55% agreed).
- The Land Bank needs an organic, sustainable, or regenerative farmer on the Commission (54%).

Additional Areas of Interest

Agriculture:

Issues related to agriculture demonstrated a clear split pattern of opinion: a group in favor, a group against, and a group unsure. Despite the areas of majority agreement discussed earlier, these groups were generally even across statements.

For example, the statement “allowing commercial farmers to lease Land Bank property creates an unfair subsidy that undermines the sustainability of the larger community of farmers” received 33% agreement, 36% disagreement, and 30% unsure, “the Land Bank should not rent and subsidize private/for-profit farmland” (37%, 32%, and 29%), and “agriculture is a leading contributor to climate change, and should not be subsidized by the Land Bank” (27%, 39%, and 32%). This consistent pattern indicates further information and discussion is necessary to address these issues and inform policy.

Affordable Housing:

Majorities agreed that affordable housing falls out of the realm of issues that should be addressed by the Land Bank. 58% disagree that affordable housing should be incorporated on some Land Bank properties, and 55% agreed that the Land Bank should focus on open space and ecological health and leave issues with affordable housing and farming to other entities.

Areas of Uncertainty

- 52% of respondents were unsure whether water resource protection currently receives adequate attention by the Land Bank.
- 47% were unsure if the Land Bank's mandate should be revised.
- 44% were unsure if the Land Bank should do more work on the islands not served by ferries.
- 36% were unsure if there should be a change of leadership at the Land Bank.
- 31% were unsure about lowering the Real Estate Excise Tax to .5 percent when up for renewal.

These areas of uncertainty demonstrate the need for education and continued community discussion on certain issues.

Proposal prompts for possible follow up conversations following areas of uncertainty:

- Should the Land Bank work more on islands not served by ferries?
- Should the Land Bank mandate be revised? If so, what areas should be removed, added, or prioritized?
- What should be the policy for agricultural land acquisitions and management going forward?

There is broad community support for the Land Bank as an organization.

Super-majorities agree that the Land Bank is critical to saving the last, best places in the islands when they come up for sale through acquisition (78% of total respondents agreed). It is believed that the Land Bank is necessary to help slow down rampant

development in the islands (77%), that its an important key to retaining the 'magic' of the islands (79%), and renewal is important to the future of San Juan County and critical to maintaining quality of life in the islands (75%). Although imperfect, the Land Bank remains steady, relevant and responsive in the complex task of providing conservation and public access (78%). **“We are grateful for the Land Bank.”**

Explore the data report [here](#).