

LWV-Kitsap Bremerton/CK Unit Meeting Notes--Saturday, June 17, 2023

Kitsap United Way Conference Room/Zoom

In Person: Guest Jim Aho, Maureen Cervinsky, Connie Marchant, Candy Rankin, Robin Muir, Raejean Bridges-Avalos, Janice McLemore, Debi Barner

Via Zoom: Katie Pratt, Kathleen Gallagher, Pat Troxell

OUR UNIT'S NEXT MEETING:

Saturday, July 15 @ 10am, United Way/Zoom

Guest: Garrett Jackson, city of Bremerton Planning Manager

As a resident of Illahee over 40 years, our guest Jim Aho has tirelessly devoted his time and energy to preserving the natural resources in the area. He is a board member of two non-profits, serving as President of Illahee Forest Preserve & writing the monthly digital newsletter for the Illahee Community group. A retired engineer, Jim has served as a Port of Illahee commissioner since 2014, helped write the Illahee Community Plan, and is a member of the Central Kitsap Community Council. His vision & leadership with the Illahee Preserve Stewardship group have helped grow Illahee Preserve Heritage Park to 600+ acres.

Pertinent websites:

- Watch the recording, *Illahee: Saving Puget Sound One Watershed at a Time*, at Zach Aho's YouTube account (Zach joined the League this year)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2daqsligwol>
- Visit the Illahee Forest Preserve's webpage at
<http://illaheepreserve.org>
- Review the Port of Illahee's 2020 Comprehensive Plan at
https://www.portofillahee.com/?page_id=34
- Read the Illahee Community Newsletter at
<https://www.illaheecommunity.com>
- Learn about long-range acquisition goals, visions & plans for this wild & pristine area at
<http://TheLostContinent.org>

The Community of Illahee & Citizen Involvement:

Illahee is one of the smaller communities in Kitsap County, about 1600 acres (~2.5 square miles), almost 50% in parks & open space, with approximately 2500 residents. The Port District of Illahee was established in 1922 by residents, when the Mosquito Fleet provided the only access to the area, until Illahee Road was built in 1938. At the urging of then East Bremerton Improvement Club, the state purchased acreage beginning in 1934 to establish Illahee State Park, which now comprises 75 acres.

A 25-year local campaign convinced farsighted government leaders & agencies to designate a portion of Illahee School Trust Lands (352 acres) as park & preserve. A noticeably "big green area" between Bremerton & Silverdale from the air, today's Illahee Forest Preserve is a model of how citizen volunteers, working with local officials & staff, can manage & maintain a major nature park and wildlife preserve. IFP is particularly unique among Kitsap County Heritage Parks as it borders a major city (Bremerton) & an Urban Growth Area (Central Kitsap). It is extremely rare to find a major forest area, a wildlife preserve, and a salmon-bearing watershed in any urban area of our country.

- Rolling Hills Golf Course became county property following owner Don Rasmussen's generous gift to Kitsap County for the Illahee Preserve, saving those 104 acres from possible future development.
- The Port secured a \$268K DOE grant to study Illahee Creek Watershed, which estimated a cost of \$20 million to control stormwater, in order to prevent massive sedimentation & pollution after heavy storms. The county & community are working together to implement those changes.
- Many environmental concerns surrounding Timbers Edge 1 & 2 planned developments prompted urgent calls for fundraising by the Illahee Preserve Stewardship group. Community & county support were secured for costly legal battles & purchase of the land so the developments could not proceed.
- Following the distribution of a questionnaire to community members, 92% replied they would like their land use choices to be guided by an Illahee Community Plan rather than one written for the larger Bremerton or Silverdale areas. The plan was completed in 2008, over 100 community members signed it & it was approved by the county. Illahee Green Zoning allows for 1-4 homes/acre.

Core Community Lessons Learned:

- Become a nonprofit corporation (501.c.3)
- Find & use the best experts (e.g., UW professors)
- Work with local staff & officials
- Use the legal system when necessary, as it is supposed to ensure justice is served
- If your issues are good, the public will support the effort with the necessary involvement & dollars. (Jim also talked about recognizing those who have contributed to their mission in significant ways by having a bronze plaque made and prominently placed. Those will last a very long time).

Port of Illahee Successes & Challenges:

The Port of Illahee is served by three commissioners who are elected to 6-year terms, with elections occurring every 2 years. Kitsap County has the largest number of port districts in the state. Jim said the commissioners from each Port in our county meet quarterly to exchange and share ideas/goals. The Port of Illahee is a small one and for several years capped its tax revenue at \$79,646. Now with several important repairs and projects facing the commissioners, they applied for and won three grants, each with a different purpose, totaling close to \$3 million. The Port has a bond obligation of \$675,000.

- An ALEA (Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account) grant of \$812,000 will be used for varied upland improvements around the dock.
- One BFP (Boating Facilities Program) grant of \$1,150,065 will support developing new guest moorage facilities & improved access.
- A second BFP grant of \$255,000 will help enable the replacement of 20 severely deteriorated pilings supporting the public pier.
- A PLIA (WA Pollution Liability Insurance Agency) grant of \$680,000 was awarded by the state to clean up contamination from the leaking petroleum Underground Storage Tanks at the site of the former Illahee Store. That remediation task is scheduled for this year.

The Port would like to bring the Illahee Store back to life. The original store was built in the 1930s and replaced in the 1970s, then closed in the late 1990s due to the leaking gasoline tanks.

A major roadblock to some of the improvements being implemented is the Suquamish tribe's objection to others fishing in the area around the dock. They say the dock is interfering with their fishing rights. The Port is not able to get work permits through the Army Corps of Engineers until this issue is resolved. Jim said the two parties do not seem to be able to come to an agreement, so attorneys may unfortunately need to become involved.

Illahee Preserve, A County/Community Partnership: "We Want to Coexist with Nature, Wildlife & Community"

In order to save & preserve prime wildlife habitat before it is developed and gone forever, the Illahee Stewardship Group is constantly on the lookout for land parcels adjacent to or near the existing Illahee Forest Preserve Heritage Park. During the years 2001-2022, the group purchased 20 properties, with the community having contributed over \$600,000 toward those acquisitions. The current planned 617-acre Preserve (including the original 352-acre purchase from DNR) has an accumulated price tag of \$12.5 million. Each property purchase brings its own challenges & entails a lengthy process of appraisal & review appraisals, followed by environmental site assessment & cultural review.

A Planned Phased Approach for Future Acquisitions:

A 30-acre homestead in Phase 1 (a "crown jewel") includes a pond, where a dam holding it back will require a spillway. The original owner, with whom the Illahee Stewardship Group was negotiating, has died & they are now dealing with the estate. The purchase is pending and is currently in jeopardy due to the spillway requirement. Money is available to help with the purchase, but additional fundraising may be needed for the spillway and the acquisition may now require two separate purchases.

Phase 2's targeted acquisitions include 10 sites, all with different property owners, ranging in size from .29 acre up to 12.15 acres. Some are riparian properties (Illahee Creek), all include old growth & mature forest and support a wide variety of wildlife species. Current threats to acquisition exist for two of the ten sites: one in the East/West corridor & one in the North/South corridor.

Jim says that what makes Illahee so unique is its deeply incised canyons--roads could not be built in those areas without bridges. The Department of Fish & Wildlife supports the goal of the group to link Illahee Preserve to other important fish & wildlife habitats, such as the marine shoreline & Illahee State Park. By purchasing properties or conservation easements, important biodiversity corridors are established, allowing wildlife passage between safe habitats. Some animals do swim back & forth in the relatively narrow passage between Illahee & Gazzam Lake Preserve on Bainbridge Island.

Public Engagement, Education & Recreation:

Illahee Forest Preserve has been adopted by the East Bremerton Rotary Club, which maintains its trails, provides signage and donated a sizable wooden shelter with picnic tables at the main Almira Drive entrance. The club coordinates work parties with Washington Youth Academy, whose cadets fill wheelbarrows with wood chips & spread them to keep the trails from getting muddy.

Citizens regularly walk the six miles of active use trails, which are also used by public schools & Olympic College for field trips. While new trails are planned for corridor & riparian areas, a wildlife preserve area not open to the public was set aside from the beginning. A native plant demonstration garden with interpretive signage is an important educational tool; and county officials/community volunteers do regular benthic (bottom-dwelling) monitoring of Illahee Creek's macroinvertebrates to assess the health of the water's ecosystem. Stewardship & community involvement have averaged over 8,000 hours/year since 2019!

As mentioned above in the pertinent websites, Illahee produced an important documentary film a number of years ago, entitled **Illlahee: Saving Puget Sound One Watershed at a Time**. It is very much worth watching. The planned 2023/24 update is just getting started.

We are very appreciative that Jim agreed to take time out of his Saturday to speak to us about the important work he has been doing for decades to preserve the natural treasures in Illahee. Our community is so fortunate to have someone with your passion and dedication to champion the crucial value of nature and wildlife in the face of continued development all around us. Thank you for your deep commitment and for all you do for Illahee & our greater community.

Recorded by Candy Rankin