

Celebrating nature's bounty

▼ *This weekend's Harvest Fair honors the island's farming heritage.*

By **KATHRYN HAINES**
Staff Writer

Dressed in moody October golds and grays, the Johnson farm – with its once-burgeoning apple orchard and pleasantly ramshackle sheds – is a portrait of the island's agricultural heritage.

Under the care of the Trust for Working Landscapes, it may also offer a glimpse of its future.

Acquired by the city in the summer of 2001, the 14-acre homestead off Fletcher Bay Road is the locus of TWL's plan to keep farming alive on Bainbridge, while giving farmers and others a place to live.

"We want to be stewards of the land," said TWL board member Bill Carruthers. "Three things come together in this effort – farmland preservation, creation of affordable housing, and creation of open space."

On an island where the demographic is decidedly upscale, those issues intertwine about the knotty problem of rising land prices. Community land trusts like TWL take land costs out of the picture by buying property and leasing it back to users.

It's a model that's worked on Bainbridge in other contexts: the Historical Society's new home, which broke ground this summer, will be built on city-owned land, as were Helpline House and the Playhouse, constructed a decade ago by Bainbridge



Ryan Schierling/Staff Photos

TWL member Rob Ferguson and Johnson Farm neighbor Kris Scothorn hang the sign announcing Sunday's festivities.

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"The only way (the Playhouse) got built was because we didn't have to buy the land," said TWL member Peter O'Connor, part of BPA's efforts at the time.

While other land trusts concentrate on conservation of properties through acquisition or easements, community land trusts focus on community uses of the property, with an emphasis on low-cost housing and active agriculture.

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While land controlled by a CLT can't be sold, structures or other improvements – low-cost housing, farm buildings and the

like – are owned by the user, who keeps any equity they invest in their home or agricultural business.

The trust, however, maintains control over the transfer or sale of those investments.

"Our organization emphasizes participation by the community," said founding board member Candace Jagel.

"They and the users really determine how the land is used."



Held by Candace Jagel, one of the farm's two resident turkeys casts an indignant eye on the proceedings.

Agrarian minds

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At the same time, Friends of the Farms and a city task force were sounding the alarm about housing costs threatening the island's driving socio-economic diversity.

"It is shocking how little farmers here make," Jagel said. "They qualify for affordable housing anywhere."

A community land trust offered a model for saving both farmers and farmland.

More than two years later, TWL is nearing a final lease agreement with the city that would give it charge of the property.

There, it plans six units of low-cost homes, a farm stand, and a livestock barn for the local 4H club – the largest in Kitsap County, and currently without a dedicated facility.

The trust is also accepting proposals from islanders interested in small-scale farming on the site.

"We expect to see the land farmed by next spring," Jagel said.

SEE FARM, PAGE A2

Down on the farm

It's Harvest Fair time! The Trust for Working Landscapes hosts the event that honors local farms from 1-5 p.m. Oct. 5 at the Johnson Farm off Fletcher Bay Road, south of High School Road.

Enjoy an afternoon of cider-pressing, horse-drawn wagon and tractor rides, island-grown foods, farm and garden booths, exhibits by island non-profits, a pie contest, homemade marshmallow roasting, the 4-H petting farm, children's games, live music and more.

The Trust for Working Landscapes will raffle island-grown turkeys to raise money for its programs to steward island farmland, including the Johnson Farm.

New this year at the fair: fly casting and beekeeping demonstrations, boating on the pond, a quilt exhibit, and the TWL Land Slide (for kids). The pie contest deadline is 2 p.m. Bake the best pie (berry, apple, or pumpkin) and be crowned Lord or Lady of the Pies. Information: 842-4277.

FARM

CONTINUED FROM A1

Rather than duplicating the efforts of other agencies, the trust intends to partner with other organizations, like Habitat for Humanity, to create housing on the site.

TWL's vision extends to other agricultural properties acquired by the city — like the recently acquired Morales farm, where TWL proposes to set up another farm stand.

"These properties need a stewardship plan," Carruthers said. "It's one thing to buy it, but then what happens to it? We want to provide the basic infrastructure that will allow other groups to use it."

This kind of stewardship is welcomed by Mayor Darlene Kordonowy, who likened TWL to organizations like the Bainbridge Arts and Humanities Council and the Health, Housing and Human Services Council — private-sector partners receive funds from the city to support municipal goals.

Those goals extend far beyond farming and affordable housing, Kordonowy said. "It goes to the heart of what people want to do, and the choices we offer them here in America," she said. "Do we want money — or any one factor — to dominate and determine how we define ourselves as individuals or as a community?"

The toll that economic pressures take on farmers is a price paid by the entire community, say TWL members.

"We're transitioning into a more and more homogeneous society," O'Connor said. "The very things that formed our community are the things we are losing."

"Absent an organization like TWL, farming is going to disappear on the island," added Carruthers. "Just having the land isn't going to cut it; we need a guiding vision."