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Long Island Sound Acquisition and Protection of Open Space

Subobjective:

Protect Long Island Sound

Type:

Partnership

Highlights:

- **What:** Acquisition and protection of high-valued natural habitats, or open spaces, protects water quality in Long Island Sound by preventing development that would increase stormwater runoff and ground water contamination.
- **Who:** The Long Island Sound Office under the Long Island Sound Study (LISS) Stewardship Initiative (Stewardship Initiative), which involves state, local, and not-for-profit partners in land protection.
- **Why:** Open space provides and maintains numerous ecological services maintaining clean surface and ground water supplies. Some open space purchases also enhance recreation and visual and physical access to Long Island Sound.

Brief Description:

This best practice was initiated following the establishment in 2006 of 33 “inaugural stewardship areas,” which were selected by the Stewardship Initiative work group and organized in the Stewardship Initiative’s 2006 Stewardship Atlas (http://www.longislandsoundstudy.net/stewardship/stewardship_atlas06.pdf). On the strength of specific acquisition suggestions from the work group in 2008, the LISS Management Committee provided the states of New York and Connecticut with \$1.6 million in FY 2008 and FY 2009 funds to purchase open space in the vicinity of the existing stewardship areas.

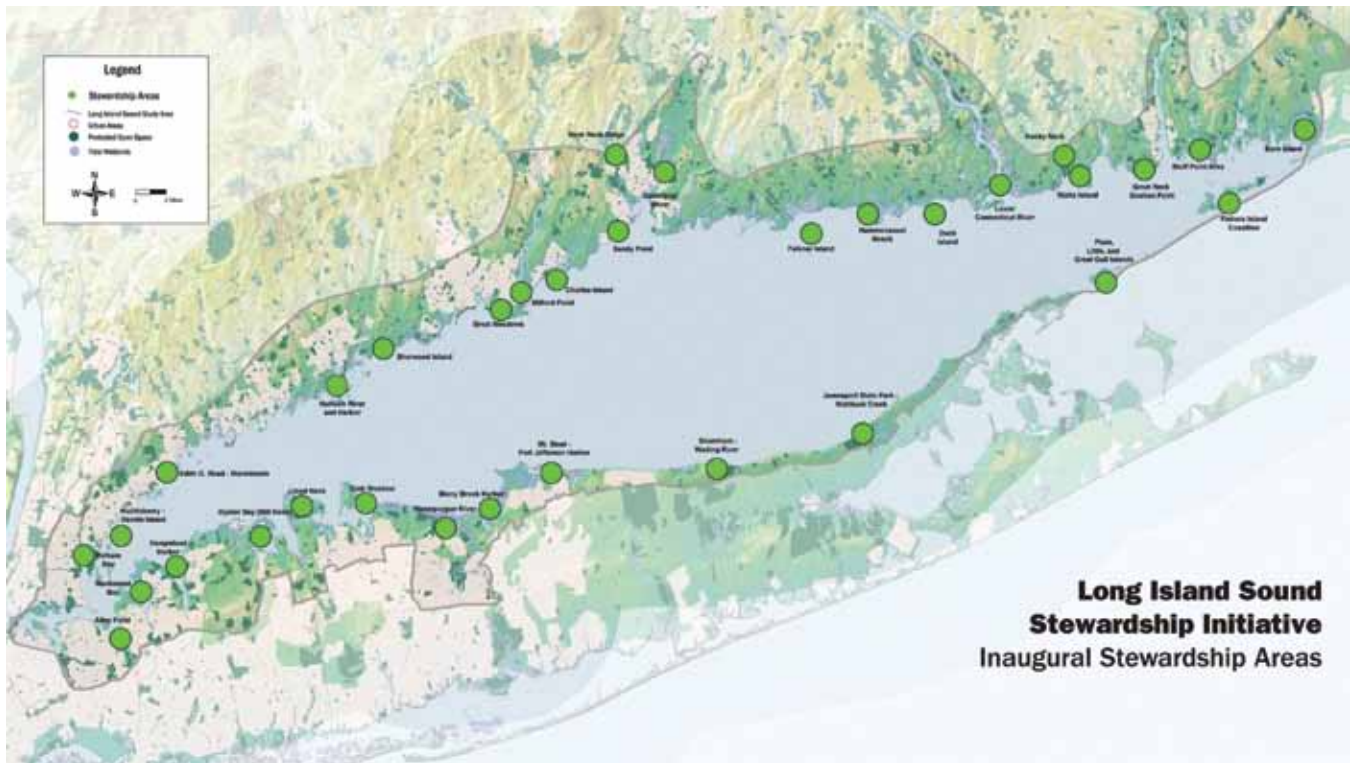
Each of the Stewardship Initiative acquisitions was enabled through highly leveraged partner funding and was selected by

subjecting the suggestions from the work group to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA’s) Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program criteria, as implemented in New York and Connecticut. One of the stewardship acquisitions achieved by the end of 2009, the 28.3-acre woodland “Diocese” property in Setauket, New York, became possible only through \$450,000 in LISS stewardship funding, leveraged by \$5 million in New York State natural resources damages funds. The land is the last large parcel in the surface watershed of Conscience Bay, a restricted estuarine embayment whose high natural resource value depends on continued inputs of clean, fresh water from surface and ground water sources. The property will be owned by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC).

The LISS will further strengthen the scientific basis, fairness, and repeatability of identifying priorities for protection through a \$251,000 grant to the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission. A contractor was selected through this grant in 2009 to develop a geographical information system (GIS)-based stewardship site selection strategy. The work group will work closely with the contractor over an 18-month period to develop a tool for selecting sites around Long Island Sound in years to come. In the interim, the LISS Management Committee will be expanding the availability of funds for acquisition to additional entities beyond the state governments by allowing for competition of acquisition proposals through the annual Long Island Sound Futures Fund request for proposal (RFP) process.

Current Status:

By the end of calendar year 2009, the Long Island Sound Study Stewardship Initiative had helped preserve 77 acres of land in or around two inaugural stewardship sites. In a 2006 agreement between New York, Connecticut, and EPA’s Regions 1 and 2, the parties agreed to a goal of restoring or protecting an additional 300 acres of coastal habitat between January 1, 2006, and December 31, 2011. Through its partnerships, the LISS already has protected more than 687 acres, 77 of which were protected directly with the additional infusion of federal dollars through the Stewardship Initiative practice of acquiring and protecting open space.



Source: Regional Plan Association

Outcomes:

The LISS Stewardship Initiative Best Practice of Acquisition and Protection of Open Space has resulted in the permanent protection of 77 acres of highly valuable open space in the Long Island Sound coastal area in the last two years, affording the region benefits in water quality, habitat protection, climate change adaptability, carbon sequestration, recreational access to navigable waters, environmental education, and prevention of new nonpoint-source pollution. Intangible benefits resulting from these acquisitions might include fostering interest in and future stewardship of Long Island Sound’s fragile resources, which the LISS partnership hopes will continue a feedback loop, ultimately improving the ecological condition of the estuary.

The LISS has proven that by carefully assessing resources and identifying priorities for land acquisition, even small purchases may have large benefits, particularly in urban and suburban coastal environments. The GIS-based site selection strategy tool now under development by the Stewardship Initiative work group and its consultant will be designed so it can be scaled down to serve localities within the LISS coastal area and also is likely to be a product that can be replicated in other regions. The work group expects the tool to be ready by early to mid-2011.

Lessons Learned/Recommendations:

The LISS has the ability to identify worthwhile acquisition projects because of its commitment to working closely with partners on the local and state-wide levels, in both government and the not-for-profit sectors. Without the advantages that come from working with partners already keenly invested in environmental protection efforts related to the Long Island Sound region, the relatively small financial investment made by the LISS in actual land acquisitions to date could not have been leveraged to achieve such prodigious results. The Long Island Sound office was fortunate to work with individuals and organizations that have an ability to undertake short-term, rapid decision-making while keeping an eye on long-term planning and future protection (as well as program) needs. The GIS tool may serve as a model or even a template for other estuary programs wishing to identify land protection priorities.

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