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CONTACT:

Gregg Caporossi, Trust for Public Land, 207-772-7424 ext. 2

Bill Hopkins, Westport Island Conservation Commission, 207-882-6047



Westport Donors Pledge Support for Land Purchase

Westport Island, ME, June 20, 2011: A group of Westport Island residents have pledged a donation of \$20,000 towards a project to acquire a 202 acre parcel on Westport Island. In order to take advantage of these generous gifts, Westport Island voters must pass two referendum questions on June 24th related to the acquisition of the property.

Since February, the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit conservation organization, has been working in partnership with the Westport Island Conservation Commission and two local land trusts to acquire 202 acres of undeveloped land representing the largest undeveloped coastal parcel remaining on Westport Island. Located in the heart of Westport Island, the property, locally known as the Barrett/Hopkins land, is a conservation priority for the local community because of its importance for water quality protection, wildlife habitat and recreational potential. If the partnership is successful, and Westport Island's voters approve, the property will be owned and managed as a community resource.

For that to happen, voters are being asked to consider two referendum questions. Question 1 will ask voters to take ownership of the property should the necessary funds be raised to acquire it from the current landowners. Question 2 will ask voters to bond \$75,000 from the Maine Municipal Bond Bank or another local bank to help raise the \$1.35 million needed to buy the property. These municipal funds will be matched by \$1.275 million in federal and state grants that are currently in the review process. If the federal and state grant requests are turned down, the town would not be obligated to raise the funds next year.

“While \$75,000 is a lot of money, the town's contribution represents 5% of the total purchase price and is an investment for the island's future, according to Dennis Dunbar who serves on the Conservation Commission. “Even without the pledged donation the overall tax impact from acquiring the property would be only 0.64 % or \$6.40 per thousand dollars of current property tax in the first year. Over time, the small impact on taxes will diminish, but the property will remain as it is today for all of Westport's residents and future generations to enjoy.”

Recognizing the difficult fiscal climate facing the Town this year, several of the island's residents have pledged private donations to offset some of the costs to the Town. According to Bill Hopkins, Chair of the Conservation Commission, “The pledged donations will eliminate the bond burden on taxpayers during these difficult times, and will eliminate any property tax increase resulting from the land acquisition bond payments. There is a catch, however, the donations are conditioned on the voter's approval of the \$75,000 contribution.”

In addition to these pledges, TPL has announced that a private donor has pledged a 20% match to any municipality that votes to bond monies for conservation in Maine. If the voters approve Question 2 on Friday, the donor would give the Town \$15,000 which could be used for debt service on the bond or to help pay ongoing property management costs, such as trail construction, road maintenance, etc.

Gregg Caporossi, a Project Manager for TPL, said, “When TPL saw this property listed for sale, we jumped at the chance to work with this community to protect the largest coastal forest track on the island. As a community, Westport Island recognizes the need to protect the island’s water resources, which are limited. This is a one time chance to achieve both of those goals, and to see private donors step up to help with this effort is truly inspiring. Now, it is up to the voters to move this project forward.”

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The Trust for Public Land, established in 1972, specializes in conservation real estate, applying its expertise in negotiations, public finance, and law to protect land for people to enjoy as parks, greenways, community gardens, urban playgrounds, and wilderness. TPL depends on the support of individuals, foundations, and corporations. In Maine, TPL has protected more than 126,000 acres. For more information, visit TPL on the web at tpl.org.