



December 9, 2024

City of Gustavus Council
P.O. Box 1
Gustavus, AK 99826

RE: Conservation of Gustavus Natural Lands

Dear Mayor and Members of the Council,

SEALT's mission is to collaborate with communities, individuals and organizations to conserve highly valuable habitat, recreation and open spaces for the well-being of Southeast Alaskans of every generation. One of the properties we are collaborating to protect is the DeBoer property, a privately owned 235-acre parcel of highly valuable habitat and open space, the last unprotected intact parcel of the Gustavus coastal wetland complex. The property has frontage on the tidally influenced reach of the Salmon River, an anadromous catalogued river and fisheries resource and a well-known corridor for wildlife. It provides important open space for nesting and migrating birds in the riparian habitats and wetland coastal forelands, including Canada geese and migrating sandhill cranes. Additionally, the people of Gustavus regard the area as a priority for conservation and use the land for hiking, picnicking, dog walking, birding, and plant harvesting. Additionally, it is an incredible place to view wildlife and the iconic sights of Icy Strait and Fairweather Range, especially as the scenic views are visible from both the meadow trails and Dock Road, which runs from the ferry dock to town.

In addition to the significant conservation merit of the property itself, the property is adjacent to and surrounded by a 4,200-acre property owned and maintained as a habitat and open space by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) as a portion of the Gustavus Forelands Preserve, which provides extraordinary conservation values to the community as well as the region. SEALT supported TNC in their acquisition of the forelands properties originally, and more than 20 years later, continues to support the permanent protection of those lands. Since then, SEALT has also been in dialog with various Gustavus landowners, including the DeBoer family for about a decade, about the conservation values and public benefits of their land. Conserving the DeBoer property would offer continuity of this exceptional land protection – ensuring recreation and habitat and honoring the private landowners' gracious allowance of public access for many years. For these reasons and more, SEALT is pleased to be involved with establishing a conservation easement on the DeBoer Forelands property for the ecological benefit of wildlife, and the recreational enjoyment of the people of Gustavus.

We have been strategizing with the landowner since 2018 to protect the property with the intention of preserving the core area necessary to maintain wildlife habitat, open space and recreational values of the Gustavus beachfront through a conservation easement (CE), which would preserve the land in perpetuity. The landowner expressed that they enjoy seeing other people walking and visiting the

property and wish to preserve the land so that "people can enjoy the views of Icy Strait passage, Fairweather mountain range, a place for the Canadian geese to continue to reside [and] be able to pick wild strawberries."

In 2023-24, the landowner and SEALT discussed in-depth preparations for a permanent conservation easement on the property, which would involve significant grant proposals that have a lead time of at least two years (from project proposed to funding secured). SEALT plans to begin writing these proposals in early 2025, depending on our staff capacity. Although SEALT would like the City to be a partner in identifying the public access and recreational uses permitted under the CE so that they align with the terms of the CRMA and other community priorities, the City would not have a legal responsibility to manage the property or enforce the terms of the easement; these obligations are met wholly by the landowner and the land trust.

In 2024, with the establishment of the Conservation Lands Advisory Committee (CLAC), we discussed an option to establish a temporary conservation easement to see the project through the 2- to 5-year process to secure full funding for a permanent conservation easement. A grant proposal for a temporary CE, as well as a scope of work for the project, were submitted in partnership with the CLAC in October. The grant proposal for \$25,000 of Endowment Fund support shows \$5,000 in private donations, and it would also be supported by approximately \$26,000 in funds SEALT is contributing on our own to work on and secure a permanent conservation easement that would benefit the community of Gustavus. This additional support was not detailed in the CLAC proposal but is nevertheless a hard cost that SEALT is dedicated to bearing if a temporary CE is supported by the City Endowment Fund.

This area in the coastal forelands of Gustavus is a wonderful open space; if developed, it would forever diminish the beauty and character of Gustavus. As the last large private developable coastal land centrally located to the community it is vulnerable to development for short term rentals, cruise ship facilities or docks, or other seasonal/tourism businesses. After many conversations with friends and colleagues in Gustavus and across Southeast, it is clear to us that conserving this property is one of the best services we can provide to the community in the near term.

We are committed to, and have prioritized, this project to protect this ecologically valuable and recreationally important area of the forelands in the next five years – and hope to have the City as a partner in the endeavor.

Please contact us at any time if you have questions or would like further information.

Sincerely,



Margaret Custer
Executive Director



Stephanie Lawlor
Conservation Manager