

# Municipal Open Space Funding Option

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## Case Study: New Shoreham (Block Island), RI

At a Special Town Meeting in 1986, voters of the Town of New Shoreham, RI (Population ca. 1000, median household income \$44,000) adopted a resolution establishing the quasi-municipal Block Island Land Trust (BILT.)<sup>1</sup> The resolution, enabled by an act of the Rhode Island Legislature, authorized the collection of a transfer fee on sales of real property on Block Island, which is currently set at 3% for funding conservation by the BILT.

The BILT has been authorized by the Town to issue up to \$6,000,000 in bonds, paid for with the fee income. Five unpaid Trustees, elected by the town for staggered four-year terms, administer the Land Trust.<sup>1</sup>

The BILT's mission is to acquire and preserve open space on Block Island for conservation, recreation, aquifer protection and agricultural uses, acting on behalf of the Town, based on the Town's Comprehensive Plan.<sup>2</sup> Protection can be by acquiring the land outright or acquiring the development rights or easements on the land (a land use agreement that restricts certain and uses).

The Block Island Land Trust works in close cooperation with The Nature Conservancy and the Block Island Conservancy, both with offices on the island. After 40 years, BILT is nearing the Town's Comprehensive Plan goal of protecting 50% of its land. This includes land held by Block Island Land Trust, Block Island Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, Town of New Shoreham, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Audubon Society, United States Government, and United States Fish & Wildlife Service.

As an indication of popular support, the most recent town-wide survey indicated over 80% of respondents support the BILT program.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, despite a conveyance fee that is higher than in other towns surveyed, the real estate market in New Shoreham appears strong, resulting in increased income over the from the 3% transfer fee (about \$1.5 million last year). Tourism continues to be a major draw, due to the beauty of the natural landscape and farmland being protected by conservation.

Kate Butcher, a realtor and owner of Block Island Realty, said that **the 3% transfer fee has been "really good" for Block Island** and has not interfered with the real estate market since there is an exemption for affordable housing and first time homebuyers.

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<sup>1</sup> Tarbox, Heidi. "Block Island Land Trust." Town of New Shoreham, 2007, [www.new-shoreham.com/displayboards.cfm?id=14](http://www.new-shoreham.com/displayboards.cfm?id=14).

<sup>2</sup> New Shoreham Planning Board, *New Shoreham Comprehensive Plan*. 12 October 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.new-shoreham.com/displaynews.cfm?id=267>