

January 5, 2024



The Honorable Mayor Shelley Owens
Members of the Gustavus City Council
City of Gustavus
Gustavus, AK 99826

Dear Mayor Owens and Councilmembers,

I'm writing today to address local concerns about rumors of a potential transfer of The Nature Conservancy's Gustavus Forelands Preserve to Hoonah Indian Association (HIA).

It is clear that over the past 20 years, the community has come to cherish and rely on this beautiful preserve as a source of food and a place of respite. At The Nature Conservancy in Alaska, we are proud of the important role the Gustavus Forelands Preserve plays for both the community of Gustavus and the Tlingit people who have called Southeast Alaska home for millennia. Further, as a conservation organization, we remain committed to the conservation of this special place.

I want to start by making it very clear that no commitments have been made to anyone and there is no timeline for a transfer. Further, changes in ownership would happen after a robust engagement process with the City of Gustavus and Gustavus community members to address community concerns. We understand that, while TNC is the owner of the Gustavus Preserve Forelands, this special place is essentially your community's front yard and we intend to treat it as such.

I deeply regret that this rumor has preempted our opportunity to proactively and thoughtfully engage with the community of Gustavus. It is my hope that this letter, the attached materials, and our participation in your upcoming work session on Monday evening will demonstrate that we care deeply about our relationship with the community of Gustavus and the many local donors who supported the creation of the preserve in 2004.

Allow me to offer a little background.

1. In November of 2021, TNC Alaska received a letter from HIA asking us to *consider* transferring the preserve lands to the tribe (see attached, with permission of HIA). TNC Alaska has enjoyed a long and meaningful relationship with HIA, with whom we have partnered on several successful conservation initiatives including the Hoonah Native Forest Partnership, Alaskan Youth Stewards, Sustainable Southeast Partnership and the Seacoast Trust.
2. Out of respect for this relationship, TNC Alaska launched an in-depth review of the history of the preserve and its creation; the legal and other restrictions associated with the lands that make up the preserve; the requirements of our global organization for land transfers; and the expressed and documented intent of the donors who funded its creation.
3. These findings were shared with HIA in a presentation in April of 2023, and since then, there has been no action to advance a transfer. A summary of these findings is being produced and will be shared as soon as it is available (this is expected to be completed early next week). Further, our review identified the first step of any such effort as a robust and meaningful engagement process with the community of Gustavus.

We are eager to speak with you on Monday to answer questions and hear your concerns. Hank Lentfer, Preserve Manager, and I will be joined by our colleague Julia Nave, Southeast Program Director, who is very familiar with the Gustavus Forelands Preserve.

In the meantime, we hope the attached documents will provide some valuable context. I would draw your attention to a few particularly important details:

- The original TNC Real Estate Project Abstract & Resolution from 2004 summarizes the conservation value and the management intent for the Gustavus Forelands Preserve.
- In the letter from HIA dated November 6, 2021, then-tribal administrator Robert Starbard writes, “HIA has the administrative capacity and scientific expertise to effectively manage ‘The Gustavus Forelands’ in a manner consistent with present conservation priorities TNC presently has attached to the lands.”
- Internal TNC policies require that the conservation values of a property under consideration for transfer to another owner or manager remain protected by a new owner with the resources and experience required to do so, and that the transferee must comply with donor and funder commitments.

Thank you for the opportunity to answer questions at the work session. I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ivy Spohnholz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "I" and "S".

Ivy Spohnholz
Director
The Nature Conservancy in Alaska