

MEDIA RELEASE – November 1, 2016



MASON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
411 North 5th Street
Shelton, WA 98584

SQUAXIN ISLAND TRIBAL COUNCIL
10 E Squaxin Lane
Shelton, WA 98584



Mason County Removes Longstanding Cloud on Title to Squaxin Island Tidelands

On October 25, 2016, the Mason County Commissioners voted to correct a century-old error surrounding 29.21 acres of tidelands on Squaxin Island. The County accomplished this by deeding the tidelands to the Squaxin Island Tribe.

The County originally acquired what it thought was title to these tidelands through a 1913 tax foreclosure against delinquent taxpayer M.J. Cunningham. The problem was that Mr. Cunningham had never really owned the Island tidelands that the County was foreclosing upon. Rather, the tidelands belonged to the Squaxin Island Tribe.

The issue of the Squaxin Island tidelands ownership is steeped in area history. The 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek exclusively reserved to the Squaxin Island Tribe the entire Island Reservation, including all of its tidelands. In fact, the United States had explained to the Squaxin people that the treaty "reserved and granted to said Indians all of said Island, upland and tide land, and in addition, enough of the waters surrounding said island to enable a steamer to run at low tide."

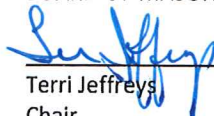
Nonetheless, the State of Washington "sold" these tidelands to Mr. Cunningham and others, who began preventing the Squaxin people from harvesting, cultivating or crossing the tidelands. The United States then stepped in. A federal court decision in a 1904 lawsuit known as *United States v. O'Brien* confirmed the Tribe's ownership of the tidelands. The effect of the *O'Brien* decision was to cancel the State of Washington's tideland sale contract with M.J. Cunningham. Nonetheless, Mason County's tax rolls continued listing the 29.21 acres of Island tidelands as surplus lands that the County had acquired through the tax foreclosure.


The Tribe is incredibly pleased that the County has cleared title to the Tribe's ancestral tidelands. "We appreciate the County's acknowledgment in correcting the record and rightfully deeding the tidelands back to the Tribe," Chairman Lopeman said. Reacquiring the land is a critical part of the Tribe's program to return Island lands to Tribal ownership. The Reservation is a cultural touchstone, a place for gathering, and for educating youth about Squaxin ancestors and culture.

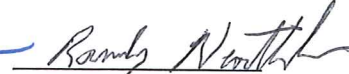
The Tribe also has an active program of reacquiring title to the Reservation's uplands. In 1884, the federal government took the uplands away from the Tribe through a misguided policy aimed at assimilating Native Americans. The government divided Indian reservations into allotments, and gave them to individual Native Americans who could dispose of them after an initial waiting period. While some allottees sold their lands for market value, many others lost lands through fraudulent transactions and forced sales due to unpaid taxes.

In recent years, the Squaxin Island Tribe has re-acquired nearly one-quarter of its original Island Reservation land from the state Department of Natural Resources; and 31.4 acres on the south end from Washington State Parks.

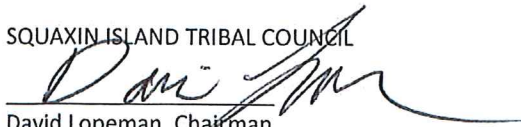
BOARD OF MASON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS


Terri Jeffreys
Chair


Tim Sheldon
Commissioner


Randy Neatherlin
Commissioner

SQUAXIN ISLAND TRIBAL COUNCIL


David Lopeman, Chairman