

Agreement Reached to Protect Blind Bay; TILT to Conserve Critical River Habitat

(Clayton, NY) Monday, April 11th - The Thousand Islands Land Trust (TILT) today announced that it has reached an agreement with Blind Bay Associates LLC to acquire the 295 feet of undeveloped waterfront and adjacent 20 plus acres of upland in Blind Bay. US Custom & Border Protection (USCBP) has disclosed its interest in evaluating the property's potential as the site for a new 48,000 square foot Border Patrol facility.

"This agreement ensures that lands critical to the health of the River, our local economy, and way of life are protected for current and future generations," said Jake Tibbles, TILT's Executive Director. "The proposed USCBP facility would significantly damage the Bay's shallow ecosystem that provides critical habitat for over 50 fish species, including St. Lawrence River muskellunge. We are grateful to all the members of our community and many others who have worked together to help protect this important piece of the River's ecosystem."

The discussions surrounding the proposed USCBP facility reinforced the importance of being proactive in conserving lands critical to the health of the River, a thriving local economy, and our overall quality of life. The construction, operation, and maintenance of the proposed USCBP facility poses adverse ecological impacts to Blind Bay and the greater Thousand Islands area. Additionally, it threatens TILT's and the federal government's existing investments in the adjacent conserved property. The cumulative environmental consequences of habitat fragmentation, edge encroachment, migration barriers such as perimeter fencing, noise and light pollution, and wetland degradation associated with the proposed facility would have lasting impacts that reach far beyond its boundaries.

Elected officials, regional agencies, and community members have voiced opposition to the USCBP's proposed facility in Blind Bay including U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer, New York Assemblyman Mark Walczyk, Jefferson County Legislator Phil Reed, Thousand Islands Park Association, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Region 6, Save The River, Town of Clayton, and Town of Orleans. Countless members of the River community also submitted public comments encouraging USCBP to find alternative sites.

"The preservation of one of the most prolific muskellunge spawning areas in the Upper St. Lawrence is very important to the survival of the apex predator in the River. Save The River applauds TILT's bold initiative in protecting this critical habitat that is essential to support biodiversity in the River and along its shorelines," commented John Peach, Save The River's Executive Director. "TILT's commitment to conserving critical habitat throughout the Thousand Islands combined with Save The River's advocacy on behalf of the River has made this Blind Bay acquisition possible. It is an excellent example of advocacy and conservation working hand in hand for the long-term benefit of our region."

TILT focuses exclusively on the conservation, protection, and restoration of the environmental integrity and water quality on the US side of the Thousand Islands and St. Lawrence River Valley regions. Conserving over 12,000 acres of critical habitat that supports a variety of threatened and endangered species, TILT has a substantial, vested interest in protecting the environmental character of Blind Bay and the broader region. When combined with the existing conservation property, TILT will have placed over 36 acres of a mix of forest, wetland and grassland habitat and over 835 feet of undeveloped shoreline under protection.

TILT has long recognized the ecological significance of Blind Bay. In 2016, TILT conserved a 16.1-acre property that borders the proposed USCBP facility site, acquiring the property with federal funding through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). The unique, sensitive habitats and other natural features of the property are now protected in perpetuity, including its pristine shoreline and forested uplands. Migratory birds use the protected land as a sanctuary that ensures safe passage on and off the mainland during their seasonal migration.

Blind Bay is also a shallow aquatic ecosystem with submersed vegetation that provides critical spawning, rearing and foraging habitat for many fish species. The State University of New York College of Environmental Science & Forestry (SUNY ESF) Thousand Islands Biological Station has documented 53 fish species in Blind Bay, including the region's most important sportfish, the muskellunge – or muskie. Muskies populations in the St. Lawrence River have experienced a significant and recent decline due to losses from viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS). Maintenance of high-quality spawning and nursery habitat is critical to ensuring population recovery and sustainability. Dredging, boat traffic and other direct and indirect impacts associated with the proposed facility would further exacerbate the decline of the iconic muskie.

“While TILT is opposed to the siting of the proposed USCBP facility in and around Blind Bay, we have formally offered staffing resources to assist USCBP with the environmental evaluation of alternative sites,” Tibbles said. “With long-standing relationships in the River communities and deep knowledge of the region's complex ecosystems, TILT is uniquely positioned to work with USCBP to avoid other sites that may be equally or more sensitive than Blind Bay.”

In addition to the ecological benefits, by conserving parcels like the Blind Bay aggregate 36 acres, TILT helps ensure a healthy balance between natural open space and responsible riverfront development. The Trust for Public Land's economic study, peer reviewed by Clarkson University, concluded that preserves, trails, and conserved open spaces attract visitors to the region, enhance property values, provide recreational opportunities and boost responsible economic development.

“This agreement ultimately translates into a more natural and attractive shoreline, enhanced property values and a stronger local economy” stated Larry Kingsley, TILT's Board President.