

History of Orcas Senior Center

Since 1976 the Orcas Senior Center (OSC) has been a treasured part of the Orcas Island community. Today, people sometimes equate the center with the building it occupies, but in fact the OSC operated without a dedicated building for more than a decade; activities took place in rented or donated space. Then, in the 1990s, the center occupied a building in Eastsound, on North Beach Road across from the Village Green. It wasn't until the late 1990s that the center began fundraising for its own, dedicated building. Interestingly, the original intent was for the building to be a combination of an assisted living facility and senior activities center.

The fundraising went well for a while, with scores of individuals donating to the project. It was a huge project, and eventually the fundraising petered out. San Juan County (SJC) government stepped in to buy a portion of the building for use as County offices. Originally (in 1999) the County portion was 42% ownership; by the time the building was completed the County portion had grown to 49% which is where it stands today.

Meanwhile, the Senior Services Council of San Juan County—the 501(c)3 nonprofit under which the three senior centers on Orcas, Lopez and San Juan islands operated at the time—was also evolving. Originally established as an advisory council, it wasn't until 2002 that District Committees were established on each island to formalize operations of the three centers. These were volunteer committees, often called “operating committees” since they operated the centers. It was another 15 years before any actual employees were hired. And it was only in the last several years that the Orcas Senior Center has grown into what it is today: An organization with employees and a payroll, policies and procedures, a modern IT infrastructure, and all the other trappings of a full-blown organization.

This year, we are witness to one of the most significant changes in the history of the Orcas Senior Center: Together with the other two districts on Lopez and San Juan islands, OSC is now its own, independent nonprofit organization. “Orcas Senior Center” is the registered trade name of this new entity, bringing much needed clarity to the distinction between the nonprofit and other organizations that provide senior services in the county. Having a single nonprofit entity focused just on Orcas has allowed the center to streamline administration and has provided more flexibility in programming and much needed stability.