

Local View: State Must Keep Investing in Outdoor Recreation

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In these challenging economic times, outdoor recreation becomes even more important. Washington state families may not have money for vacations or a night at the movies, but they can always get out together and walk, hike, bike or skate on trails and in parks. They can use baseball and soccer fields, and swim in local pools.

In 2009, Clark County can receive up to \$7.6 million in state funds for projects that will improve parks and trails, and protect the natural landscapes that make our corner of the state so attractive and livable.

These projects are eligible to receive funding from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP), a state grant program for parks, habitat and farmland preservation projects. This session, the state Legislature will decide at what level to fund the WWRP, determining the future of our projects, such as Fallen Leaf Lake Park in Camas and a countywide trail project.

In 1989, former Govs. Dan Evans and Mike Lowry co-founded the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, a group of business, conservation and community leaders. This diverse group recognized that population growth, if left unchecked, would overtake landscapes that support wildlife and outdoor recreation. To address this concern, the Coalition persuaded the legislature to create the WWRP grant program as an ongoing source of funds to protect habitat and create parks. Applicants go through a rigorous review process that ensures the state funds only the best projects.

Clark County continues to be a rapidly urbanizing and expanding county. Our ability to attract and retain talented new employees and innovative businesses depends on the livability of our communities. We must make wise investments now that will support our natural infrastructure well into the future.

WWRP grants are funded in the state's capital construction budget and do not compete with human services or classroom size. The development projects create local jobs, and acquisitions and easements put money in the pockets of local landowners, fueling the economy and generating taxes that return to state and

local coffers. Having contributed \$35.5 million to communities throughout Clark County over the past 20 years, the WWRP is vital to our way of life.

\$50 million request

This year, the governor has requested \$50 million to sustain the WWRP grant program, although the coalition's goal is \$100 million. The \$50 million would fund 17 percent of the record-high number of applications submitted, and Clark County would receive funding for the following projects:

- Opening up more recreational opportunities and shoreline access along Fallen Leaf Lake in Camas;
- Protecting Lacamas Prairie, which provides valuable wet prairie and oak woodland habitat;
- Protecting Washougal Oak Natural Area Preserve, the largest, high-quality native oak woodland remaining in Western Washington.

At the \$50 million level, Clark County would lose funding for two valuable projects. One is the Chelatchie Prairie Rail-with-Trail, a proposed 33-mile trail that would benefit walkers, bicyclists, Rollerbladers and horseback riders. Also cut would be the development of a 9-acre park and playground and wildlife habitat in Washougal. If WWRP funds do not preserve this land, the owner may be forced to sell it.

Over the past 20 years, the WWRP program has protected nearly 1,000 parks and wilderness areas across the state, granting \$620 million to communities in need. I have served on the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, which oversees the administration of WWRP grants as well as on the coalition's board. As your former state legislator, I am a firm supporter of the program because I have seen how it improves people's lives.

The WWRP has been a backbone for collaborative conservation efforts in Southwest Washington. The state can continue to make wise investments in protecting our way of life now and for future generations by sustaining WWRP funding and working with our local agencies to apply for future WWRP grants.