



It Pays to Invest in Open Spaces

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by the Editor
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Our Views

In 1989, former governors Dan Evans and Mike Lowry joined forces to push legislation to set aside money in each state construction budget for wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities.

Evans, a Republican, and Lowry, a Democrat, were able to put together an incredibly broad coalition of business and labor leaders, environmentalists and sportsmen and soccer moms. They came together because people of all political stripes understand the need to preserve property today for future generations.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition has been a tremendous success, with

\$450 million going into an incredible array of 775 projects statewide. The \$450 million has leveraged an additional \$300 million in matching funds and paid for projects encompassing more than 160,000 acres in all 39 counties.

Thurston County's share

More than \$21 million has come to Thurston County and has gone for such projects as the Chehalis Western Trail, Pioneer Park in Tumwater, the Woodard Bay natural resource conservation area in the county, 45th Avenue Park in Lacey and Friendly Grove Park in Olympia. Local and state government agencies have put up an additional \$15.9 million in matching funds to give the South Sound community some of its most prized recreation opportunities and wildlife preservation areas.

The coalition received \$50 million in the 2005-07 state budget. But coalition supporters are setting their sights higher this time - asking the Legislature for \$100 million in the 2007-09 state spending cycle. It's a request that deserves legislative support.

Need is growing

Olympia activist Karen Munro, wife of former Secretary of State Ralph Munro, represents the Washington State Horse Park Foundation on the coalition's board of directors. She was asked why the coalition is asking for twice as much money as it received this biennium.

"The need is getting ahead of what we have been able to set aside," Munro said. She notes that the need for recreation property or wildlife habitat preservation areas is not going away and, with land prices skyrocketing, now is the time to invest in those special properties that enhance wildlife or provide recreation opportunities for future generations.

It's extraordinary to have realtors and environmentalists at the same table pushing the same cause. But Lowry and Evans' coalition has managed to pull those natural adversaries together to work in collaboration.

Phil Harlan, a broker associate with John L. Scott Real Estate in Lacey, said that for real estate agents, it's a quality-of-life issue. "With lot sizes what they are, playing Frisbee in the backyard is pretty tough these days," Harlan says. "We need these open spaces to play and have fun. If we lose these areas to development, they are gone forever."

Sense of urgency

Eric Erler, executive director of the Capitol Land Trust, which seeks to preserve the natural heritage of southern Puget Sound through land acquisitions with willing sellers, agrees. Erler says: "There's an urgency to preserve these lands now. What we are trying to do with all these funds is something we're not going to have an opportunity to do in the future. Time is critical."

The state Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation has gone through a rigorous screening process, ranking \$200 million in proposed projects in various categories. They include farmland protection, trails, water access, critical habitat and park development. That way, legislators are assured that the best projects will be tackled first and that each project has a government partner willing to match the state dollars.

If the full \$100 million is approved by the Legislature, Thurston County is scheduled to receive \$8.9 million. The largest chunk would go to the Bald Hills natural resources conservation area to purchase more than 1,200 acres. Other funds would go to the Woodard Bay project to preserve urban wildlife habitat. Olympia's West Bay Park plan would get money, as would Millersylvania State

Park, the McLane Creek Nature Trail and the city of Lacey's Woodland Trail development project.

Legislators need to look at this \$100 million request for what it is - an important investment in the future.

The one thing humans cannot create is additional land. Now is the time to lock up these special areas of the state for the future use and enjoyment of our children and grandchildren.