

State Budget Proposals Include Conservation Projects

By Sue Ellen White
The Whidbey Examiner
April 14, 2011

State lawmakers are expected to approve an austere budget at the end of the month, but Island County could get more than \$1.6 million for three wildlife and recreation protection projects if the Senate agrees with the House Capital Budget Committee's proposed budget, released last week.

Two of the sites named in the House funding bill are on Central Whidbey: 416 acres at Crockett Lake and 59 acres along Admiralty Inlet in Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. The third site is at Barnum Point on Camano Island.

A purchase of 416 acres surrounding Crockett Lake would protect a critical patch of Douglas fir, grand fir and Sitka spruce forest surrounding the lake.

Preserving the land would help safeguard marine and freshwater wetlands and the 238 species of birds that live at the lake or use it for migration habitat. Whidbey Camano Land Trust is the applicant. The group would match the request of just over \$400,000 with \$630,000.

The Admiralty Inlet site near Fort Casey State Park, Crockett Lake and Naas Preserve includes an old-growth forest, endangered native plants and about 2,200 feet of high-bluff waterfront.

It is one of only 12 known sites worldwide for a native plant called golden paintbrush. The site's expansive views also would make it attractive for development.

The state Department of Natural Resources is the applicant. The agency asked for over \$2 million for the project, but the proposed House budget grants only \$230,000. DNR would contribute more than \$2 million from federal grants and cash donations.

Even though the Admiralty Inlet project was ranked second in the category of urban wildlife, it was only partially funded due to state laws that spell out priority order for different types of applicants. In this case, local governments had higher priority.

All projects submitted for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program are ranked in importance by a state board and the statutory formulas.

Legislators then decide how much money is available. Projects that rank above the cutoff line, subject to formulas for distribution, are approved.

“The discussion and debate will be around how much of a capital budget we will have,” said Rep Norma Smith, R-Clinton, a member of the House Capital Budget Committee.

“The Senate is making a proposal that will significantly impact our capital-budget ceiling this year,” Smith said. “The governor made her own proposal. There are a lot of moving parts on this and a lot of uncertainty.”

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program is part of the state’s capital budget, funded by selling bonds, and is not part of the operating budget, which pays for education, health care and public safety.

The debt service for the bonds, however, does come out of the general fund. For the proposed \$50 million in statewide WWRP projects, \$3.5 million in principal and interest will be paid annually from the operating budget for 25 years.

Applicants for the funding may include local governments, state agencies, tribes, special districts and nonprofit organizations. They apply for the competitive grants to acquire land threatened by development or to develop existing public recreation facilities.

Barnum Point on Camano Island would eventually become a new county waterfront park if the final state budget includes purchase of 49 acres there, including a half-mile of forested shoreline.

The site, on the east side of Camano Island, would protect habitat for salmon. It is part of a phased 120-acre project.

Island County is the applicant seeking \$1 million from the capital budget and would contribute \$1.2 million from private and state grants.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program started in 1989 and was budgeted at \$70 million for 2009-11 and \$100 million in the 2007-09 state budget.

The state Senate Ways and Means Committee was expected to release its proposed capital budget on Tuesday.

The budgets of the two legislative bodies must pass out of their respective committees and be approved by each house.

The state Senate also has passed a bill restructuring the state's bonding formula. House and Senate budgets and bills affecting the budget process must be reconciled before a final state budget is passed.

Lawmakers have struggled this year to close an estimated \$5.1 billion budget deficit resulting from the poor economy.