



Lawmakers Wise to Keep Politics Out of Preservation Program

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Even in a down economy, state lawmakers have set aside \$42 million for wildlife habitat, farmland preservation and recreation opportunities. Equally important, the House shot down the Senate's plan to politicize the process for selecting natural resource preservation projects worthy of state funding.

Lawmakers allocated the \$42 million in the state's two-year construction budget to fund the Washington Wildlife and Recreation program. The dollars will pay for 52 projects around the state, including three here in Thurston County. It's a far cry from the need, but the legislative appropriation is a clear demonstration of the value of the program that protects and enhances special places in this state for future generations.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition was created in 1989 when former governors Dan Evans, a Republican, and Mike Lowry, a Democrat, assembled an incredibly broad, 130-member coalition of business and labor leaders, hunters and environmentalists, sportsmen and soccer moms. Today that coalition has grown to more than 250 members.

The coalition works because people of all political stripes understand the need to create special places while that's still possible. Legislative appropriations have ranged from \$40 million to a peak of \$100 million. And even in difficult financial times like these, lawmakers have repeatedly recognized the need to preserve wildlife habitat and enhance recreational opportunities. Since 1990, the state has directed \$618 million to more than 1,000 projects across the state. Now add \$42 million and another 52 projects to the list.

The state goes through a long and involved process to solicit proposed projects, analyze them and rank them according to importance and impact. The process has been free of political influence.

Regrettably, the state Senate this year supported a shift in strategy that would have politicized the process. In addition to paying for a small portion of the list of competitively ranked projects, the Senate proposed to set aside another pot of

money for politically popular projects. It was a terrible idea and one that was ultimately rejected.

Good.

The state's competitive ranking process works. Many of the projects create jobs and some involve property acquisitions and conservation easements that put dollars in the pockets of local landowners, helping to stimulate the local economy. But most importantly, these projects secure natural resources for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The trails, swimming areas, parks and natural areas that are paid for through the competitive grant program provide financially strapped members of the public free recreation opportunities across Washington state.

Investments in Thurston County alone have totaled more than \$30 million and include such popular attractions as Rainier Vista Park in Lacey, the Woodard Bay Natural Resources Conservation Area, the regional athletic park off Marvin Road, Olympia Woodland Trail, Millersylvania State Park, Grass Lake Nature Park, Deschutes Falls Park, Chehalis Western Trail, Ward's Lake property acquisition, Tenino City Park and the Bald Hills Natural Resources Conservation Area.

The new \$42 million allocation pays for three Thurston County projects: enhancements at the Mima Mounds Natural Area (\$1.06 million), expansion of the Pleasant Glade Community Park (\$1 million) and a state project in conjunction with Joint Base Lewis McChord to remove invasive plants from South Sound prairies and the Bald Hills.

We add our voice to those of the two former governors saluting lawmakers for their continued support for this most worthwhile natural resource enhancement and preservation program.

As Lowry said, "Funding conservation projects is an important part of maintaining our heritage and way of life in Washington state. Twenty-two years ago, when we founded this coalition, we wanted to create a program that serves generations of Washingtonians to come. I join communities around the state in thanking the Legislature for these vital recreation and conservation projects which are so important to our quality of life and our economy."

Joanna Grist, executive director of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, said it best. She said, "We are incredibly thankful that both the Senate and the House recognize not only the importance of funding conservation projects and maintaining our heritage, but also in maintaining the integrity of the (wildlife and recreation program)."

It was a struggle to get the \$42 million allocation and to keep it free of political influence. Coalition members deserve credit for pointing lawmakers in the right direction as the end result is outstanding.