



State Legislators Made Right Move For Future With Recreation Program

By Sandra Staples-Bortner
OP-ED: Peninsula Gateway
June 22, 2011

It's no secret this year's legislative session was a contentious one. But 50 years from now, our children and grandchildren will still be enjoying the results of one important decision in which legislators reached across the aisle and came together to protect one of the state's most respected programs, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

The people of Washington State have long understood that our future prosperity is inextricably bound to our success in preserving the environment in which we live. That's why, throughout the past 21 years, the WWRP has grown into one of the state's most popular programs for its mandate to protect and improve state and local parks, preserve habitat for fish and wildlife and save working farms.

Throughout the years, the WWRP has played a pivotal role in the development of recreation and conservation on the Great Peninsula. From funding family areas like Harbor Family Park in Gig Harbor or Evergreen Park in Bremerton to the protection of Hood Canal or native forest through projects like the Stavis / Kitsap Forest or Laughlin Cove, the WWRP grant program has made our community a great place to live, work and play.

Often these seemingly smaller decisions, where legislators weigh policy and work together to come up with the right solution for the entire state, are overlooked, and we forget to recognize our legislators for all of the good work they have done. But in the case of the WWRP, the Legislature deserves our thanks for illustrating the democratic process at its best, and for showing us what can happen when partisan politics are put aside for a greater good and investment in our communities' future.

This year, in addition to setting aside \$42 million for WWRP, funding more than 50 projects in communities around the state, the Legislature also made sure it maintained the core integrity of the WWRP in place, keeping the objective, transparent funding process that has won the program widespread support.

WWRP conservation and recreation projects are funded based on independent ranking criteria that determine which projects are the best. That means every community has an equal opportunity to get its project funded based on its merit, whether it's saving the migration grounds of Washington's largest elk herd, creating parks for our children to play, or making sure our working farms stay working.

That means Kitsap residents will benefit from a \$1.8 million grant to protect parts of the Kitsap Forest near Seabeck, and PenMet Parks can acquire the DeMolay property on Fox Island, protecting the spit from subdivision and development.

Renewing WWRP is not simply an investment in our state's heritage and high quality of life we all enjoy. Funding the WWRP is also an investment in the long-term prosperity of our community because of the number of jobs that outdoor recreation brings to our state, like fishing, hunting and hiking.

Annually, parks and recreation-based activities generate some \$8.5 billion in retail dollars and millions in tax dollars. They support 115,000 jobs statewide.

We are grateful that the Legislature has kept this important program in place, both for the future of the Great Peninsula and the state. Great Peninsula Conservancy is a proud supporter of the WWRP grant program because we believe in enhancing and protecting our communities and the land, air and water of Washington.

Our Pierce County and Kitsap County delegations, especially Sen. Derek Kilmer, D-Gig Harbor, should be commended for their commitment to our community and to future generations. Thanks to their continued support of the WWRP during the 2011 session, citizens of our state will be able to enjoy the sweeping lands and clean waterways that we have today for years to come.

Despite a long and difficult session, legislators worked together, across party lines, and did what's best for our state now and for future generations.

Sandra Staples-Bortner is the executive director of the Great Peninsula Conservancy. She can be reached at 360-373-3500 or by email at sandra@greatpeninsula.org. For more information, visit www.greatpeninsula.org.