



Investing in State's Heritage, Prosperity

By Dave Somers
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The people of Snohomish County, and Washington, have long understood that our future economic prosperity is inextricably bound to our success in preserving the environment in which we live. That's why, over the past 21 years, the Washington Wildlife Recreation Program (WWRP) has grown into one of the state's most popular efforts to protect and preserve habitat for fish and wildlife, save working farms and improve state and local parks, like the Reiter Hills and Big Gulch Trail.

Here in Snohomish County we are thankful to see these two key conservation and recreation projects that our community has wanted for a long time finally being realized, thanks to our state Legislature, which looked to the future by funding the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) during tough economic times.

The Reiter Hills Trails System will develop additional trails for hikers, bikers, off-road vehicles, campers, hunters and fishers. This nicely complements the emerging destination recreation corridor we're working hard to create to serve as an economic driver for our communities in the Sky Valley. This includes the federally designated Wild Sky Wilderness, 3,000 newly acquired acres west of Lake Roesiger and additional plans for what is being called Fisherman's Park, and a public shooting range near Sultan.

In Mukilteo, a new grant will finish the final link of the Big Gulch Trail, providing recreational opportunities for citizens while protecting sensitive shoreline and watershed areas. These projects will play a key role in our county's vital recreational economy as well as our quality of life for years to come.

But what many people don't know is that Snohomish County nearly didn't get to see these projects realized because they were hanging in the balance of a key capital budget decision. It's thanks to the leadership and foresight of our own Rep. Hans Dunshee, chairman of the House Capital Budget Committee, that these -- and similar projects statewide -- were maintained in this year's budget.

It's no secret this year's legislative session was a contentious one. But in the case of the WWRP, the Legislature, led by Rep. Dunshee, deserves our thanks for showing us what can happen when partisan politics are put aside for the greater good.

Renewing WWRP is not simply an investment in our state's heritage and quality and life. Funding the WWRP is an investment in the long-term prosperity of our community because of the number of jobs that outdoor opportunities like fishing, hunting, hiking and more bring to our state. Annually, parks and recreation-based activities generate some \$8.5 billion in retail dollars and millions in tax dollars, supporting 115,000 jobs statewide.

In addition, businesses around the state recognize the importance of the outdoors and quality of life when attracting skilled workers. The real estate industry knows that communities with recreation opportunities and parks are vital to increasing home sales. In tough economic times, industries and communities around the state have come to depend on both the short- and long-term benefits of investments like the projects the WWRP funds.

This year, in addition to setting aside \$42 million to fund more than 50 projects in communities around the state, the Legislature also maintained the core integrity of the WWRP, keeping in place the objective, transparent funding process that has won the program widespread support, and allows smaller communities like the Sky Valley and Mukilteo to compete for funding.

Thanks to the Legislature's continued support of the WWRP during the 2011 session, 50 years from now citizens of Snohomish County, and our state, will still be able to enjoy the sweeping lands and clean waterways that we cherish today. Despite a long and difficult session, legislators worked together across party lines and did what is best for our state and for future generations.

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