

PUGET SOUND Business Journal

NOVEMBER 10-16, 2006 • VOL. 27, NO. 29 • SEATTLE.BIZJOURNALS.COM • \$2.00

Business Leaders Get It.

State should invest \$100M in wildlife, recreation

Whether a business has been here for generations or is considering relocating to the region, companies usually have one thing in common: They consider the state's quality of life important — both in attracting new workers and keeping the ones they have.

Whether east or west, the one thing that binds us together as a state is quite simply the outdoors. Where else in the country — in the world — can you find a Tiger Mountain so close to a teeming metropolitan area? Where else can you find wilderness to the north and vineyards to the south? Where else can you leave a vibrant downtown area and be skiing in little more than an hour, whether you live in Seattle or Spokane? Nowhere else but here.

That's largely thanks to something called the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP), a 15-year-old state program that protects habitat, beaches, working farms and wildlife preserves, and develops parks, boat launches, walking trails and biking trails.

The WWRP is essential because the outdoors is more than just a way of life in Washington state. It is part of the fabric of our economy. For a successful business already here and for an economic development council trying to attract new businesses, our quality of life is one of the state's main selling points.

Richard Florida, the guru of the creative class, put it best in an *Information Week* article:

"While it was thought that the rise of the Internet economy would lead to the

GUEST OPINION



Doug
Walker

the WWRP is so important. Over the past decade, the WWRP has provided funding to protect and create many of the outdoor places for those knowledge workers to go.

And, with increasing conversion of natural lands to development and skyrocketing land prices, it is getting harder and harder to find the land needed to preserve those outdoor options.

With more than 6 million residents, Washington recently passed Indiana as the 14th largest state in the United States. More people are coming our way — the Puget Sound Regional Council estimates more than a million people are coming to just the Puget Sound region between now and 2020. That's four more Tacomas.

If Washington is to keep the quality of life that attracts the knowledge workers that Richard Florida talks about, then steps must be taken now to help preserve impor-

tant landscapes that might otherwise be lost.

end of geography, now, more than ever, knowledge workers choose jobs based on location," he wrote.

Why? "Knowledge workers want to work and live in a city that caters to other facets of their lives besides work," said Florida. "They want to live in places with lots to do."

Great outdoor places do not come easily, or cheaply, which is why money provided through

the WWRP will need more funding if it is expected to meet the needs of Washington's citizens.

To address that demand, the coalition is asking Gov. Chris Gregoire and the state Legislature to increase funding for the WWRP to \$100 million next year. That is up from \$50 million in the last biennium, but it is vitally needed now to move forward on the parks, trails, ball fields, beaches, wildlife areas, farmland preservation and state parks so needed throughout the state.

An increase from \$50 million to \$100 million may sound huge, but the last biennium's \$50 million allocation is the same amount as 1990, the first year the coalition worked to help create wildlife and recreation areas.

Inflation and rising land prices make it all the more important that the WWRP have more funds to achieve its goals. No one expects to be able to buy a house today

at the same price as 1990.

If there is anything that the past 15 years of coalition work have taught us, it is that we cannot wait. No challenge we face is greater than the challenge of growth, and the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition recognizes that it is only through the power of partnership that we will be able to fully realize the vision of a state with the kinds of parks, trails and wildlife areas that make it special.

Great outdoor places do not come easily, or cheaply, which is why money provided through the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program is so important.

By increasing funding for the WWRP next year, the governor and Legislature have the opportunity to achieve something few other states have been able to accomplish: preserve for our children's children the outdoor amenities we so enjoy today, and the economic benefits that flow from that enhanced quality of life.

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