

Preservation of Outdoor Spaces Doesn't Come Cheap

Bob Shirley, Tacoma News Tribune, Apr. 14, 2005
April 14, 2005

By Bob Shirley, guest to The Tacoma News Tribune
April 10, 2005

As a fly fisher, I want access to streams, lakes and saltwater in and around Pierce County in order to enjoy fishing and boating.

I am passionate about the outdoors and concerned about the threat to our recreational and wildlife areas here in Pierce County and across Washington.

Most people would be shocked to learn that of the 11 Western states, ours has the least public land but the second-highest population. And more people are moving here every day.

In a forest of concrete development, there is a program fighting to protect and preserve our parks, trails and wildlife. The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program is a state grant program that helps local communities develop new parks and protect fish and wildlife habitat.

Since 1990, \$408 million has been provided for more than 650 neighborhood parks, ballfields, biking and walking trails, local beaches, boat launches, wildlife habitat and state parks.

Local communities apply for grants, and a competitive process is used to assess which projects should be funded. The governor and Legislature set the funding levels and approve the final list of projects.

The program helped fund the Fox Island public fishing pier and protected 80 acres of salmon habitat along Chambers Creek. WWRP grants also helped fund skate parks in Lakewood, Gig Harbor, Spanaway and Buckley.

The program's commitment and success in the enhancement and expansion of recreational and wildlife areas in Pierce County and Washington state are truly

worthy of our support and involvement.

I serve on the board of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, which advocates for state funding of the WWRP grant program. The coalition is unusual in that it includes representatives from hunting and fishing groups, business, labor and recreation interests, as well as conservation organizations.

Members of the coalition may look at some issues differently, but we all agree on one important thing: We need to protect our state's outdoor recreation and wildlife areas for our families and future generations. Every year we go to bat for the citizens of Washington to ensure we preserve, protect and enhance our special natural places.

Unfortunately, since 1993 the program's share of state bond dollars has been cut by more than half. That means too many parks, ballfields and fishing piers have failed to become a reality for many children and families.

This year we hope to fund the 21st Street Park on the Thea Foss Waterway and Chinese Reconciliation Park on Commencement Bay in Tacoma, and improvements to Bradley Lake Park in Puyallup.

If our legislators increase their support for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, Pierce County will gain the following:

- A new neighborhood park for the City of Fife. A \$70,775 WWRP grant would fund Wedge Park, where there would be a climbing rock, playground and facilities for jogging, picnicking and basketball.
- A walking trail through Gig Harbor. Pierce County and Gig Harbor seek a \$300,000 WWRP grant to extend the Cushman Trail four miles so the community will be able to easily walk, bike and travel to the history museum, shopping center and Rosedale Farm.
- Enhanced waterfront access for the entire community. A \$500,000 WWRP grant will acquire 0.6 acres to enhance waterfront access by providing space for picnics and public gatherings along the waterfront at Skansie Brothers Park and nearby Jerisich Park in Gig Harbor.

These projects will truly enhance our community and help our children and families enjoy the outdoors. Our governor and legislators are faced with difficult decisions, but we must ensure that they prioritize the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program in the capital construction budget.

Rescuing, protecting and preserving our recreational areas are key to the vitality of our community and help to maintain our quality of life. Our communities have a responsibility to care for wildlife and outdoor recreation areas for our families and future generations.

Once concrete is poured, we cannot roll up the pavement and recreate a local beach, ballfield or habitat for fish and wildlife.

Bob Shirley of Tacoma is president of the Washington State Council of the Federation of Fly Fishers. More information is available online at www.wildliferecreation.org.