



EDITORIAL: Wildlife and Recreation Deserves Funds

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In 1989, former governors Dan Evans and Mike Lowry joined forces to push legislation to set aside money in each state construction budget for wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities.

Evans, a Republican, and Lowry, a Democrat, were able to put together an incredibly broad coalition of business and labor leaders, environmentalists, sportsmen and soccer moms. They came together because people of all political stripes understand the need to preserve property today for future generations.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition has been a tremendous success. In 1990 the Legislature made its first appropriation - \$53 million to be spent over two years. Since then, appropriations have ranged from \$40 million to \$50 million, with a notable exception in 2007, when lawmakers were flush with money and appropriated \$100 million. The increased funding was one of the major accomplishments of the 2007 session.

Since the beginning of the effort, lawmakers have appropriated \$620 million in grants to purchase wildlife habitat, increase public access to waterways, protect natural areas, invest in local and state parks and preserve farmland. That \$620 million has been matched with \$440 in state and local funds for a grand investment approaching \$1 billion.

Investments in Thurston County alone have totaled an amazing \$29 million and include such popular attractions at 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 and the Bald Hills Natural Resources Conservation Area.

That's a remarkable gift to present and future generations of South Sound residents.

Less money

Faced with an economic recession, Gov. Chris Gregoire has proposed a significant funding reduction in the 2009-11 state construction budget. Gregoire is proposing to drop back to the \$50 million level for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

"It represents funding for only 20 percent of the projects applied for by state agencies, local governments, land trusts and tribes across the state for parks, trails, farmland preservation and habitat areas," according to Jill Wasberg, development and communications director for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition. "While we understand the state's revenue shortfall and the governor's pledge to not raise taxes, we are concerned that the (Wildlife and Recreation program) took a disproportionate share of the cuts. Protecting our precious natural areas, parks, and trails is essential even in hard times, and much of the land we're conserving through the acquisition projects won't be there any longer if we wait."

Coalition lobbyists are going to press lawmakers to boost the appropriation from \$50 million to \$100 million, which would pay for 115 projects - 34 of them tied to the protection of Puget Sound.

Good news

The good news for Thurston County is that a number of local projects are included in the funding list even at the \$50 million level.

One of the biggest projects is the acquisition and preservation of the Black River Ranch, a 725-acre dairy farm located between the Glacial Heritage Preserve and Mima Creek Preserve. It is one of the largest dairy farms in the county and contains a diverse complex of wetlands, floodplain, riparian and upland habitat, as well as extensive productive agricultural lands. The property also contains close to 1,000 acre feet of water rights. The proposal calls for \$1.09 million in coalition funds matched by \$1.19 million in local funds.

Other local projects funded at the \$50 million level include Ward Lake property acquisition in Olympia, expansion of the Tenino City Park, a project to seed South Sound prairies and additional improvements at Woodard Bay conservation area.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment is the failure of the Percival Landing rehabilitation project to make it to the top of the funding list. It's not even funded at the \$100 million level, but should move up the priority list as other top projects are completed.

President-elect Barack Obama and Gov. Gregoire both have talked about an

economic stimulus package to get the state and nation out of its recession and moving again. Many recreation and wildlife habitat projects are "shovel ready," meaning they are ready to go if the funding is provided. Legislators should give serious consideration to the coalition's \$100 million request, not just to protect habitat and increase recreation opportunities, but as a jobs program to get people working and money flowing through the economy.