



Grants Protect Parks, Develop Open Spaces

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Population growth and development is outstripping state efforts to preserve natural areas, park space and working farms in this state.

That's the conclusion of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, a nonprofit citizens group of farmers, hikers, hunters, conservationists and businesses that has lobbied the Legislature since 1989 to set aside funds for everything from open space and wildlife habitat to boat launches and urban trails and parks.

The coalition, co-chaired by former Govs. Dan Evans and Mike Lowry, has had considerable success, securing more than \$450 million for more than 775 projects encompassing 160,000 acres statewide.

Among the \$21 million of funded projects enjoyed by thousands of Thurston County residents are the Chehalis Western Trail, the Woodard Bay Natural Resources Conservation Area, Camp Kenneydell Park on Black Lake and Rainier Vista and Wonderwood community parks in Lacey.

Population growth

But in that same time, the state's population has grown by 25 percent and is projected to grow another 2 million people in the next 25 years. Meanwhile, program funding has stayed relatively stable at about \$50 million every two years.

"With population growth and development, the need is getting ahead of what we're able to provide," said Karen Munro, a Mud Bay resident and member of the coalition board.

"We won't have the opportunity to set these special places aside if we wait another 20 or 30 years," said Eric Erler, executive director of the Capitol Land Trust.

Project funding

In the latest funding go-around, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program administered by the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation received 200 applications totalling \$150 million.

Among South Sound projects likely to receive funding at the \$100 million level, but not the \$50 million mark, is one to build a stream-viewing platform and covered area for visitors at the McLane Creek Nature Trail.

The IAC's eight-member committee also is on record in support of the \$100 million funding level from the state capital budget in the 2007-09 biennium.

"The \$100 million recommendation is unprecedented, but with overwhelmed state parks and loss of wildlife habitat, it's absolutely essential that we support the funding of so many important projects that benefit all of us," said Val Ogden, chair of the IAC and a former state senator from Vancouver, Wash.

The funds for the program come from the capital budget. Sen. Karen Fraser, D-Thurston County, presides over the Senate Capital Budget Committee.

"I agree, more is better," Fraser said of the need to invest in recreational opportunities and open space. However, she said, it's too early to predict what will happen to the request in the 2007 session.

Support

A boost in funding has the support of a diverse group of interests who don't always see eye-to-eye on environmental issues. The list includes: the Boeing Co., Weyerhaeuser, Washington Association of Realtors, Washington Environmental Council and The Mountaineers.

"We look at this issue holistically," said Phil Harlan, broker associate with John L. Scott Real Estate in Lacey. "It's a quality-of-life issue. You need open space and parks to attract business, housing and jobs to the state."

Besides, he said: "With yards getting smaller, we need these open spaces to play."

Among the four South Sound projects virtually assured funding at the \$50 million level is a city of Olympia project to build a boat launch and walking paths at West Bay Park in the lower Budd Inlet. The grant is for \$366,134.

"The grant allows us to develop public access at the park far sooner than we could have done it alone," noted Olympia Parks, Art and Recreation director Linda

Oestreich.

South Sound projects

These are the projects in Mason and Thurston counties slated for funding if state lawmakers allot \$50 million for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program

A 90.7-acre expansion of the Woodard Bay Natural Resource Conservation Area on Henderson Inlet, \$2.3 million.

A 70-acre expansion of Millersylvania State Park at Deep Lake, \$1.57 million.

Purchase and development of a city of Olympia park with paths and a boat launch on West Bay Drive at "Rotary Point," \$366,134.

Purchase by Mason County of 500 acres of forested wetlands and Decker Creek shoreline, \$694,000.

Here are the projects in Mason and Thurston counties that need a boost in state funding to \$100 million to move forward.

A 1,200-acre expansion of the Bald Hills Natural Resource Conservation Area in southeast Thurston County, \$4 million.

Purchase of the 56.7-acre lower Union River estuary by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, \$1.9 million.

Purchase of 365 acres of Skookum Creek riparian area by the Squaxin Island Tribe, \$953,000.

Improvements, including a viewing platform, at McLane Creek Nature Trail, \$250,000.