

Senate Should Adopt House Plan on Critical Recreation Funding

By Mike Deller
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Amid a legislative session filled with doom and gloom, there is a bright spot for residents of Snohomish County. When the House of Representatives announced its capital construction budget earlier this month, slashing funding for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP), which funds high priority land conservation projects across the state, by 50 percent -- from \$100 million to \$50 million -- it wasn't considered a bad thing. Why? Because the House of Representatives, led by our very own Hans Dunshee, did something right. Even while cutting the program, they kept its essential pieces intact so it can thrive in future, more prosperous years.

And keeping those essential pieces intact means good things for Snohomish County. Included in this year's proposed House capital budget are two key projects in our area. If the House proposal passes, the Snohomish County area is set to receive \$325,000 for Reiter Foothills Trail System and \$220,000 for Big Gulch Trail-Gap Area. The Reiter Foothills Trail System grant will be used to create a trail system as part of an emerging recreation corridor in the Sky Valley for hikers, bikers, off-road vehicles, campers, hunters and fishers. The City of Mukilteo will use the Big Gulch Trail-Gap Area grant to finish the final link of the Big Gulch recreational trail.

By funding projects like the trail systems here in Snohomish County, the House has demonstrated that it is looking ahead and understands what it would mean for Washington's economy if critical recreation areas and wildlife habitat are not conserved and protected now. Outdoor recreation generates \$8.5 billion in revenues annually in Washington and supports 115,000 jobs in our state -- many of those here in Snohomish County.

However, all that good work by the House has been put at risk by the counter proposal outlined by the state Senate. Their proposal doesn't just further decimate the WWRP's funding by slicing \$30 million from the House's proposal, it also moves \$16 million into a different fund for hand-chosen projects, in key districts, rather than funding projects based on their merits.

The WWRP funds its projects statewide based on an independent ranking criteria that decides on the best projects, a process that demonstrates integrity and competition. This means every community has an equal opportunity to get a project funded. It also means there is no chance of earmarking politically popular but less critical projects. Allowing legislators to cherry pick favored projects will rapidly undermine the integrity of the program.

Over the last 21 years WWRP has taken root as one of the state's most popular and successful programs, enjoying broad and well-deserved support for its mandate to protect and improve state and local parks, preserve habitat for fish and wildlife and save working farms. Bravo to the House for recognizing and fighting for this important project. Let's hope that the Senate steps back and re-examines what this program means to our economy and to our way of life, and follows suit.

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