



Bainbridge Trail Caught Up In Budget Battle

By Christopher Dunagan
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BAINBRIDGE ISLAND — As the House and Senate continue to clash over the state's capital budget, Kitsap County commissioners are asking local legislators to stick to tradition when funding wildlife and recreation projects.

Their action follows a request from Bainbridge Island parks officials, who are eager to buy the 31-acre "Hilltop property" to fill a gap between the east and west portions of Grand Forest. Like a key piece of a jigsaw puzzle, that property would complete the linkage to build trails connecting the island's eastern shoreline with the western shoreline.

The Bainbridge Island property is one of many projects caught up in a philosophical battle over state spending in a time of economic crisis. Nobody is predicting how it will turn out.

Specifically, the House approved \$50 million for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, which provides money to buy critical habitats, build parks and trails and protect farmland. The money would be spent on priority projects using a scoring system adopted by the state Recreation and Conservation Funding Board.

The Senate approved \$20 million to be allocated to the highest scoring projects, then set aside another \$16 million with a special focus on jobs. The effect was to skip over higher-scoring projects — including the Bainbridge property — in favor of projects that could generate more jobs.

Officials with the nonprofit Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition view the Senate's move as an attack on the integrity of the long-held funding formula that everyone depends on.

"The funding formula, which is in statute, has been successful because it has the support of a broad bipartisan coalition," said Joanna Grist, executive director of the coalition. "There is certainty in the system, which has received national awards for its independent ranking. If legislators begin picking different criteria, applicants will lose faith in the system."

The Hilltop purchase, needed to complete the Forest to Sky Trail, is in line for \$211,000 in the trails category. The project was ranked high enough for the Bainbridge Island Land Trust to form a funding partnership with the Bainbridge Island Metropolitan Park and Recreation District. The two groups laid out a five-year plan and paid for an option to buy the \$2.7 million property.

Matching the state's \$211,000 with an equal amount of local money would be the first step to acquiring the property. But the project, ranked fourth on the trails list, failed to make the cutoff in the Senate's budget, which favored other projects far down the list.

Asha Rehnberg, executive director of Bainbridge Island Land Trust, said a long-term strategy was needed to acquire the "very high-value" real estate with views of the Olympic Mountains. To get in line for funding, the project had to jump through many hoops at both the local and state levels.

"After we were ranked so highly, we had reasonable confidence that if the program got funded at all, we would be in good shape," she said. "The land trust has stuck its neck out a long way."

An option to purchase the property expires in September, Rehnberg said. Losing the state grant does not mean losing the project, but it would be a serious setback and would require a new strategy.

State [Sen. Derek Kilmer](#), D-Gig Harbor, said he proposed the \$16 million focused on jobs to get bipartisan support for the entire funding package in the Senate. Kilmer pointed out that the governor's proposed budget also deviated from the funding formula, with a focus on Puget Sound projects. Kilmer said several options were discussed in light of the state's economic difficulties — including cutting all funding for the program.

"These are unusual times," he said. "You're in a recessionary period with very little capital capacity. The state will not be making a lot of the investments it would be making at other times."

Kilmer also is a strong proponent of a constitutional amendment to lower the state's debt limit while changing the way the debt is calculated. He worries that interest on outstanding bonds is eating up more and more of the revenues needed to run state government. Changing the system would allow more capital projects to be built during an economic downturn when costs are lower and people need the work, he said.

Within that broader context came the idea to target jobs in the Wildlife and Rec Program.

"Our overall goal was to put people to work in the short term," Kilmer said. "We're really trying to rethink how the investments get made."

So, for the \$16 million, the Senate listed the projects in order of the number of jobs created for each \$1,000 in cost.

In the trails category, the Bainbridge Island property acquisition failed to make the cut, but projects involving trail development moved up the list. They included the \$1-million Cushman Trail in Gig Harbor, the \$761,000 Forbes Lake Park Trail in Kirkland, the \$341,000 Olympic Discovery Trail in Sequim and the \$377,000 North Bay Trail in Mason County — none of which were included in the larger \$50-million budget approved by the House.

In Kitsap County, a \$35,000 picnic shelter at Horseshoe Lake made the Senate's list, because it would produce 1.2 new jobs, placing it seventh from the top.

"We're sympathetic with what Sen. Kilmer is trying to do," said Grist, of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition. But the approach is flawed for a number of reasons.

First, because this is the first time that job numbers have been calculated, they may not be as accurate as one would like with so much riding on the outcome. If jobs are to become a major consideration, they should become part of the ranking criteria after careful study, Grist said.

"It's not something that is ready now," she added. "Many people would say that the priority for this program needs to be protecting habitat and creating parks for people to enjoy. I know the sportsmen would be very unhappy if this became a jobs program."

Another flaw, she said, is that farmland preservation was left out of the Senate's list entirely, based on the idea that it would not create jobs.

"Farmland maintains existing jobs," said Grist. "There were 66 jobs maintained by the House that are not even mentioned in the Senate version. These are seasonal jobs in rural communities where every job counts."

By focusing on jobs, the funding goes to smaller projects that are less challenging. Shoreline acquisitions and projects fitting into a larger puzzle get ignored.

Also, by reaching down to include some of the lowest-scoring projects, there is a good chance that "bad projects" will get funded, she said. These are ones where the local match has not been secured or permits may not be obtained in time.

"Once we start funding projects that are ranked poorly, the whole program starts to unravel," she said.

Reluctantly, Grist said she would rather lose the \$16 million entirely if it would keep politics out of the selection process.

"As terrible as it is to lose funding in the short term," she said, "the integrity of the process in the long term is more important. We hope the Senate will reconsider."

Sen. Phil Rockefeller, D-Bainbridge Island, said he supported Kilmer's approach because it was important to gain bipartisan support when every vote counts. But now the game has changed, as lawmakers try to reconcile the Senate and House versions of the budget.

"This is not over," Rockefeller said. "There is a reconciliation process to go through."

Kitsap County Commissioner Charlotte Garrido noted, with a smile, that her South Kitsap district would gain from a new picnic shelter at Horseshoe Lake versus a new trail on Bainbridge Island.

"But if it ranked lower, it is not fair to jump the queue," she said. "I want some consistency in how these applications are made."

The three commissioners agreed to send a letter to local legislators supporting funding under the traditional formula.