

Program Vital to Our Way of Life

By Tom Koenninger, Opinion Editorial; Nov. 29, 2006 © The Vancouver Columbian
November 29, 2006

Wednesday, November 29, 2006

In its current saturated state, it would be difficult to imagine Clark County as a brown, barren wasteland. But as the population increases and development and home building boom across the land, the green face of Clark County begins to fade, and trees and foliage disappear at an alarming rate.

Open space shrinks as well. Fields and trees that once existed between "Old Town" Ridgefield and Interstate 5 are currently being turned into homesites. It's a common occurrence in the county.

Defoliating also occurs when firms such as Asplundh cut trees and trim greenery for power lines for Vancouver, Clark Public Utilities and Bonneville Power Administration.

To counter the unnatural tree thinning from a variety of causes, Vancouver has adopted an ordinance designed to "reverse the erosion of Vancouver's already anemic tree canopy," according to a recent Columbian story by Erik Robinson. The story reported just under 20 percent of the city is covered by vegetation taller than 7 feet, compared with the U.S. Forest Service recommended 40 percent.

In October, Clark County commissioners set up a lands conservation office. Additional help is occurring on a statewide scale, with local benefits. It is the 15-year-old Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, and its "rally squad," the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, co-chaired by former Govs. Dan Evans and Mike Lowry.

The coalition persuaded the Legislature to create the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, which accepts grant applications for a variety of projects to create and improve open space, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities and cleaner waterways.

Local, federal and state agencies, including the Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation Department, go through a competitive application process to receive grants, and match every grant with their own resources. Grants are funded by the

state capital construction budget, and appropriated by the Legislature. Application for grants is through the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation, chaired by Val Ogden of Vancouver, former state representative. "Expert volunteers scrutinize and screen the applications and even do site visits," Ogden said.

Plenty of projects

Since 1990, \$450 million has been obtained for 775 projects in the state. This year, the county and city seek a combined \$3,789,132 in grants, according to David Judd, director of Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation. "We've been able to accomplish a lot (through the program) over the years," Judd said. Still, projects sought exceed available funding, he noted.

Proposed projects for the coming biennium include: Chelatchie Prairie Railroad Trail from Battle Ground to Battle Ground Lake; acquire 67.5 acres of shoreline, riparian and wetland habitat at Lacamas Lake; develop 88-acre community park north of Vancouver; acquire 52 acres of shoreline, riparian and floodplain habitat on East Fork of Lewis River; acquire 4.42-acre neighborhood park site in Fisher's Landing area of southeast Vancouver and obtain 2.4-acre site for East Image Neighborhood park in east Vancouver. Grants for other developments or improvements are sought for Mackie, David Douglas (redevelopment) and Marine (more water access) parks. The Lacamas Lake shoreline and a David Douglas Park upgrade would happen only if the budget is raised from \$50 million to \$100 million, said Jeroen Kok, senior parks planner for parks and recreation.

Judd said the local legislative delegation strongly supports the program, but program needs are greater than ever.

Requests for funding are up 80 percent over the last biennium, and park planners worry that land available for parks, habitat protection or open space and working farms will be lost forever if acquisition is stalled.

This program is so good it has brought real estate interests and environmentalists together as supporters. Space is needed for people and wildlife because Washington expects to add 2 million residents in the next 25 years. That's why state support must be raised to \$100 million.

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