

## State needs to bolster parks and wildlife fund

EDITORIAL © 2006 Tacoma News Tribune,  
December 04, 2006

December 6, 2006

Back in 1997, as growth was threatening to pave over every mile of the South Hill, Puyallup voters spoke loud and clear about the value of open space.

They passed a \$5.9 million bond issue to save farmer Ward Bradley's lake from development. Today, the former peat bog is the 58-acre Bradley Lake Park, a popular spot for family outings and lakeside strolls.

But Puyallup didn't do it alone. It received state grants totaling about \$1.1 million to help make the park what it is today.

That money came from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, created in 1990 at the urging of former governors Dan Evans and Mike Lowry, who had founded the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition.

Both men were concerned about the effect that growth was having on the state's ability to protect habitat and create parks. Before 1990, the state's investment in acquiring and preserving open spaces averaged \$2 million a year.

That record has improved considerably over the last 15 years, thanks to the wildlife and recreation program, which has awarded \$450 million for more than 775 projects statewide.

The money helps preserve and improve neighborhood parks and ball fields, biking and walking trails, local beaches, boat launches, wildlife, habitat and state parks. Bradley Lake is among the Pierce County projects that have received 52 grants totaling millions since 1990.

But the program, which has about the same amount of money to dole out today as it did back in the early 1990s, isn't able to do as much as it once could.

The Legislature earmarked \$50 million for the program in the last two-year capital budget — a slight increase over what it received in the previous budget, but well below the \$60 million appropriation set aside in 1991-93, its first biennium of operation.

Preserving Washington's open spaces isn't getting any cheaper. In fact, development pressures are eating up open space faster than state and local governments can acquire it. Soaring property values are increasingly pricing what's left out of reach.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program has lost much of its purchasing power over the last 15 years. It is overdue for a bigger budget. State lawmakers have a choice: They can either invest more now, pay higher prices later or, worst of all, short the next generation of places to enjoy Washington's natural beauty.